THE DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR PEERS

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ABSTRACT. *This paper explores constitutive features and functions of the discourse of social networking sites (henceforth SNSs) that contribute to define it as a genre. Nowadays, SNSs are used for personal, professional, and commercial uses. Discussion will focus on personal interaction among university students on a particular SNS, i.e., Facebook, having similar features to other SNSs. SNSs have changed the way students interact for the specific purpose of constructing their identities and personal relationships. The corpus used consists of a random sample of 200 messages from university students in United Kingdom and United States during 2010-2011. Genre analysis in this virtual, academic context is approached following Bhatia (1993, 2004, 2008) by stressing communicative purpose, conventions and the propensity to innovation by users. Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday 2004/1994/1985), appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005) are combined with politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) to attempt an explanation accounting for discourse organization in SNSs.*

KEY WORDS. *genre, appraisal, evaluative language, computer-mediated discourse.*

RESUMEN. *Este artículo explora rasgos y funciones del discurso de sitios de redes sociales (en adelante SRS) que contribuyen a definirlo como género. Actualmente, los SRS se utilizan para usos personales, profesionales y comerciales. La discusión versará sobre la interacción personal entre estudiantes universitarios en una red social, concretamente Facebook, de rasgos similares a otras redes sociales. Los SRS han cambiado la forma de interactuar de los estudiantes para construir sus identidades y sus relaciones sociales. El corpus utilizado consiste en una muestra aleatoria de 200 mensajes de universitarios del Reino Unido y de Estados Unidos durante 2010-11. El análisis de género de este contexto académico-virtual se basa en Bhatia (1993, 2004,2008) subrayando el fin comunicativo, las convenciones y tendencia de los usuarios a innovar. Desde la Lingüística Sistémica-Funcional (LSF) (Halliday 2004/1994/1985), combinaré la teoría de la valoración (Martin and White 2005) con la de la cortesía (Brown and Levinson 1987) para explicar y razonar la organización discursiva de SRS.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *género, valoración, lenguaje evaluativo, discurso de redes sociales.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings have been telling stories and creating a virtual world of fantasy since Prehistoric times. Paleolithic walls were filled with stories depicted in paintings long before Facebook virtual walls were born. A few revolutions in communication later, triggered by the invention of the printing press, the computer and the cell phone, we have gained access to global communication tools, which allow us to be connected in a social network and to keep others informed in real time of our personal stories. As a consequence of the main use of social networking to create personal relationships and community engagement, the interaction among the subjects studied reveals the practice of a pervasive use of evaluation. Evaluation will be used here as "the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about" (Thompson and Hunston 2000: 5). Hence, evaluation intervenes, among other things, in the realization of other prominent sub-functions of language, such as expressing opinion, maintaining relations, or organizing the discourse (Thompson and Hunston 2000: 6). The discourse function of evaluation is realized through *appraisal*, the system for the expression of evaluation as developed by Martin and White (2005) within the framework of *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) (Halliday 2004/1994/1985). In their work, they model appraisal resources, which include *attitude*, (for the expression of meanings of *affect*, *judgement*, and *appreciation*), together with *engagement* and *graduation* resources, used "for adopting a position with respect to propositions and for scaling intensity or degree of investment respectively" (Martin and White 2005: 39). The pervasive use of appraisal resources in the discourse of SNSs seems to indicate a common, ever-growing, and compelling need to evaluate and share the results of evaluative appreciations through this medium of communication. Appraisal resources will be illustrated with examples from a corpus of a random sample of 200 messages (2,150 words) circulating among university students in the United Kingdom and the United States through a particular social network, i.e., *Facebook*. This site has been chosen because it is world wide spread and shares common essential features with any other SNS, thus making it possible to generalise results to other SNSs. Facebook is considered to be the leading social networking site "based on monthly unique visitors", according to comScore[1] an important internet marketing research company. The selection of speakers from these two countries is due to the fact that English is their native language. The systemic functional tradition of appraisal theory will be combined with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which can help to account for various aspects of the evaluative function of language in order to preserve face, i.e., "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61).

Genre analysis will be approached following Bhatia (1993, 2004) and taking into consideration the emphasis given by the author to the communicative purpose, the importance of conventions and the propensity to innovation, in order to define a genre. Genre analysis expands linguistic analysis, as Bhatia (1993: 38) observes, "from

linguistic description to explanation taking into account not only socio-cultural but psycho-linguistic factors too." My expectation is that the combination of the approaches suggested, will help to identify some of the distinctive features and functions that characterize communication through social networking sites and make it different from another computer-mediated communication tool, i.e., electronic mail (email).

