Constructing Identity on Facebook:
Report on a Pilot Study

Brook Bolander and Miriam A. Locher

In this paper we examine the construction of identity on the social network site (SNS) Facebook. We thereby focus on the language use in personal profiles and status updates (SUs) of ten individuals from Switzerland. This paper thus presents the results of a pilot study, which is part of a larger project on language and identity in Facebook. Drawing on previous work on SNSs by Zhao et al. and Nastri et al., this paper highlights that Facebookers use a variety of strategies to construct their identities, i.e., visual, enumerative, narrative (cf. Zhao et al.) and self-labelling practices, as well as what we term "Creative language usage." Results show that identity construction on Facebook tends to be mediated more extensively via implicit identity claims than explicit ones, which corroborates the results of Zhao et al. We hypothesize that this may be related to the fact that individuals in Facebook tend to have "anchored relationships" (cf. Zhao et al.), which means their Facebook relationships are grounded in offline life. The paper also points to particular factors relating to the medium and the social context of interaction which appear to influence language use in this SNS, and which will need to be studied in further depth as the project proceeds.

1. Introduction

This paper explores identity construction on the social network site (SNS) Facebook (cf. Section 3 for more information on SNSs) and presents the results of our pilot study of the personal profile pages and status updates of ten Facebookers living in Switzerland. Personal profile

pages give individuals the possibility to "type [themselves] into being" (Sunden 3, quoted in Boyd and Ellison) through a process of self-labelling and description, or enumeration, of hobbies and interests. Example 1 shows the information provided by one woman on her personal profile page:

> Example 1:
> <F-7> is a "woman," "engaged," "interested in men," "looking for friendship," provides details of birthday, college education and job situation.

From this particular individual's personal profile page, we learn about F-7's sex ("woman"), her marital status ("engaged"), sexual orientation ("interested in men"), motivation for using Facebook ("looking for friendship"), birthday, college background and employment situation. This information is the result of F-7's practice of self-labelling and enumeration, whereby she selects options (such as "woman") from pre-existing lists of traits and characteristics (such as "man" or "woman"), and describe her hobbies and interests in spaces provided by the site for this purpose (cf. Section 5 for more detail).

The practice of self-labelling can be seen to constitute a relatively explicit form of identity construction. It is seen as explicit since individuals choose labels to describe themselves, thereby straightforwardly and unambiguously placing themselves in categories (e.g., the category of sex/gender) and positioning (Davies and Harré) themselves within the categories (e.g., by selecting from the options "man" or "woman" within this category). The enumeration of hobbies and interests, on the other hand, is a less explicit form of identity construction, since there is a less straightforward connection between statements about one's hobbies and interests, for example, listening to music, reading books or going on holiday, and the type of identity one constructs for oneself through such a claim (cf. Section 5.1 for more detail).

Through the status updates we gain insight into other processes of identity construction, both explicit and implicit, i.e., processes of identity construction which see a more or less straightforward connection between the language used and the type of identity claim made (cf. Section 6 for more detail). Status updates are texts written by Facebook users in which they share information about what they are doing at the present moment (through the system prompt "What are you doing now"),[1] or other information with their Facebook friends, for example,

---

[1] At the time we collected the data for this project this was the system prompt for status updates. In the interim, the prompt has changed, and now reads "What is on your mind."

pertaining to how they are feeling, what they did in the past or plan for the future. In Examples 2-4 we see three status updates, in which the Facebook user constructs her identity as an employee (Example 2), and as a student (Examples 3 and 4).

Example 2:
<F-7> ordered 15,000 paper towels by accident! My boss' face: priceless!

Example 3:
<F-7> has got to start writing her first assignment for university now :-(.

Example 4:
<F-7> is at work and starting to get nervous about tomorrow! University will rule my life once again!

While we do not see explicit identity claims, since F-7 does not explicitly state that she is an employee and student, information on identity is nonetheless conveyed through the language of the status updates, e.g. through the nouns "boss," and "university." This implicit means of identity construction is clearly different to the explicit form evident in the self-labelling on the profile pages.

Taking these examples as a starting point, we wish to explore how users of the SNS Facebook employ language to create identities in this virtual world. Our research questions are thus:

1)   How and to what extent do the participants in our pilot study make use of the information categories provided on the personal profile pages?
2)   In what ways does the language used in the status updates contribute to identity construction?

These two questions are explored for ten individuals from Switzerland, who form a group of friends, and whose profile pages and status updates have been analyzed for the purposes of this study.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Sections 2 and 3 we outline previous work on identity and language, and social network sites (SNS) and Facebook, so as to be able to contextualize our research within a wider framework of research on Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). In Section 4, we briefly describe the data, before turning to the personal profiles in Section 5 and the status updates in Section 6. In both sections 5 and 6, we first outline the method and then the results and discussion. The paper concludes in Section 7 and points to implications of the results of this pilot study for further research.

