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Humour in microblogging

Exploiting linguistic humour strategies for identity construction in two Facebook focus groups

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Abstract

Research within interpersonal pragmatics highlights the relational aspect of language in use (Locher and Graham 2010). While this focus has especially been dealt with in politeness research, it can also be fruitfully combined with the study of identity construction through language (see Locher 2008). The use of humour is such a means of identity construction since showing a sense of humour in interaction is valued in many contexts. This chapter reports on a project on Facebook status updates (see Bolander and Locher 2010, Locher and Bolander 2014) and thus provides insights into identity construction in an interactive Web 2.0 social network site, where the participation framework is such that status updates are written in a semi-public environment in front of an audience of ratified Facebook friends, who can decide to move from the role of overhearer/eavesdropper to participating actively. We conducted a qualitative discourse analytic study of how humour is used in status updates by participants of two Facebook focus groups. These humorous acts of microblogging (Zhao and Rosson 2009; Yus 2011; Zappavigna 2012) are contrasted with different types of identity construction in the other status updates. While some but not all convey that they have a sense of humour, others also evoke identities in connection with other personality traits, as well as making pastime, work, and relationships claims.

1. Introduction

In the introduction to this volume, Chovanec and Dynel (p. 7) state that social media "grant contemporary audiences new participatory privileges. Audience members are not merely end-recipients of texts but they assume an active production role as well (Morris and Ogan 1996; Alexander 2011)." In our chapter, we work on data derived from Facebook, a social network site, which offers a dynamic participation framework that allows its users to take on and perform the roles of producers, transmitters, and overhearer/eavesdroppers (Goffman 1981). When we started our linguistic project on Facebook practices in 2009 one of the main driving forces was that we found the status updates of our friends humorous. We enjoyed reading them and reported chuckling about them to each other. Example (1)¹ is taken from our English data (to be further described in Section 3):

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- (1) Status Update (SU): Lauren is wondering where on earth the [name] lecture theatre is... she's starting to wonder whether it is a [name of university] version of the room of requirement as it's not mapped! (10:22 am)

Reaction to SU 1: unfortunately not Lauren i had lectures there last year. Head to [name] south, over beside the room where you can collect video recording equipment from, you know where that is? And head up the stairs, it'll be on the right in a corner. Sorry not as exciting as your idea..... (10:31 am)

Reaction to SU 2: Lol to the max. Wooo Harry Potter! (10:54 am)

Lauren uses a Facebook status update (SU) to broadcast to her friends list that she cannot find the lecture theatre at her university where she is required to be. We interpreted this SU as containing humour since Lauren, rather than simply asking "where is the lecture theatre?", creatively makes an analogy to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from the Harry Potter book series by J. K. Rowling, which contains a room named 'the room of requirements', and which, crucially, does not appear on any maps of the castle, and hence cannot be found easily. Through the mere act of posting this SU, Lauren ratifies all the members of her friends list as recipients. These very recipients, in turn, can choose to remain in the position of overhearers or they can decide to become active participants and engage in interaction by becoming producers of messages themselves, thereby creating dialogues or polylogues (Marriccia 2004). The first reaction to this status update begins by making a brief allusion to the humorous element of the SU ("unfortunately not") and then proceeds to explain where the lecture theatre is located. The response finishes with another allusion to the humorous content ("Sorry not as exciting as your idea.....") and thus reveals that the reference has been understood. The second comment reacts to the humorous content by naming Harry Potter explicitly and thus revealing that the writer has

¹ All examples have been reproduced as presented on the Facebook walls; we have not corrected orthography, errors, etc. but have changed all names and references to places.

understood the reference to the series as well. By doing this, the reference is also made transparent for non-initiated readers of the interaction. The writer further displays that the sense of humour of the SU writer is appreciated ("Lol to the max. Wooo"), thereby both positioning the SU writer as having a sense of humour, and indicating that this is a positive trait. This is done publicly in front of other Facebook friends.²

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These kinds of interactions sparked our interest in what Facebookers actually do on the platform and what kinds of practices they engage in (see Bolander and Locher 2010; Locher and Bolander 2014). In what follows, we will return to our data and our original motivation to delve into the language of Facebook users and elaborate on the role of humour within the interactive practices observed. In a first step we will discuss humour in computer-mediated communication in general (Section 2), and will then turn to the social network site Facebook and our data in particular (Section 3). We will then link this topic to the study of linguistic identity construction (Section 4) and will illustrate our observations with examples from two Facebook focus groups (Section 5). In the final section, we will elaborate on current Facebook practices linked to humour.

2. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and humour

It is important to state from the start that we do not wish to argue for a particular type of generic Internet humour that is fundamentally different in function from humour found in face-to-face interaction. Just as the search for Netspeak (Crystal 2001), i.e. a particular type of Web language different from face-to-face interaction, was thwarted by the quickly developing scope of computer-mediated practices that ultimately no longer allowed one to speak of only one particular variety of CMC language (see Locher 2014 for an overview of the development), we also cannot make any sweeping generalizations about the use of humour on the web. Instead, we would like to point to the multifunctionality of humour, and related to this to the many different sites where humour occurs on the web; we thereby do not claim to provide an exhaustive overview.

Acknowledging that computer-mediated communication is used for different purposes and offers different interactive possibilities (from information encyclopaedias run by professionals and those run by the general public, private and business email correspondence, to chat and voice interaction, virtual worlds and social network sites, etc.), it is not surprising that the use of humour surfaces in these different locations as well. We can potentially find humour in all of these sites, although the

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² When we look at the time stamps included in Example (1), we can also make a point in arguing that the first commentator, who responds within nine minutes of the original question, interprets the SU as a request for help, while the second commentator, who responds 32 minutes later is probably too late to be of help and is rather reacting to the humorous sense of exasperation displayed in the SU. In our data, there is no guarantee that SUs get a response since there is no uptake in fifty per cent of all 475 SUs. This statement is not only true for all SUs in general but also for all SUs that were tagged as containing humour. It is important to state as well that Facebook writers are aware of the fact that their status updates may not receive a response since users do not have to be logged on at the same time to use the site.

likelihood that humour occurs in a factual encyclopaedia article is lower than the likelihood that it can be found within social interaction among individuals. The use of humour, in other words, is not appropriate for every communicative genre and the same restrictions but also the same possibilities for creative output apply as in face-to-face interaction. While there is much "accidental" humour, i.e. humour that emerges in interaction, there are also sites explicitly dedicated to the sharing of humour. Indeed a crude Google search reveals that there are many compilation sites which collect jokes of all types, funny videos and comedy contributions and cartoon. There are also sites which offer (hospital) clown services or discuss the functions of humour in therapy, and there are many proposals on how best to define humour.

Despite this obvious computer-mediated humour outlet, Zappavigna (2012: 151-152) argues that "internet humour has not been widely studied in linguistics". She maintains that the main direction of research is to investigate the function of affiliation, i.e. humour "as developing solidarity (Baym 1995)" (Zappavigna 2012: 152). The sources of studies reporting on this affiliation function of humour in different computer-mediated contexts are, among others, Baym (1995), Cappelli (2008), Danet et al. (1997), Del-Teso-Craviotto (2006), Nastri et al. (2006), North (2007), Oring (2008), Page (2012), Petroni (2009), Schnurr and Rowe (2008), Shifman and Lemish (2010), and Vandergriff and Fuchs (2009). For example, Zappavigna herself (2012, Chapter 6) works on the 'fail' meme on Twitter and reports on how interactants develop a shared practice and sense of humour.

In Section 5, we will explain what definition of humour we adopted and how we analysed humour in the interactions observed. In the next section, we will turn to the use of humour on Facebook since we wish to explore how humour surfaces in the practices of two specific Facebook focus groups and how these findings can be linked to linguistic identity construction.