2. DATA AND METHOD FOR ANALYSIS

Bhatia (1993: 45) stresses the importance of the communicative purpose in the definition of a genre: "the communicative purpose which the genre is intended to serve is the most important factor in genre identification." In Bhatia (2004: 23), communicative purposes are also stressed: "Genres are recognizable communicative events, characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which they regularly occur". Therefore, it will be necessary to explore those aspects contributing to the definition of the communicative purpose of the genre of discourse on SNSs, with special reference here, to the use made of them by university students. Bhatia (2004: 22-26) reviews different views on genre analysis and distinguishes two important features common to all of them, namely, "The emphasis on conventions", as "Genre essentially refers to language use in a conventionalized communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals of a disciplinary or social institution" Bhatia (2004: 23) and "propensity for innovation", (…) "which is often exploited by the expert members of the specialist community to create new forms in order to respond to novel rhetorical contexts or to convey 'private intentions within the socially recognized communicative purposes'", Bhatia (2004: 24). Keeping in mind, then, the importance of the communicative purpose, the emphasis on conventions and the propensity for innovation, I will explore several distinctive features of Facebook in contrast to a rather different computer-mediated means of communication, i.e. email, attempting at the structural description of this SNS. When compared to email, SNSs can be characterized by reference to their users' orientation to the following aspects: (i) Interactional versus transactional function of the language, (ii) interpersonal versus ideational meaning, (iii) dialogic orientation and implementation, (iv) frequent use of appraisal resources, including attitude, (meanings of *affect*, *judgment*, and *appreciation*), together with engagement and graduation, (v) construction of a virtual identity, by the weaving of power and solidarity relationships. The exploration of these aspects will contribute to the definition of the communicative purpose and the structural description of the genre by observing its conventional nature and its propensity to innovation.

The corpus for analysis consists of a random sample of 200 messages (2,150 words) circulating among university students of Arts and Humanities in the United Kingdom (UK sample) and the United States (US sample) through a particular social network, i.e., *Facebook*, during 2010-2011. I have collected data as a natural observer, as the participants were either friends of mine or friends of friends in my contact list. They are close friends, with ages ranging between 20 and 35, engaging in daily contact with even several

messages a day, which serves to explain the intimate character of their talk and aspects such as the ironic and teasing elements in their messages. In order to abide by ethical considerations, I asked the observed friends for permission to include their messages in my research and also sent them a copy of this article, in order to both guarantee their permission and check my interpretation of their messages. Data analysis has combined quantitative and qualitative methods, as Corpus Linguistics (CL), Conversation Analysis (CA) and Discourse Analysis (DA) have been connected in "a bricolage assembling process of producing a suitable method of analysis" (Santamaría-García 2011: 346). CA has been used for the segmentation of units of interaction in the corpus (turn, pair, sequence), and has been complemented with Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) units (act, move, exchange) and Tsui's (1994) taxonomy of discourse acts, classified into types and subtypes of elicitations, informatives, requestives, etc.) in the DA tradition.

The mark up of data contains appraisal categories from Martin and White (2005). Careful examination and tagging of the data has facilitated the automatic retrieval of categories with *UAM Corpus Tool* (O'Donnell 2011). Analysis of the data together with previous research on SNSs (Santamaría-García 2013 and 2014) has allowed for the definition of communication through SNSs as a specific genre, as will be discussed in the following sections. Rather than formulating hypotheses, this study has been guided by CA with an interest in discovering possible phenomena and practices in the data in order to establish evidence that there is a participant-relevant practice. This study might lead to more quantitative-oriented ones in the future.

3. RESULTS: DEFINING THE GENRE OF COMMUNICATION THROUGH SNSs

When compared to email, SNSs in general, and Facebook in particular, show several distinctive features that can be characterized by reference to their users' orientation to the following aspects: (i) Interactional versus transactional function of the language, (ii) interpersonal versus ideational meaning, (iii) dialogic orientation and implementation, (iv) frequent use of appraisal resources, including attitude, (meanings of *affect*, *judgment*, and *appreciation*), together with engagement and graduation, (v) construction of a virtual identity, by the weaving of power and solidarity relationships. These aspects will be explored in the following sections in order to define the communicative purpose of the genre and to attempt its structural description by observing its conventional nature and its propensity to innovation.

3.1. *Communicative purpose and structural description*

The main function and communicative purpose of the discourse of SNSs in university students' communication with their peers is the building of social relations by sharing individuals' stance toward life. This function is achieved by the users' orientation toward the interactional function of the language versus the transactional, the priority given to the construction of interpersonal meaning over the ideational and their

tendency to engage in dialogic interaction and use evaluative language. An individual's stance is constructed by the frequent use of appraisal resources to express attitude, graduate the force of utterances, and engage with others' discourse. The discourse of SNSs serves to the individual's construction of a virtual identity, achieved by the weaving of power and solidarity relationships with other users. All these aspects will be further discussed in the following sections.

Regarding the structure of SNSs, the convention is that users share a representation of them by means of text and/or images (usually called a profile), several links to sites of their interest and choice, and web based services for interaction, such as e-mail and instant messaging. SNSs also allow users to interact at a public space in their home pages, which can be made accessible to friends only or to friends of friends (relying on a system of trust), but also to the general public (for those with blind confidence). This space is called "the wall" in Facebook, and users can share their ideas, feelings, etc. on it by means of text, images or videos. Text can be written as a reply to the prompt: "What's on your mind" in order to initiate interaction, or as comments to other user's utterances, videos or images. Users can also interact by clicking the "like" button. I will focus here on the public communication made visible on the wall and will relate formal, conventional features of its structure to the functions that shape the communicative purpose of the genre.

