Keynote 2, Jul 20th 15:30 – 16:30 CET

Gender, Sexuality, and the Digital Commodification of Linguistic Style

Christian Ilbury (University of Suffolk)

Research has increasingly sought to document the ways in which linguistic and other semiotic signs become indexically linked – or 'enregistered' (Agha, 2003) – with person-types. This includes work which has examined those parodied or 'stylised' (Coupland 2001: 345) forms of interaction, such as the 'Mock White Girl' documented by Slobe (2018).

In this paper, I focus on the intersection of gender and sexuality in stylisation in digital communication. I do this by exploring the emergence of a stereotypically feminine style and persona that is prevalent in British social media. Specifically, I examine the prevalence of non-standard spellings (e.g., <dallyn> darling, <gawjus> gorgeous, <partehh> party), particular discourse features (e.g., hun, babe, u ok hun?), and characterological tropes (e.g., the life motto 'live, love, laugh', the budget alcohol 'Lambrini', taking a package holiday to 'Zante') as indexical representations of a particular type of classed, gendered, and ethnic identity in a corpus of 1000 Instagram memes. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that these features have become enregistered as a 'characterological figure' (Agha, 2003) of a White British working-class woman – the Hun. For users, this persona is particularly valued as a 'commodity register' (Agha, 2011) where it appears to have acquired certain social and linguistic capital within internet subcultures.

Concluding, I reflect on the social significance of the Hun and the challenges of examining (gender) identity online. Finally, I discuss the implications of stylisation and personae for future research on digital communication.

Agha, A. (2003). The social life of cultural value. Language and Communication, 23, 231-273.
Agha, A. (2011). Commodity registers. Journal of Linguistic Anthropology. 21(1), 22-53.
Coupland, N. (2001). Dialect stylization in radio talk. Language in Society, 30, 345–375.
Slobe, T. (2018). Style, Stance, and Social Meaning in Mock White Girl. Language in Society, 47(4), 541- 567.

Christian Ilbury is a Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Suffolk. His research examines the intersection of digital culture and language variation, with a particular focus on examining the social meaning of variable patterns of language use across face-to-face and digital contexts.