3. Facebook: A network of relationships and our data

Facebook is a social network site, which was established in 2004 for Harvard college alumni, and which has been available to everyone since 2006 (Boyd and Ellison 2007). In 2008 its slogan was "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life [...]. It's free and anyone can join" while in 2014 it is "Connect with friends and the world around you on Facebook" (facebook.com). Like other social network sites, as defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007), Facebook is

[a] web-based service [...] that allow[s] individuals to 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, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd and Ellison 2007)

Facebook can be described as a social environment where users befriend other users who they usually know in offline life (Zhao et al. 2008). While this comment is certainly true for

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the two focus groups that are part of this empirical study (see below), there are also interest "groups" on Facebook that one can join and where the members do not have to know each other from offline contexts (see also Yus 2011; West and Trester 2013; Locher 2014 for overviews of how Facebook works).

The participation framework of Facebook has developed over time. Today the platform offers multiple options for communication and activities that Facebook users can engage in (see Yus 2011; Jucker and Dürscheid 2012; Herring 2013; Locher 2014): Users write status updates and comments, upload their own pictures and video clips, share and pass on material they find noteworthy,³ chat with friends who are also logged in and write (e-mail) messages, etc. Facebook users thus find themselves in the roles of producers or transmitters of content addressed to their friends lists (or the general public if their profiles are not private) but they also take on the role of ratified recipients who can choose to remain overhearers or become active producers/transmitters in turn. Facebook is thus an example of the Web 2.0 development (Yus 2011: 93; Lee 2011: 112). In this context, Zappavigna (2012) points out the social function of Web 2.0:

The social web, or Web 2.0, are popularized terms used to signal a shift toward the internet as an interpersonal resource rather than solely an information network. In other words, the social web is about using the internet to enact relationships rather than simply share information, although the two functions are clearly interconnected. (Zappavigna 2012: 2)

This comment is also reflected in the two Facebook slogans quoted above and it allows us to make the link to identity construction, which will be explored in the next section.

In early 2009, we downloaded the profile information and all the activities documented on the walls of those people who had given us consent to participate in our research, after having been contacted via our personal friends list (74 individuals in the case of the Swiss network) and via an academic contact in the UK, who invited students of a British university to join the study (58 individuals) (for considerations on ethics see Herring 1996; Eysenbach and Till 2001; Ess and the AOIR ethics working committee 2002; Markham, Buchanan, with contributions from the AOIR ethics working committee 2012). Within both groups, we selected one anchor person and nine friends, who were chosen on the basis of the number of mutual ties; thus creating two dense networks. FG-S is constituted by a group of ten individuals who were living in Switzerland at the time of data collection, mainly students and young professionals, while FG-UK is a group of ten students who were studying in the UK at the time of data collection. Since we asked to download activities that had already happened in the past (beginning of December 2008 until end of January 2009), the informants gave us consent to work with material that was not written with the researchers in mind (thus we avoided the observer's paradox). The status updates in FG-UK are written almost entirely in English, while those

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³ As Chovanec and Dynel (this volume: 9-10) point out in the introduction: "Recipients of seemingly private messages are now capable of turning into transmitters, re-animating the messages authored by others beyond the original communicative frame and participants."

of FG-S are more multilingual. Even there, however, the status updates are written in lingua franca English in the vast majority (81.9%) and the display of different languages occurs predominantly in the reactions to status updates and the ensuing mini-dialogues (see Locher and Bolander 2014 for a discussion of these findings).

A tally of all activities pursued by the 20 Facebook users showed that the most dominant activity in both focus groups was to write status updates (SUs), which were triggered by the prompt "What are you doing?" at the time. FG-S wrote 227 SUs (47%) and FG-UK 248 (37%), out of a total of 481 and 673 activities, respectively (Bolander and Locher 2010). Hence we opted to primarily study these text-based practices and to pay less attention to other (increasingly) important multi-modal activities. Other frequent activities for FG-S users were the use of applications (18%), the acceptance of gifts, etc. (11%) (all registered as system messages⁴), and the commenting on somebody else's status updates or photographs (9%). FG-UK, on the other hand, showed the use of applications in 13%, commenting in 23% and playing games in 16%.⁵ In the next section, we turn to the link between microblogging and identity construction in order to start our analysis of the status updates in our data.