3.1.1. Interactional versus transactional function of the language.

Facebook presents several conventional features that facilitate the use of the interactional over the transactional function of language, as defined by Brown and Yule (1983). The interactional is used "to establish and maintain social relationships" (Brown and Yule 1983: 3), whereas the transactional is used to convey "factual or propositional information" (Brown and Yule 1983: 2). The following features can be mentioned: the use of a picture and personal data for speakers' profiles, a dialogue box with a summons to write something as personal as what is on our minds, a list of contacts who are labeled as *friends*, constant invitations to contact more friends, a list of social events that may be of interest, and a page layout that makes this information easily available and visible while communication is taking place. It is interesting to note a peculiarity of this tool that makes the use of the interactional different from its use in everyday, non-computer mediated interaction, i.e., the user can choose the addressees among a community of contacts who are labeled as friends or friends of friends, all sharing the *a priori* quality, therefore, of being positively ranked in a scale of affect, even when some of these contacts may only be acquaintances. This means that contacts seem to be generally chosen among those to whom we show *positive affective involvement*, using the terms provided by Eggins and Slade (1997: 52) to refer to the dimensions of social identity. Some studies also report on friends who have never met and people who "friend" anyone (Thaeler 2008, on a study by Rapleaf of 30.74 million social networkers). Even in these cases, users are choosing their addressees and who to keep as contacts, what makes them

positively marked for the category of affect. This fact will also foster the user's tendency to use Facebook for the interactional, in order to establish and maintain social relationships.

3.1.2. Interpersonal versus ideational meaning.

As a consequence of the use of language for the primarily interactional, speakers will employ an extensive range of language resources for construing interpersonal meaning, as defined by Halliday (1985: xiii), as the manifestation of the purpose "to act on the others." Interpersonal is opposed to ideational meaning, a manifestation of the purpose "to understand the environment." Both strands of meaning are enacted in communication, but, while transactional communication focuses on the ideational, i.e., using the gloss provided by Eggins and Slade (1997: 49), "conveying meanings about the world, representation of reality (e.g. topics, subject matter)," interpersonal deals with "meaning about roles and relationships (e.g. status, intimacy, contact, sharedness between interactants)" (ibid.). Whereas messages in both email and SNSs may communicate ideational and interpersonal meaning to a lower or higher degree, it is interesting to note that email usually gives priority to the "subject" in its layout, i.e., the ideational, while Facebook teases the user from the start by prompting a question in a dialogue box –"What's on your mind?"– which results in building intimacy and orients to the interpersonal. By sharing their thinking, users not only "speak their minds," but invite other users' contributions, which work to build rapport and interpersonal relationships. Martin and White (2005: 95), while theorizing about the negotiation of alignment, observe the following: "We note, in this regard, that when speakers/writers announce their own attitudinal positions they not only self-expressively 'speak their own mind', but simultaneously invite others to endorse and to share with them the feelings, tastes or normative assessments they are announcing." It seems that Facebook designers have also cleverly made the same observation and have, thus, introduced a question for the purpose of stimulating engagement through the communication of attitude. The following example from my data, issued as a response to the "What's on your mind?" prompt question shows an attitudinal position (in this case, judgment of social sanction, following Martin and White 2005: 52), which gets endorsement by two users:

> (1) FILE 1/11 (2) (UK)
> FACEBOOK: What's on your mind?
> USER A: I hope your having fun on your SPEED AWARENESS course!... criminal! x
> USER B: hahahahah corrr it all goes down with that beann!! x
> USER C: hahhahahahahaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

User A condemns a friend's behavior ironically by negative social sanction on his propriety (ethics), identified by Martin and White (2005: 53) as a comment related to "how far beyond reproach?"

Apart from stimulating engagement through the communication of attitude, the Facebook prompt also serves as a convention to mitigate face risk, which is typical of introductions and exchange initiations. Face, i.e., "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself," as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987: 61), is at risk from the danger of not getting a reply or not getting the expected reply. For this reason, introductions usually recur to formulaic language, as linguistic routines mitigate the possible offense. This observation was made by Laver (1981: 289): "Linguistic routines are shown to be a tool of polite behavior. They serve as a means of reducing the risk of face threats." Telephone-call openings typically involve a high use of verbal routines (Schegloff 1968; Godard 1977; Houtkoop-Steenstra 1986; Hopper and Doany 1989; Santamaría García 1995). The Facebook prompt acts as a summons, like the telephone ring in a phone call, and sets the expectation of a response. It works as the first part of a question-answer adjacency pair, and facilitates the speaker's job of communicating. Speakers prefer to respond to a question rather than initiating an exchange, especially when communication is not face-to-face, as initiating an exchange (sending a new message) may occasion anxiety while waiting for a response. By replying to the prompt "What's on your mind?" however, speakers are responding to an automatic, formulaic question, complying with a request for information and, at the same time sending a message and orienting to the interpersonal construction of a relationship.