2. Language and identity

Our individual identities are shaped by numerous factors, including age, gender, class, ethnicity, upbringing, profession, hobbies and regional loyalties. However, our identities are not simply the sum of these factors. In this paper, we adopt a definition of identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz and Hall 586; cf. also Mendoza-Denton; Locher). This points to the importance of the intersubjective and the interactional, i.e. to the fact that we position ourselves and others in and through interactions with others. Thus, identity "is intersubjectively rather than individually produced and interactionally emergent rather than assigned in an a priori fashion" (Bucholtz and Hall 587).

In other words, identity is constructed in and through interpersonal relationships and social practice, or through the performance of "acts of positioning," where positioning can be defined as follows:

> Positioning [. . .] is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines.   (Davies and Harré 46)

Thus, as the quote indicates, when we interact with others, we are underlining the existence of a particular self, which can be observed by others at a particular point in time. Within public spaces where there are witnesses to acts of positioning (like in Facebook), the positioning of self and others is particularly interesting, since by claiming I am a friend of X, for example, I am also positioning X as a friend of mine.

However, while endorsing a view of identity and identity construction which underlines that the process is dynamic and emergent, it is important to note that this does not mean that interactants reinvent themselves from scratch in every new interaction. Instead, they are embedded in their knowledge as social actors in their social world and they draw on expectations about identity claims and stereotypes derived from previous encounters in a process of analogy. While not the only means, language is one key way of constructing identity when we engage in social practice.

3. Social network sites and Facebook

Facebook is a social network site situated on the Internet. It was originally launched in early 2004 for Harvard students, and thus targeted "distinct college networks only" (Boyd and Ellison). However, since

2006 it has been open to everyone. Following Boyd and Ellison, we define SNSs as web-based services that allow individuals to

(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
(2) articulate a list of other users ["friends"] with whom they share a connection,[2] and
(3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.   (Boyd and Ellison)

Facebook can be classified as an SNS on these criteria. Individuals can construct a profile within the Facebook platform, and this profile can be more or less public depending on the privacy settings the user selects. They can become "friends" with other individuals on Facebook, to whose profiles they then have access.[3]

Recent work on CMC has underlined the need to emphasize "the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet" (Androutsopolous 421). This constitutes a clear move away from the *computer* or *technological determinism* which was pervasive to early work on CMC (cf. Androutsopolous, for example, for a criticism of the computer deterministic viewpoint). While the influence of the medium on language use should not be ignored, scholars argue for the importance of appreciating both medium and social/situational factors for language use.

This recognition of the potential role played by both medium and social/situational factors is most clearly expressed in Herring's faceted-classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse, a non-hierarchically ordered, open model which lists those factors which have hitherto been shown to influence language use in a variety of genres of CMC, while recognizing that others may well also play a role. The whole model cannot be presented here, yet it is worth emphasizing that the medium factors of "asynchronicity (M1)" and "message format (M10)" and the social factor "participant structure (S1)," which includes considerations about the degree of anonymity, have been seen to influence language use in our data (cf. Section 6).

Literature on Facebook thus far has tended to come from communication studies, sociology and network studies. Linguistic interest has been relatively limited. Two articles which demonstrate a linguistic interest are Zhao et al. and Nastri et al. The former explores identity con-

---

[2] It is worth noting that Facebook's slogan emphasizes notions of "sharing" and "connecting:" "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life [. . .]" (http://www.facebook.com/).
[3] As mentioned before, depending on the privacy settings, different friends of a Facebook user may have varying degrees of access.

struction in Facebook and demonstrates an interest in language, although language is not studied in its own right. It is an important text in relation to identity construction in SNSs, since, as Zhao et al. point out, "[i]dentity construction in a nonymous online environment has not been well studied" (1818). Nonymity (the opposite of anonymity) refers to the fact that Facebook users' relationships tend to be grounded in offline life. In their study of 63 Facebookers, who were students at an American northeastern university, Zhao et al. found that: "Facebook users predominantly claim their identities implicitly rather than explicitly; they 'show rather than tell' and stress group and consumer identities over personally narrated ones" (1816). In light of our research, this is interesting, since it suggests that we can expect to find less self-labelling (which is a form of explicit identity construction) in the personal profiles, and more implicit identity claims made by individuals via their status updates. Nastri et al.'s paper, while neither concentrating on identity construction nor on Facebook *per se*, does focus on a linguistic analysis of the language of away-messages in Instant Messaging (IM), using Speech Act Theory. In Sections 5.2. and 6.2. comparisons between our own results and those of Zhao et al. and Nastri et al. are made.