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4. Microblogging and identity construction in Facebook

Working within interpersonal pragmatics (Locher and Graham 2010: 1), we are particularly interested in the relational aspect of language and how we can link the study of this inherent aspect of language in general (Watzlawick et al. 1967) to identity construction (see Locher 2008). With respect to away messages in instant messenger, Natri et al. (2006) report that "[t]hrough posting away messages, users can express their identity and maintain their sense of connection to their friends and family by providing them with a window into their lives" (Natri et al. 2006). For Twitter, Zappavigna (2012: 14) points out that "people use Twitter and other microblogging services to share their experiences and enact relationships rather than to simply narrate the mundane details of their activities, as has been claimed in the popular press" (see also Zhao and Rosson 2009; Yus 2011). Zappavigna (2012: 38) is quite explicit in linking microblogging with "an ongoing performance of identity" and she sees the motivation for writing tweets in

the human desire for affiliation: we exist within communities of other voices with which we wish to connect. The stances we adopt and observations and evaluations we share all exist relative to the meaning-making of the other members of our social network and to all other

⁴ In 2008 and 2009, the information on the walls shows comments and status updates, but also system messages such as information on uploading photographs or playing games, while in 2013, messages on activities such as playing games are filtered into a different space on the Facebook interface.

⁵ As already mentioned, the participation framework in Facebook has changed over time. Our impression is that Facebook users in 2014 use Facebook differently; e.g. they upload video clips, photographs and memes to a much greater extent than in the past. The options of engaging in synchronous chat or writing non-public messages to Facebook friends within the platform do not appear on the wall/newsfeed of the interactants and are thus not part of our data collection.

potential networks of meaning. In other words, we perform our online identities in order to connect with others. (Zappavigna 2012: 38)

Social network sites are particularly interesting to look at through a relational lens. In the case of Facebook, we follow Sundén (2003:3) who argues that "[p]rofiles [and status updates, ML/BB] are unique pages where one can 'type oneself into being'" (Sundén 2003: 3). West and Trester (2013: 142) refer to this as "self-presentation" in the Goffmanian sense (see also Boyd 2011).

To study this identity construction in a systematic way we follow Bucholtz and Hall (2005), and Davies and Harré (1990) in adopting the concept of "acts of positioning" as a starting point for our analysis. This means looking at the (explicit and implicit) stance that people project through their language choices, i.e. at how they position themselves vis-a-vis others. For example, considering Example (1) again, Lauren positions herself as somebody who goes to university (looking for a lecture hall), who reads Harry Potter, and who has a sense of humour. By explicitly naming the university and the name of the lecture hall, she is appealing to an in-group of people who have access to this information. At the same time she is excluding other Facebook friends who are not familiar with her university. The same argument about in-group knowledge can be made about the Harry Potter series, as already explained above. Lauren thus engages in relational work, which is defined by Locher and Watts (2008: 96) as "all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice". It is important to stress that she is doing this "publicly" in front of her circle of Facebook friends.

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Over time, Facebookers can build up particular identities with the information they reveal in their profiles and the status updates and the activities they share.⁶ In the profile pages people can tick pre-given system categories such as gender or age, or they can add personal information on their birthday, education, employment, interests and favourite music/TV shows/etc. In the case of SUs and comments people can be more creative and use explicit (the SU contains a lexeme which evokes a particular role, e.g. "professor", "fiancée") and implicit acts of positioning (the SU only implies that one belongs to a particular identity category; e.g., by describing the act of grading an individual evokes the role of a teacher).

What we wish to explore in this chapter is the use of humour as a means of identity construction within the SUs of our data set. Nastri et al. (2006), who work on English away messages in instant messenger, report Baron et al.'s (2005) finding that "away messages often incorporate humour in an attempt to showcase personality, and that the participants in their study appeared to value the use of humor in away messages". Humour is indeed a valued character trait as evidenced in many cultural practices. To name just a

⁶ In Bolander and Locher (in press) we explore whether the reactions to the SUs of the users of our two focus groups confirm or challenge the identity claims made in the SUs. We found that both focus groups engage predominantly in face-maintaining and face-enhancing behavior and thus confirm rather than challenge identity claims.

few of many possible examples, the president of the United States has to show that he has a sense of humour at the White House Correspondence Dinner or at cameos in the show *Saturday Night Live* during the presidential campaigns, and dating ads highlight humour as an important trait a potential partner should have (Marley 2010: 458). However, humour displays are multifunctional and can come in many different guises. In the next section, we will explore the ways in which humour surfaced in the status updates of our Facebookers.