3.1.3. Dialogic orientation and implementation.

One of the most significant features that seems to be responsible for the increasing success of SNSs is their *dialogic orientation and implementation*, which facilitates dialogue within a community of users, even when the individuals are not engaged in the dialogic activity simultaneously. The wall keeps and shows the latest contributions of our friends creating an "heteroglossic" framework of different voices. Hence, Facebook layout allows for the implementation of Bakhtin and Voloshinov's influential notions of dialogism and heteroglossia, quoted by Martin and White (2005: 92-93) as informing appraisal theory, "under which all verbal communication, whether written or spoken, is 'dialogic' in that to speak or write is always to reveal the influence of, refer to, or to take up in some way, what has been said/written before, and simultaneously to anticipate the responses of actual, potential or imagined readers/listeners". Whereas writing has typically been an asynchronous communication mode with addressees out of sight, SNSs bridge the gap between writing & speech to some extent. Friends are visible by means of pictures and we are even announced whether they are connected at the same time, therefore facilitating their presence in our minds and dialogues. Moreover, the creation of a socially significant community of friends with shared knowledge stimulates dialogue and facilitates engagement among users. Addressees are selected from a community according to different values (Thaeler 2008), but, as already discussed above, they seem to be generally chosen among those to whom we show *positive affective involvement* regarding social identity. This fact seems to motivate the use of

language for appraisal, i.e., for showing feelings, expressing attitudes toward behavior or to the value of things and triggers the use of engagement and graduation. I take the position that whatever we say can be seen as "stanced or attitudinal" (Martin and White 2005: 92), following Stubbs: "Whenever speakers or writers say anything, they encode their point of view towards it" (Stubbs 1996: 197). Among the possible philosophical explanations for this human behavior, I find the Theory of Value of special significance. It claims that we are "purposive beings," showing constant valuing activity as a continuous balancing of "ends in view" (Dewey 1939)[2]. In line with this theory, I would suggest that we are also evaluative beings. Burns and Brauner (1962: 208) relate evaluative behavior to ends: "People do *in fact prize*, desire, or value certain existential situations; these can be said to constitute (under certain conditions) ends in view. Ends in view serve as plans or guides to behavior so that prized existential situations (ends) can be realized; ends in view are thus means to ends" (emphasis in original). It would seem, then, that SNSs provide an excellent environment for evaluative and purposive beings, who use them to keep their community constantly informed of their plans, actions, and the evaluation of them. At the same time, they keep track and evaluate those of others. SNSs have, hence, implemented the communicative tools that facilitate the expression of our evaluative selves, as will be illustrated in the following section.

3.1.4. Appraisal resources.

Appraisal, the system for the expression of evaluation (Martin and White 2005) includes *attitude* for the expression of the meanings of *affect*, *judgment*, and *appreciation*, together with *engagement* and *graduation*, resources "for adopting a position with respect to propositions and for scaling intensity or degree of investment respectively" (Martin and White 2005: 39). Within a functional model of language, appraisal is concerned with the interpersonal, "an interpersonal system at the level of discourse semantics" as "a resource for construing tenor" (Martin and White 2005: 33, 31). Therefore, the fact that speakers communicating through Facebook orient to the interactional and interpersonal within a community of users connected through *positive affective involvement*, seems to motivate a high use of appraisal resources for the expression of interpersonal meaning and for showing their stance towards life and others. *Affect, judgement* and *appreciation* are the three regions of attitude concerned, respectively, with "our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behaviour and evaluation of things" (Martin and White 2005: 35). Engagement deals with "sourcing attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse", while graduation "attends to grading phenomena whereby feelings are amplified and categories blurred" (Martin and White 2005: 35).

The results of the analysis of appraisal resources in the data show that they are exploited mainly for the expression of affect. Affect is produced more frequently than judgement and appreciation. It is present in 69.40% (n=311), of the total number of evaluative utterances (n=448) containing attitude in the 200 turns analysed, while

judgement features in 22.99% (n=103) and appreciation in 13.83% (n=62). Table (1) presents the results for the analysis of different types of attitude.

Attitude-type	Percentage	N
		N=448
Affect	69.40%	311
Judgement	22.99%	103
Appreciation	13.83%	62

Table 1. *Results for the analysis of types of attitude*.

Apart from expressing freely with comments, by means of these appraisal resources, Facebook users can choose to communicate appraisal by clicking on a dialogue box that facilitates the conventional and automatic expression of appraisal: "I like this," shown together with an icon for a thumbs-up. The mere existence of this box seems to act as a trigger, motivating the users' expressions of *affect, judgment,* or *appreciation*, depending on whether the S shows feelings, evaluates behavior, or the value of things. A total of 40 examples have been found in the 200 messages of my data. If we consider that only 64 turns are initiations of an assessing type or expressives (using Tsui's 1994 taxonomy), which could expect and agreeing response or supportive follow up of the "I like type", this means a high percentage of 62.5%. Users may combine the automatic click of "I like it" with free language use, which makes room for more creative and personal uses of the language. For example, in exchange (2), B accepts A's comment by clicking the "like" button and by adding "YES YES YES!" The repetition of the adverb is not typical of the written register but possible in the hybrid register of written conversations on SNSs.