4. Data

The participants in our data are ten Swiss individuals, who are in their late twenties and early thirties, nine of whom went to university. Eight know each other in offline life. They are thus part of the same social network, which is relatively loose-knit: some individuals have multiplex and dense ties, while others are only close friends with our anchor person,[4] and have only casual offline connections with the others (cf. Milroy and Milroy). For ethical reasons, we chose to obtain permission to use the data as part of our study (cf. Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee; Eysenbach and Till).

The data for our pilot study consists of the "personal profile pages" and the status updates on the so-called "walls" of the users. While the function of a wall in a physical context is primarily to enclose a space and/or to separate space, it can also be used to post messages on (notice board/pin wall) or to decorate (paintings, posters, etc.). "Walls" in Facebook constitute a space on the website where the owner of the wall and his or her friends can leave messages and where the acts they en-

---

[4] In order to find our ten participants, we focused on one person and chose those nine friends the majority of whom also know each other on Facebook.

gage in are documented. The acts (or "action types" as we have called them) individuals can perform on their walls are manifold. This is evidenced by Table 1, which shows the "action types" performed by the pilot study group (N=481). The time frame in question is from 1 December 2008 until 31 January 2009. It should, however, be noted that we collected our data in spring 2009 for this time frame, so as to avoid the observer's paradox. The action types were performed by the individuals at a time when they were not aware that their entries would later be used for research purposes.

Table 1: Action types

Action types:		Total #	%
SU:	status update	227	47
AP:	application activity	87	18
AC:	acceptance of a gift or similar item	51	11
PH-CO:	a comment on a photo	43	9
SQ:	a source or quote (from a newspaper, magazine, blog, etc.)	20	4
PH:	uploading of photo	14	3
FAN:	becoming a fan	12	2
GR:	creating a group	10	2
SQ-CO:	a comment on an SQ	11	2
EV:	announcing an event	4	1
REV:	writing a review	1	0
GA:	game move indicated by system	1	0
Total		**481**	**99**

As evidenced by Table 1, SUs were the most prominent action type, with 47%. Applications (AP), such as becoming a friend with someone, and the acceptance of a gift or something similar (AC) were also relatively common. Since this is a small sample, it remains to be seen whether similar patterns are observable for the other individuals in our wider study.[5]

While SUs were the most common action type, not all ten individuals wrote them. Indeed, as Table 2 shows, two individuals (F-1 and F-8)

---

[5] This paper reports on a pilot study on ten Swiss individuals within a corpus that contains 74 individuals in Switzerland, and 58 in England.

had none at all, and were virtually inactive on their walls, whereas F-7 and M-2 produced 55 and 45 status updates respectively.

Table 2: Participants and their extent of activity on the wall

Action types:	F-1	M-2	F-3	F-4	F-5	M-6	F-7	F-8	F-9	F-10	Total	%
SU		45	19	16	20	29	55		37	6	227	47
AP					3	1	6	4	35	38	87	18
AC			1	2			1	24	18	5	51	11
PH-CO		7	9	5			21			1	43	9
SQ		2	1		1	10	3		3		20	4
PH		1	4		2	1	3		2	1	14	3
FAN		9			1	1			1		12	2
SQ-CO		2				6	3				11	2
GR		0				1	1	1	4	3	10	2
EV		1				2			1		4	1
REV		0							1		1	0
GA		1									1	0
Total	0	68	34	23	27	51	93	29	102	54	481	99
%	0	14	7	5	6	11	19	6	21	11	100	

More generally, Table 2 highlights different degrees of activity on Facebook. While F-9 performed a total of 102 actions (21%) and F-7 93 (19%), F-4 performed 23 (5%) and F-1 zero. It is noteworthy that there is variation both in terms of general activity on the wall, and in terms of the types of activities performed on the wall. Again, further research will underline whether the same stands true for other groups of Facebook users.

5. Explicit and implicit identity labelling in the Facebook profile pages

In Sunden's words, "[p]rofiles are unique pages where one can 'type oneself into being'" (3, quoted in Boyd and Ellison). The personal profile page on Facebook invites users to provide information about themselves: The header "basic information" triggers self-labelling with respect to age, sex, relationship status, etc.; "personal information" invites enumerating activities, interests, favourite music, TV shows, movies,

books and quotations and entails a section entitled "about me;" the headers "contact information" and "education and work" trigger further details. The ten individuals in the study varied in terms of the amount of personal information they chose to reveal to their friends, as will be shown shortly.

5.1. Method

As mentioned in Section 3, we rely strongly on Zhao et al. for the methodology used in this paper. Table 3 is adapted from their study and shows a continuum of identity claims, which ranges from implicit to explicit. These claims are linked to the Facebook categories within the profile pages.