(2) FILE 1/11 (2) (UK)
USER A: strokes are gonna tour the UK in july pal. we are there!! x
USER B: ("Like" button) YES YES YES!

The "like" button also facilitates *engagement* of proclaim or disclaim types (agree/disagree). In my data, I have observed that users choose the "like" button even when a criticism is meant, like in C's turn in example (3).

(3) FILE 1/11 (2) (UK)
USER A (M.O.): M.O. is far better at making capucino's than J.L.
USER B: ("Like" button) you guys are BARE cute hahaaaa, unluckily for me you guys making cappuccino's together means she never answers her phooonnnnnnnnnneeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee :P
USER C: ("Like" button) … but I'm sure she has better grammar than you ... ;)

It seems that user C is using the "like" button to indicate that s/he agrees that M.O. makes better cappuccinos than J.L., but uses the comment box to indicate a criticism. This use of the "like" button, seems to be the equivalent to "Yes, but" in conversation and responds to the operating preference for agreement. The term *preference* is used here in its technical sense, as defined by Pomerantz (1975: 23) and Sacks (1987: 58). According to their research, after an assessment is produced as a first action of a pair, agreement is preferred, i.e., socially acceptable, expected, and, consequently, produced straightforwardly, with no pauses or prefaces of any kind. On the contrary, after an assessment produced as a first action, disagreement is dispreferred, and its delivery is typically characterized by a dispreferred format, i.e., following pauses, prefaces, and other delay devices. The dispreferred nature of disagreement, then, could be responsible for Facebook users' tendency to choose the "like" button, even to express criticism or disagreement with friends. This behavior may respond to the "avoid disagreement" strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987: 113-114): "The desire to agree or appear to agree with H leads also to mechanisms for pretending to agree, instances of 'token' agreement." They quote Sacks (1973) and his collection of examples "of the remarkable degree to which speakers may go in twisting their utterances so as to appear to agree or to hide disagreement – to respond to a preceding utterance with 'Yes, but…' in effect, rather than a blatant 'No'."

Another possible explanation for the use of the "like" button could be that speakers click it as a quick and automatic act of engagement before planning the discourse in their forthcoming contribution. There may even be no other contribution but the clicking. Users seem to click the button and omit comments more often after funny and lighthearted posts but prefer to invest time and write comments instead when the post is of more serious concern. For instance, a post like the following, got 13 "I like" clicks and eight very short comments, five of which were "amen", as requested:

(4) FILE 2/11 (1) (US)
USER A: If you don't love yourself, how the hell are you gonna love anybody else? (Can I get an amen?)

However, a more serious post like (5) got no "I like" answer but four comments:

(5) FILE 1/11 (1) (US)
USER A: Having a minor heart attack as I begin to attempt to piece together a clear idea for this master's project....
USER B: Welcome to my hell. I'm sure you will do marvelously, though!
USER A: heart. attack.
USER C: You are on track...
USER D: You can do it!

Engagement is given priority in interaction at SNSs and the "I like" click becomes a conventional and formulaic routine for engagement. Being formulaic, the illocutionary

force of the speech act expressed is mitigated, as compared to freely expressed agreements. As explained above (section 1.2.), linguistic routines are a tool of polite behavior, which serve as a means of reducing the risk of face threats, as Laver (1981: 289) observed. The first user's need for positive face (i.e., his/her desire to be liked and/or admired) would be threatened by not receiving a reply attending to this need. Therefore, the clicking of the "like" button as a response maximizes reply efficiency: The user's face is saved with a minimum of time invested. Once the first user's need for positive face is satisfied with a token agreement, the following users may carry on to state opinions that may be contrary to those by first user. Irony may also be used as a way of "superficially agreeing with the preceding utterance" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 114). In the following example, user A gives an assessment on her new hair style and user B clicks the "like" button before ironically denying the possibility of the veracity of the fact reported:

(6) FILE 1/11 (2) (US)
USER A: Peacock hair!
USER B: ("Like" button) Peacocks don't have hair
USER A: Kristian, I cannot fight with your logic. But Ron, a pic is forthcoming...

User B is expressing a negative social sanction judgment on the veracity of the fact (terminology from Martin and White 2005: 53). User A interprets the judgment accordingly and acknowledges it (using the term by Tsui 1994: 205), proceeding to initiate a move toward proving her honesty.

However, users who feel a negative attitude of disapproval, disagreement, criticism, etc., i.e., face-threatening acts (FTAs) toward the first speaker's need of positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987: 66), can recur to any of the strategies included in their chart (Brown and Levinson 1987:60). The strategies will be reformulated here by making reference to the possible alternatives provided by Facebook:

1. Don't do FTA. The user can ignore the person and his/her comment.
2. Do FTA off/on record. The user can do the FTA in a public way and upload it on the wall or either send a private message or use the chat option. Emoticons may be used to provide redress or compensation for face loss. A smiley or winking face, for instance might mitigate the offense, as used in 12 instances of a total of 15 risky turns in my data, which means that 80% of risky turns get an emoticon as a mitigator
3. Deletion of FTA. When the comment or post is on the wall of the threatened speaker, s/he can delete it, and even remove that person from the contact list (if the person is in the list of contacts). If the comment is public, the speaker can also report the situation to the webmaster.

It is interesting to observe that there is no "dislike" button even when it has been requested by 2,192,754 registered people. This is one of the users' opinions on a Facebook fan page petitioning for the change: "WE have the right to say what we like,

how about the right to say what we don't like!!" It may respond to the need felt by users to express negative evaluations, as well as positive ones, in an automatic, formulaic way. Also, other sites, like YouTube, give the option of thumbs-downing things. However, the reluctance of Facebook administrators to have it included may respond to the belief that the network will work better if there are more opportunities to express favorable assessments toward other users.

The frequent use of appraisal resources on Facebook may also respond to the fact that appraisal is a resource to construe power and solidarity. Power and solidarity are identified as two key tenor variables (Martin and White 2005: 29), the first realized by the principle of reciprocity of choice (for example, of term of address) and the latter by the principles of proliferation and contraction. Proliferation "refers to the idea that the closer you are to someone, the more meanings you have available to exchange" and contraction "refers to the amount of work it takes to exchange meanings, and the idea that the better you know someone the less explicitness it takes" (Martin and White 2005: 30-31). When you are close to someone, you may even not say anything, but use simply a smile or any other body gesture to show attitude. SNSs facilitate the observance of both principles. The wall encourages the sharing of personal information by users, which results in their getting to know each other better, feeling closer and having more meanings available to exchange, hence favouring proliferation. By virtue of the principle of contraction, some meanings may be conveyed by a gesture or facial expression without any explicit verbal message. In an attempt to simulate facial expression, SNSs provide users with emoticons, a new resource for encoding attitude without words that serves the principle of contraction. Typing different combinations of punctuation marks and numbers give as a result a wide range of facial expressions, from smiling faces (smileys) to frowns, or pictures with a particular meaning, like a heart, meaning love, which are automatically inserted in the message. A whole list of Facebook emoticons can be found at www.facebookemoticons.com. They are presented as a way to save typing: "You can say it all without having to spend time typing the letters one after the other" or "emoticons go a long way simplifying your conversations." For instance, if you type a semicolon followed by a closing first parenthesis you get a perfect friendly smile, which saves the effort of typing the words "I am happy" or a similar wording. On the contrary, if you are in a situation that has made you both disappointed and surprised, Facebook advises to put the emoticon for grumpy. You can create it by typing >:-("to let others know how so heavily you were struck by some information." Regarding graduation, emoticons can be used to grade force, i.e., intensity or amount (using a repeated grumpy symbol, for instance) and to grade focus. Focus is graded according to prototypicality, as smileys are chosen as symbols for prototypes. The grumpy face is the prototype of anger, and the angel is prototype of good behavior, for instance. Emoticons have developed as a conventional way to express appraisal which has resulted in an innovative means of expression. Therefore, I would consider emoticons as a new resource for the expression of appraisal (within a SFL perspective), which has not been considered in previous accounts of the model (Bednarek 2008; Martin 2000; Martin and White 2005). They give punctuation marks a different use from the conventional, serving the encoding of attitude together with

the expression of engagement and graduation. Emoticons show the dual character of convention and innovation postulated for genres by Bhatia (2004: 24). Convention shows genre as "a rhetorically situated and highly institutionalized textual activity" while propensity for innovation, "is often exploited by the expert members of the specialist community to create new forms in order to respond to novel rhetorical contexts (…)". Emoticons are a conventional resource on SNSs, exploited with relative freedom by their members, who come with new uses of them from time to time, enlarging the list.

3.1.5. Construction of an ideal virtual identity.

Politeness theory, as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), has provided a useful theoretical framework for the study of the self and the construction of identity. Even when it has been further developed in a more discursive approach in works such as Watts, Ide and Ehlich (2005) and severely criticized (e.g., Eelen 2001; Watts 2003; Mills 2003; Locher and Watts 2005), critiques have not destroyed the model but triggered new trends in research (such as Lakoff and Ide 2005). The concept of face is central in the theory and essential for an understanding of the construction of identity. Brown and Levinson (1987) borrowed the concept from Goffman (1967: 5):

> The term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.