Table 3: "The continuum of implicit and explicit identity claims on Facebook" on profile pages, adapted from Zhao et al. (1824)

	More implicit <---------------------------------------> More explicit			
Category	**Visual**	**Enumerative**	**Narrative**	**Self-labelling**
Type	Self as social actor	Self as Consumer	First Person Self	First Person Self
Category in Facebook	Pictures	Interests/ Hob-bies/ etc.	"About Me . . ."	Basic information

In the column "Visual," we have implicit identity claims. These claims are made through pictures.[6] Here, the self is described as a "Social Actor," since, "[i]t is as if the user is saying, 'Watch me and know me by my friends'" (Zhao et al. 1825). In other words, the identity claims here are made on the basis of showing not telling (cf. Zhao et al 1816).

In the column "Enumerative," the Self is described as a consumer, since he/she foregrounds interests, tastes, hobbies, favourite books, movies, etc; i.e., what she/he consumes, in the sense of "engages in" or "utilizes." This column describes more explicit identity claims than the visual one, but the acts are still indirect, since they are about "see[ing] what I like/do/read/listen to" (Zhao et al. 1825–1826).

More explicit still is the narrative column, which contains verbal descriptions of the self. These are explicit, since in the "About me" section in Facebook, individuals have the possibility of directly presenting themselves to their friends. Hence, the focus is on the "First Person Self."

---

[6] Facebook users can also upload pictures. This action will appear on the wall. This practice is not discussed in this pilot study.

Finally, the most explicit column within the personal profiles is the "Self-labelling" one, which we added to Zhao et al.'s original framework. Here, again, we can speak of a "First Person Self," since individuals have the option to label themselves. Mostly, they can do so by selecting from a series of options (e.g., "Relationship status," which provides options, such as "single," "engaged," "it's complicated"), and sometimes by providing a short text (e.g., relating to their religious views). This is to be regarded as more explicit than the "Narrative" column, since we are dealing with labels, which serve the function of categorizing individuals, in a means analogous to the social variables assigned to individuals in variationist sociolinguistic and sociological studies, such as "sex," "age" (through the "birthday" information), "education."

We analyzed the implicit and explicit identity claims in our data systematically according to the framework just presented in order to address research question 1, repeated here for convenience:

1) How and to what extent do the participants in our pilot study make use of the information categories provided on the personal profile pages?

This research question can be split into two sub-questions, namely:

a) To what extent do individuals make use of the information possibilities?
b) How can the observed practices be linked to identity construction?

5.2 Results and discussion

Tables 4 and 5, dealing with the "Visual," "Enumerative," "Narrative" and "Self-labelling" categories, present the results from the analysis of the personal profile pages (research question 1a), and in the following we will attempt to interpret these initial research results and relate them to identity construction (research question 1b). As evidenced by the tables, the results on identity construction in the personal profiles are mixed.

Zhao et al. report that their sample of 63 students is characterized by "the almost universal selection of dense displays of profile photos and wall posts, followed by highly enumerated lists of cultural preferences associated with youth culture, and finally the minimalist, first-person 'about me' statements" (1826). Their general conclusion is thus that "Facebook users predominantly claim their identities implicitly rather than explicitly; they 'show rather than tell' [. . .]" (1816). With respect to pictures, Table 4 shows that 9 out of the 10 Facebookers of our study

also use a profile photo on their main profile page, which is a visual means of implicit identity construction.

Table 4: Visual, enumerative and narrative identity construction

Category	Present	Absent
Visual identity construction		
Profile photo	9	1
Identity construction through enumeration		
Interest types	3	7
Favourite music	3	7
Favourite TV programmes	3	7
Favourite books	3	7
Activities	2	8
Favourite movies	2	8
Favourite quotations	2	8
Political views	2	8
Networks type	2	8
Religious views	1	9
Identity construction through narrative		
"About me"	3	7

When we turn to identity construction through enumeration, we observe different frequencies from Zhao et al. (range from 48 to 73% presence). As Table 4 shows, for all of the categories the majority of users did not volunteer any information at all. Indeed, our individuals only present scarce information about themselves as consumers, by referring to their interests, favourite music, TV programmes, books and movies. Information on activities, favourite quotations, political and religious views, and network types is even rarer. This is interesting in light of the discrepancy in frequency between our results and those of Zhao et al., although one must note that only tentative conclusions can be drawn from this comparison, since our sample, as it stands, is simply too small. The results of Zhao et al. showed that most of the users in their study "provided highly elaborated lists of such preferences signaling precise cultural tastes" (1825). For them, this can be interpreted in light of the two potential audiences in Facebook, friends and strangers:

> What better way to personally convey "kool, hot and smooth" than to signal it through "kool, hot, and smooth" music. A better way to present oneself to strangers as well as to friends is therefore to "show" rather than "tell" or to display rather than to describe oneself. (Zhao et al. 1826)

Indeed, in their initial sample of 83 users, 63 students made a large part of their accounts visible to both friends and non-friends. However, in our study, this does not apply, since none of the ten individuals seem to have made their profiles visible to non-friends. The relative lack of listings in our sample may have to do with the nonymity of the relationships between our informants. Thus, the particular participant structure (and one of the social factors described in Herring's model) of our group influences the practice.