In this definition, as observed by Dippold (2009: 3), face is seen as the result of speakers' presentation and its construction by others: "face is a conglomerate of the self-image speakers want to present to the outside world and the image that is constructed of them by others." When elaborating the concept from Goffman, Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that every individual in a society is assumed to have *negative* and *positive* face. *Negative face* is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition," whereas *positive face* includes "the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). According to politeness theory, speakers' face is vulnerable to acts[3] that run contrary to face wants. For instance, orders, requests, suggestions, advice, threats, and warnings, which put some pressure on the addressees to carry out an act, threaten their negative face. Disapproval, criticism, contradictions, or disagreements, on the other hand, threaten their positive faces, i.e., their desire to be liked and approved of. As a consequence of face vulnerability, "any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 68) by choosing either from positive politeness strategies "oriented toward the positive face of Hearer" or from negative politeness

strategies "oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (or redressing) H's negative face" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 70).

With this elaboration of face, Dippold (2009: 5) claims, some of the original ideas in Goffman are lost: "We have already seen that in Brown and Levinson's framework, the idea that individuals claim a particular self-image (Goffman) and the notion of personality, which had initially been invoked in the definition of positive face (Brown and Levinson), disappears entirely behind the notion of FTAs." Recently, Dippold notes, authors like Spencer-Oatey (2002) and Riley (2006), are returning to the original concept by Goffman. Riley (2006: 298) sees face as "both constructed and projected by speakers and attributed to them," in Dippold's (2009: 6) words. Riley (2006: 298) uses the classical term "ethos" in his study of identity: "Ethos is communicative identity. It is an amalgam of speaker identity (who I am and who I want to be taken for) and perceived identity (who you think I am and who you take me for)."

The works reviewed here have dealt with the construction of face and identity through interaction, i.e., projection by a speaker in and through his or her discourse, and perceived by the hearer. However, I will turn now to the computer-mediated construction of a virtual identity. Before the common use of the internet for social purposes, the construction of face was mainly handled through interaction in face-to-face contexts or telephone conversations. Gossiping, understood as judgment upon others, played an important role in the construction of face and identity in social groups. Martin and White (2005: 52) present judgment as "the region of meaning construing our attitudes to people and the way they behave" and divide judgments into those dealing with "social esteem" and those oriented to "social sanction." The first have to do with "'normality', how unusual someone is, 'capacity' (how capable they are) and 'tenacity' (how resolute they are); the second have to do with "'veracity' (how truthful someone is) and 'propriety' (how ethical someone is). According to these authors, the oral culture is responsible for the shaping of social esteem while social sanction is codified in written rules and regulations: "Social esteem tends to be policed in the oral culture, through chat, gossip, jokes, and stories of various kinds – with humor often having a critical role to play (Eggins and Slade 1997: 52). [...] Social sanction on the other hand is more often codified in writing, as edicts, decrees, rules, regulations, and laws about how to behave as surveilled by church and state". However, after close observation of data from computer-mediated interaction, I find that social sanction is frequently handled through the same mechanisms than social esteem in personal and private spheres of life. For instance, examples (1) and (6) above and (9) below contain social-sanction judgments among friends. It is also interesting to note here that SNSs are taking up the role before confined to "the oral culture." Gossiping creates a feeling of community, either if delivered face-to-face, by phone or through computer-mediated means. It provides a space for sharing evaluation of real life situations, and it is no surprise that students are using SNSs for virtual gossiping and hence, creating a feeling of community. As Martínez and Wartmann (2009: 4) claim: "Students use these sites to interact and bond with other students, to share experiences, and to participate in the new online college

'community' that is understood by students to be real." And sharing a community feeling is crucial for the construction of students' identities: "It is now unmistakable that in the era of online social spaces like Facebook, Instant Messenger (IM), Live Journal, Xanga, Web Shots, Blogger.com and Bebo college students use these and other online sites as a social medium, a space where they explore their identities, where they produce and reproduce rules of behaviour, where they make public self-representations through text and images." (Martínez and Wartmann 2009: 4). The following example shows self-presentations of college students through text:

> (7) FILE 1/11 (US)
> FACEBOOK: What's on your mind?
> USER A: I think it's kind of creepy how little my looks have changed over the last 26 years.
> USER B: When I gave myself bangs again as an adult, I was shocked how much I looked like me as a little kid again. Well, me with more of a beer gut!
> USER C: The only thing that makes me look different from H.S[4]. is my skin. I'm getting old :-(

Examples like this seem to give a positive answer to the question formulated by Else and Turkle (2006): "Is social networking changing the way people relate to each other?" Before the existence of SNSs, private issues of an intimate character aimed at self-disclosure, used to be dealt with mostly in the spoken mode, either in face-to-face or telephone conversation. Email is also being used for private issues, gossiping, and building a feeling of community, of course. However, real-time, evaluative comments of self-disclosure like those in example (7) need an atmosphere of intimacy that seems to be more easily created by SNSs than by e-email. Therefore, it seems that SNSs are making it possible to use written text for expressing and building a degree of intimacy that could only be expressed and built by means of spoken interaction in the pre-networking era. Moreover, the fact that users are not face-to-face, seems to allow for more freedom of speech and behavior in some cases. This seems to be the case in the following example. User A is a friend and guest at B's. After having dinner, they go to bed in two separate rooms and both connect to Facebook. In that context, user A sends the following chat message:

> (8) FILE 9/10 (UK)
> USER A: What are you dreaming?
> USER B: Do you really prefer FB to chatting over a cup of wine?