Like in Zhao et al.'s study (42 / 67%), a smaller number of participants chose to make use of the "About me" option in Facebook (3 / 10; Table 4) in comparison to the picture information. Moreover, these three texts are very short, M-2 writes the word "mehl," (German "flour"). M-6 writes "hello. i like." and F-9 writes a German proverb "Hunde, die bellen, beissen nicht," which is equivalent to the English "a dog's bark is worse than its bite."

In all three cases, it is not immediately evident how this can be linked to the "First person self" we expect to see when we read the "About me" section. Despite the scant amount of data, it is interesting that the individuals chose to make these claims as a response to the "About me" system prompt. For this reason they deserve to be considered as potential identity claims, albeit opaque ones. Thus, in the case of F-9, one could argue that the German proverb constitutes an identity claim, since the individual might be saying this about herself. She may be constructing her identity as an individual who sometimes "barks," or gets loud, but is not actually someone to be feared. Even more opaque are M-2's "mehl," and M-6's "hello. i like." However, we can argue that the intent is to be humorous. Indeed, for both M-2 and M-6 this can be backed up by the fact that out of the ten pilot study participants they use humour the most in their status updates: M-2 uses humour in 24.4% and M-6 in 17% of his status updates.[7]

While a full 67% of the users in Zhao et al.'s study made use of the "About me" option, 37% of these only wrote 1-2 short sentences. The authors thus conclude that "this category tended to be the least elaborated of the identity strategies" (1826). However, those identity claims made were of a more explicit nature. Thus, claims, such as "I'm a laid back type" (Zhao et al. 1826) are described as "typical example[s] of these brief 'about me' statements" (1826). We did not find any of these in our data.

---

[7] Further research on the "About me" sections, the types of claims made and their potential functions in light of identity construction is needed to provide a fuller picture of the relevance of this part of the personal profile for identity construction (see Section 7).

Finally, at the other end of the continuum, we find explicit identity construction through self-labelling. This is a category not directly included by Zhao et al. in their figure, although it is addressed in their paper. In our study, we added it to Table 3, since we are convinced that self-labelling is an explicit form of identity construction. Table 5 shows that the use of this form of identity construction is mixed.

Table 5: Identity construction through self-labelling

Category	Present	Absent
Birthday	9	1
Relationship status	7	3
Job	5	5
Sex	4	6
College	4	6
Hometown	3	7
Interested in	3	7
Looking for	2	8
High school	2	8

Most individuals included information about their birthday and their relationship status, and half provided insight into their job. For the other categories, we find under half of the users self-labelling themselves as being either male or female, and providing information about their colleges, hometowns, what they are interested in, looking for, and where they went to high school.

Again, this result may be linked to a variety of factors, for example, the participant structure and the nonymity of the relationships, or the purpose of using Facebook. For example, all seven participants who provide information about their relationship status are in a relationship (i.e., five have a boyfriend or girlfriend, one is engaged and one is married). They may thus be constructing their identities as "taken" or simply expressing pride in their partners. This is especially the case if one considers that five of the seven provide the name of their partner. By doing this, we can argue that not only are these individuals positioning themselves as being in a relationship with their partners, they are also positioning their partners as being in a relationship with them (cf. Section 2).

Regarding information on one's birthday, it is hard to say whether this labelling is motivated by an identity act, in the sense of claiming to be part of an age cohort. It may have more to do with the fact that individuals want to let others know when their birthday is, so that they can be congratulated, which indeed is a common practice on Facebook walls when someone celebrates their birthday.

Why the other categories tend to be left open, could be connected to the nonymity of the relationships (i.e. to the participant structure), or the fact that there are various possibilities of constructing one's identity on Facebook. This is notably the case on the wall and through status updates, so that individuals may more readily make use of this latter option of identity construction, thereby opting to underline what is relevant for a specific point in time, as opposed to utilizing more static labels. Furthermore, in the case of "sex," many may have selected not to use the self-labelling route, since the visual component (i.e., the profile photo) and the fact that our informants know each other offline and have subscribed with their real names make this kind of information redundant.

In sum, our results generally support Zhao et al.'s, particularly regarding the "visual" and "narrative" elements. Further results will be needed to better be able to reflect upon the differences regarding the "enumeration" and to comment on the "self-labelling" component in more detail.

6. Status updates and the creative usage of language for identity construction

The research question at the centre of this section of the paper is the following:

2) In what ways does the language used in the status updates contribute to identity construction?

What we find in the status updates is termed "Creative language usage," since individuals can use language without restrictions.[8] While they are prompted by the general system prompt "What are you doing," there are no options to choose from, or specific prompts, relating to religious, or political interests, the way there are on the profile page. Thus, status updates invite individuals to share snippets of their lives with others, and by doing so they construct their identities.