User B interprets A's question as a move toward her positive face, as desire to build intimacy. It seems that this move had not happened in face-to-face interaction but could happen through the chat tool. It is not surprising then, that computer-mediated chatting is becoming a popular means to find a partner. Behind the computer, friends have access only to those aspects we choose to portray of our identity. We hide the character traits

we don't like and idealize our virtues by means of our discourse and pictures: In the virtual world, we are what we say and what we show.

In the context of SNSs we can expect users to give priority to their friends' and their own needs for positive face because establishing and maintaining relationships requires of various social skills which make use of positive politeness strategies, such as claiming common ground, conveying cooperation and fulfilling hearer's wants. In fact, the results of the analysis of politeness strategies, shows a high total number of positive politeness strategies, with 323 instances of different positive politeness strategies scattered along the 200 turns in the sample. However, only 3 instances of negative politeness, of the apologising "do not impinge" type, have been found.

Politeness strategies	Percent	N
Positive-politeness-type	N=323	
claim-common-ground	65,01%	210
convey-cooperation	17,02%	55
fulfill-h's-want	17,95%	58
Negative-politeness	N=3	
don't-impinge	100.0%	3

Table 2. *Realisation of politeness in the data*.

(9) FILE 09/11, (US) Summons for help in an area devastated by floods
USER A: Hi Everybody. Please read this. Your help is needed with the clean-up from the floods that ravaged Schoharie and Greene counties from Irene. YOUR help. The time is not later, it is now. Willing to give some time? Call Sarah Goodrich, who is coordinating volunteers in the town of Schoharie, 518.470.0014
USER B: I like this. (Click of the "like" button by Eva)
Eva was just there today helping to gut a house. It's pretty devastating stuff. I'm also helping to collect school supplies, which is apparently needed; One of my friends is making another trip up there Monday.

As a response to the summons for help by USER A, USER B conveying that helping is admirable and interesting. She is also claiming common point of view, opinions, attitudes, knowledge and empathy with A, by seeking the agreement of other users' and by presupposing/raising common ground, i.e. an interest to help, "indicating that S and H belong to the same set of persons who share specific wants, including goals and values" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 103). All these meanings are realized by means of "I like it", a literal expression of affect, which, in this context, can be interpreted as a token for judgment of social sanction, showing propriety, i.e. helping is considered to be good behaviour.

Negative politeness is only found in acts of apology like the following:

(10) FILE 1/11 (2) (UK)
USER A: Have a great time. Sorry about all the Freya posts it was a fault on my
     phone I think x x x

The speaker is apologizing for the undesirable effects created by another friend's use of the phone. Freya borrowed A's phone and some posts have reached non-intended recipients. Negative politeness in this example features a formulaic "sorry" together with justification "a fault on my phone". The other 2 examples of negative politeness in the data also show apologizing for some inconvenience, which seems to be the most common speech act making use of negative politeness.

4. CONCLUSION

The corpus of university students' messages extracted from Facebook, the most widely spread SNS, has served to explore some of the constitutive features and functions of its characteristic discourse, which can be generalised to other SNSs, as they all share common essential features. I have focused on the communicative purpose, importance of convention and propensity for innovation of Facebook users, in an attempt to define the characteristic discourse of SNSs as a genre. The article has also shown the potential of SNSs for the specific purpose of creating face and identity by building intimacy and a feeling of community among students. The use of SNSs as a computer-mediated means of communication seems to motivate the expression of appraisal through the encoding of attitude, engagement, and force, thus contributing to the construction of power and solidarity relationships among students, who generally choose to contact people with positive affective involvement. The use of the "like" button for a quick and automatic act of engagement, of smileys that simulate facial expressions, and of evaluative comments serve to realize the communicative purpose of the genre as defined above: the building of social relations by sharing individuals' stance toward life.

In the era of SNSs, university students are using them as a social medium to explore and portray their identities through text and images, being the first generation that is using written text instead of oral communication for building intimacy. According to Else and Turkle (2006), we are also building relationships of intimacy with our machines: "Our new intimacies with our machines create a world where it makes sense to speak of a new state of the self […] a subject wired into social existence trough technology, a tethered self". The possibilities offered by SNSs for social interaction have changed the ways students relate with each other. We cannot escape the facts, and it will be worthwhile to reflect on the way that SNSs are affecting our private lives and, as teachers, our profession.

NOTES

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook (accessed 24th February 2011).

[2] No page reference included in the source, an article by R. Field at the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. A peer reviewed academic resource*, available at http://www.iep.utm.edu/dewey/ (accessed 26th February 2011).

[3] By *act*, Brown & Levinson (1987: 65) refer to "what is intended to be done by a verbal or non-verbal communication (...)".

[4] "H.S." is used for "High School."

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