In order to account for this creative use of language, we have adapted Table 3 by adding two columns at both ends of the continuum of implicit to explicit identity claims; in addition, we have specified whether the practice witnessed occurs on the profile page or on the wall (Table 6).

---

[8] There is a length restriction of 420 signs.

Table 6: "The continuum of implicit and explicit identity claims on Facebook" on profile pages and the Wall, adapted from Zhao et al. (1824)

	More implicit <---------------------------------------> More explicit					
	Creative L-usage	Visual	Enumerative	Narrative	Self-labelling	Creative L-usage
Type	Actions	Self as social actor	Self as consumer	First person self	First person self	Actions
Category in Facebook	See Table 1	Pictures	Interests/ Hobbies/etc.	"About Me ..."	Basic information	See Table 1
Location	Wall	Profile/wall	Profile	Profile	Profile	Wall

We are thus focusing both on implicit and explicit identity claims: implicit, in the sense that statements like Example 2 (<F-7> ordered 15,000 paper towels by accident! My boss' face: priceless!) indirectly construct the individual's identity as an employee in this specific instant. On the other hand, we can also find explicit identity claims, along the lines of "F-7 is engaged to [name]! yay!." The latter constitute examples of "self-labelling," yet without the system prompt "Relationship status," and thus are still regarded as within the framework of "Creative language usage."

As outlined in Section 4, we are focusing on 227 status updates. Overall, they add up to a corpus of 1,984 words. On average these were 7.7 words long (minimum 2; maximum 29; SD 4.6). If we think back to the length of the three "About me" narratives (one word, three words, five words), it becomes evident that individuals write longer SUs, i.e., employ language in a creative way within this interactional context, more so than they do as an explicit presentation of the "First person self." The self here is described as a "social actor," yet unlike the social actor in the visual element of the profile, this "self" also tells something. He/she uses language to engage socially with his/her friends.

6.1. Method

In addition to Zhao et al., Nastri et al. served as an inspiration for our method of analyzing the status updates. The latter analyzed 483 away messages in Instant Messaging (IM), produced by 44 US students, applying speech act theory and analyzing the use of humour. We thus systematically coded the status updates for speech acts and the occurrence of humour as well. Further analysis involved the use of metaphors, non-standard language, and the grammatical and syntactic realization of the

status updates. In this paper, we can only report on the speech acts and the use of humour and their connection to identity construction.

6.2. Results and discussion

Table 7 presents the results of the speech act types used in the status updates. It shows that assertives were clearly the most common type of speech act in the SUs (177 / 59%), followed by expressives (78 / 26%) and commissives (27 / 9%). Examples are given in Table 7.

Table 7: Speech acts in status updates

Speech acts:		Total #	%
Assertive:	M-2 wonks around in lol-universe.	177	59
Expressive:	M-2 loves bass.	78	26
Commissive:	F-7 is off to Basel soon!	27	9
Directive:	F-7 [...] grow, my little green shrubs, grow!	7	2
Question:	F-5 is pan tan wan? san xang oder pak wando??	7	2
Quotation:	M-6 is easy like sunday morning.	2	1
Link posting:	M-6 google under attack: http://tinyurl.com/aa8c2q	2	1
Total		**300[9]**	**100**

Nastri et al. also found these three types to be the most frequent in their analysis of 483 away messages (68%; 14%; 12%). The functions of these messages in Facebook, as opposed to in IM are, however, different. Nastri et al. concur with Baron et al. when they argue that "[o]ne of the main functions of informational away messages is to convey that one is not in front of the computer or to otherwise signal unavailability for instant messaging at that time." Since IM is a synchronous medium, there may be communicative consequences if one does not signal that one is away from the computer and is hence no longer available to chat. While Facebook has both synchronous and asynchronous components, SUs are asynchronous, and one does not expect one's friends to be waiting online for a new update. What Herring calls the medium factor "asynchronicity (M1)" may partly explain why Facebookers use SUs dif-

---

[9] It should be noted that since some SUs constituted more than one speech act, we allowed for double-labelling, so that the total is more than 227.

ferently: we propose that the main function of Facebook SUs is to perform identity work. On the basis of this realization, we conducted a content analysis of the status updates in order to see what the Facebookers are doing when they use an assertive, or expressive, for example. These results are presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Content analysis of the status updates

Content analysis:	Total #	%
State of mind (happy, angry, …)	88	25
Reference to action in progress	59	17
Reference to future action	50	14
Reflection on past events	24	7
State of body	20	6
Location (S is in …)	18	5
Reference to completed action	18	5
Reference to likes	14	4
Expression of desire	13	4
Identity claim (S is somebody)	9	3
Request for help/advice	6	2
Offer recommendations/advice	6	2
Send wishes	7	2
Quotation	2	1
Response	2	1
Metacomment on SU	4	1
Advertising something	4	1
Express thanks/gratification	3	1
Apologise	2	1
Reference to dislikes	1	0
Total	**350**	**102**

This list is not exhaustive, and our continued analysis of newer data shows that other functions can also be fulfilled through the SUs (e.g., expression of love or friendship). However, the Facebookers in our study mostly used SUs to refer to their state of mind (25%), and to reference action in progress (17%) and future action (14%). It should again be noted here that the message format (Herring's category M10), i.e. the medium, may have played a role in influencing the frequency of refer-

ences to action in progress, by virtue of the SU system prompt "What are you doing."[10] However, overall this influence seems to be rather small.

To illustrate these three most prominent actions and link them to creative language use for the purpose of identity construction, we will use Examples 5 and 6.

> Example 5:
> <F-4> is happy to stay with <F-10>.

> Example 6:
> <F-7> is in the office and trying to be as productive as possible so she can actually go out and have some fun tonight!

In Example 5, an expressive speech act, we have a reference to "state of mind," grammatically realized through the adjective phrase "happy to stay with <F-10>." On the level of identity construction, it highlights a relationship of friendship between two of the individuals of this pilot study. Thus, F-4 constructs her identity in this instant as a "friend" of F-10, although she does not explicitly state "I am friends with F-10." It is important to stress that this claim of friendship is done publicly, i.e. it is witnessed by their mutual circle of friends, which renders this act even stronger. Moreover, we again have an example in which the positioning of F-4 as a friend of F-10 simultaneously constitutes a positioning of F-10 as a friend of F-4 (cf. Section 2).

Example 6 is an assertive speech act and fulfils a triple function: F-7 specifies a location ("F-7 is in the office"), references an action in progress ("trying to be as productive as possible") and a future action ("so she can actually go out and have some fun tonight"). What she also does, in this instance, is construct her identity as an employee (notably through the specification of the location), and as someone who enjoys going out (notably through the reference to future action).

While the use of humour is not frequent in our sample, we argue that having "a sense of humour" is nevertheless an important identity claim in our data (this is in line with Nastri et al.'s[11] and Baron et al.'s findings). Individuals construct their identities as "amusing, funny people" in those moments when they update their status and share this informa-

---

[10] Indeed, this led us to expect a strong use, even overuse of the present continuous, which was, however, not confirmed by the grammatical analysis of our data. Only 20 % of the SUs were realized using "is + verb-ing."

[11] Nastri et al. report that one fifth of their data contained a humorous element. This frequency is much higher than ours.

tion with others. In 29 SUs we identified the occurrence of humour[12] in a variety of functions. Table 9 exemplifies the types of humour we coded.

Table 9: Types of humour in SUs (more than one type can occur in an SU)[13]

Humour type	Total #	%
Irony	14	37
Humour used to bond with in-group	8	21
Word play	7	18
Personification	3	8
Humour at the expense of others	2	5
Self-deprecation	2	5
Canned jokes	1	3
Hyperbole	1	3
Vulgarity	0	0
Total	**38**	**100**

As Table 9 shows, humour is predominantly used in an ironic and bonding way, as exemplified by Examples 7-9:

Example 7:
<M-2> ignores facebook by updating his status.

Example 8:
<M-2> has applied laser hair removal, botox and gallons of protein-enhanced smoothies.

Example 9:
<F-7> is tackling the books . . . and they are winning :-(.

Example 7 is clearly ironic, since M-2 is not ignoring, but using Facebook. In Example 8, we have a case of humour for the purpose of in-group bonding: M-2 received a trip to Miami as a present, and his friends know that he did not actually have his hair removed, nor did he get Botox, or drink smoothies. He is instead referring to practices one may stereotypically associate with the location. This is a case of in-group

---

[12] As humour is often subjective, we have labelled conservatively, that is only when we found clear evidence either through linguistic means or background knowledge that warranted the SU to be taken humorously (cf. Hay; Nastri et al.).

[13] It is for this reason that we have 38 occurrences of humour in 29 SUs.

bonding, since only those who know where he is, what he is doing (or not doing) there, and who have information about certain cultural stereotypes, will appreciate the humour of the update, and not take it literally. This is even more so the case, since there is no emoticon or other paralinguistic feature to highlight that he is "joking." Finally, in Example 9, we have a case of self-deprecation (because she puts herself in the position of the "loser" of the battle), irony (because she is not really tackling the books) and personification (of the books, since books cannot actually engage in battle), which is made humorous through the metaphor STUDYING IS WAR. This is evidenced by the combined use of the verbs "tackle" and "win," in relation to the practice of "studying."

7. Conclusion and suggestions for further research

In this section, we would like to draw two initial conclusions warranted on the basis of our pilot study of the Swiss group, point to what types of research we are in the process of conducting and outline what further research needs to be done in order to better understand language use and identity construction on Facebook.

Our first conclusion is that Facebookers in our pilot study used more implicit than explicit identity claims in their SUs and on their personal profile pages. As already mentioned, this may have to do with the participant structure relevant for our group, i.e., that they entertain relationships with one another which are grounded in offline life. Thus, identities on Facebook reinforce or add new elements to offline identities rather than creating them from scratch (cf. Zhao et al. 1830). Facebook is thus different in this regard to anonymous SNSs and other CMC interactions. Further study is obviously needed here.

Secondly, initial results show that both medium and social/situational factors influence language use on Facebook. In this paper, asynchronicity, participant structure and message format were highlighted. As our study progresses, we will investigate the effects of a whole range of further factors (for example, purpose of the group, purpose of the activity, filtering and quoting options, and persistence of transcript; Herring) which have been shown to influence language use in CMC.

Our next step in the analysis of our data is to study the profiles and SUs of ten individuals from England. We will systematically compare the results and will look for similarities and differences with the pilot study on Swiss individuals. The questions that will follow are (1) Are the similarities and differences between the two groups indicative of group-specific patterns or idiosyncratic usage?; (2) Do individuals who perform

less explicit acts of identity construction compensate for these through the creative use of language in the status updates?; (3) Do the processes of identity construction in the profiles challenge or underline those in the status updates? It is only through research into these issues that we will better understand the processes of identity construction on Facebook. Furthermore, and this is our key desideratum for further research, we need to augment our catalogue of speech acts with a catalogue of acts of identity. This will entail categories, such as "employee," "student," "friend," etc. which have surfaced through the analysis of the status updates (and have been presented in this paper) and will include both implicit and explicit identity claims. By compiling such a catalogue we can better and more fully understand the processes of identity construction on Facebook and the language used by various individuals to construct their identities, or perform acts of positioning when interacting with one another and presenting themselves to their friends.

Finally, it should be noted that it was not our aim to pinpoint the sum of individual identity claims. This is connected to the theoretical approach to identity we have chosen to adopt. Nevertheless, future research would benefit from following a number of individuals and their implicit and explicit identity claims on Facebook in close detail, in order to better understand how the strategies work together. This research approach can be combined with more quantitatively oriented ones in an attempt to mix methodologies in order to circle in on such an elusive subject as linguistic identity construction.

References

Androutsopolous, Jannis. "Introduction: Sociolinguistics and Computer-Mediated Communication." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 10.4 (2006): 419-438.

Baron, Naomi S., Lauren Squires, Sara Tench and Marshall Thompson. "Tethered or Mobile: Use of Away Messages in Instant Messaging by American College Students." *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation of the Social Sphere.* Ed. Rich Ling and Per Pedersen. London: Springer-Verlag, 2005. 293-311.

Boyd, Danah and Nicole Ellison. "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13.1 (2007). Available at: http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/-boyd.ellison.html. Accessed on: 14 April 2009.

Bucholtz, Mary and Kira Hall. "Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach." *Discourse Studies* 7.4-5 (2005): 584-614.

Davies, B. and R. Harré. "Positioning: The Social Construction of Self." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 20 (1990): 43-63.

Ess, Charles and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee. "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research. Recommendations from the Aoir Ethics Working Committee" (2002). Available at: http://-www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf. Accessed on: 1 April 2009.

Eysenbach, Gunther and James Till. "Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research on Internet Communities." *British Medical Journal* 323 (2001): 1103-1005.

Facebook slogan (2010). Available at: http://www.facebook.com. Accessed on: 25 January 2010.

Hay, Jennifer. "Functions of Humor in the Conversations of Men and Women." *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (2000): 709-742.

Herring, Susan. "A Faceted Classification Scheme for Computer-Mediated Discourse." *Language@Internet* 1 (2007). Available at: http://www.languageatinternet.de/articles/761. Accessed on: 28 August 2009.

Locher, Miriam A. "Relational Work, Politeness and Identity Construction." *Handbooks of Applied Linguistics. Volume 2: Interpersonal Communication.* Ed. Gerd Antos, Eija Ventola and Tilo Weber. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008. 509-540.

Mendoza-Denton, Norma. 2002. "Language and Identity." *Handbook of Language Variation and Change.* Ed. J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill and Natalie Schilling-Estes. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. 475–499.

Milroy, James and Lesley Milroy. "Social Network and Social Class: Towards an Integrated Sociolinguistic Model." *Language in Society* 21.1 (1992): 1-26.

Nastri, Jacqueline, Jorge Peña and Jeffrey Hancock. "The Construction of Away Messages: A Speech Act Analysis." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11.4 (2006). Available at: http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue4/nastri.html. Accessed on: 1 April 2009.

Sunden, Jenny. *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003.

Zhao, Shanyang, Sherri Grasmuck and Jason Martin. "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digitial Empowerment in Anchored Relationships." *Computers in Human Behavior* 24.5 (2008): 1816-1836.