5. Humour in two Facebook groups

Let us now turn to the definitions of humour and the methodology that we adopt in our study. In her overview of humour research, Schnurr (2010: 311) aptly summarizes the challenges of humour studies as follows:

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Humour is a versatile linguistic strategy. It is not only an excellent means of reinforcing solidarity, but may also be used to "do power", as well as to express resistance and to challenge interlocutors. However, which specific functions a particular instance of humour performs is not always straightforward, and most instances of humour are multi-functional and serve different interpersonal functions simultaneously. In identifying the functions of a humorous occurrence, researchers may rely on various clues including response strategies and speaker's intonation (Holmes 2000; Mullany 2004; Schnurr 2009). (Schnurr 2010: 311)

While doing power with humour and expressing resistance and challenging humour are functions of humour discussed in Schnurr (2010), she claims that creating, maintaining and reinforcing solidarity is the "most typical function of humour, which all instances accomplish to some extent" (2010: 311). As mentioned above, Zappavigna (2012: 152) argues that developing solidarity is the most important humour function reported in Internet research. What is particularly intriguing for our data is that we are dealing with a participation framework which encourages a semi-public performance of humour in front of an audience of Facebook friends. When humour builds upon shared knowledge, it creates closeness and an in-group feeling and also maintains a group identity. In the same vein, the same instances of humour can also exclude those friends who lack access to common ground (e.g., those who have not read *Harry Potter* in the case of Example (1)). Since Facebookers can connect people from different networks of offline life (e.g. family members, travel companions, school and university mates, work colleagues, etc.) around their own persona, it is easily possible that the witnessed humour will not be understood by everybody who reads the SU. If the SU writer does not wish to exclude Facebook friends, he or she is thus faced with an interpersonal challenge (to be discussed further below).

For our analysis of humour, we systematically analysed the 475 SUs in the two focus groups and established firstly whether or not humour occurred and secondly what categories of humour emerged. Tagging humour is not an easy task; in our case we opted not to label an SU as humorous if we had doubts. Our procedure for deciding was ruled by

either clear evidence through linguistic means (see the examples of word play, irony, etc. below) or background knowledge that warranted the SU to be taken humorously (see Hay 2000; Nastri et al. 2006). This background knowledge extended beyond our own personal ties to our informants, to knowledge gleaned from interactions between the informants themselves. Reactions to SUs, or instances in which ratified recipients choose to become visibly engaged in and thereby construct or maintain a dialogue or polylogue (Marriccia 2004), provided a particularly fruitful means of assessing the presence/absence of humour. In this sense, we acknowledge that humour constitutes a form of "situated performance" (Baym 1995) which is under "joint construction" (North 2007). In the context of chats, North (2007) points out that

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Successful humour in these discussions is a joint construction, in which participants encourage each other both by signalling their appreciation through emoticons or other graphic symbols, and by adopting and building on other people's humour. 'Playing along' is an important strategy for supporting humour online as it is in face-to-face interaction (Hay 2001). (North 2007: 547)

While we explored all responses to SUs in light of humour, the fact that only fifty per cent of the SUs received an uptake/comment (Bolander and Locher in press), means that we cannot always draw on the interactive element in classifying an SU as humorous.

Table 1 shows the ten humour categories that our Facebookers employed and that we tagged systematically in the data: Appeal to shared knowledge/in-group, canned jokes, dialogic character, disaffiliative humour, hyperbole, irony, personification, self-deprecation, understatement, and word play. (Instances of vulgar humour were absent.) Examples for each are also provided in Table 1. The category labels refer to forms employed for humorous effect in our data and were developed and observed bottom up. This is not to say that the same forms cannot be used for other non-humorous purposes as well. Furthermore, the same SU could be tagged with more than one humour category. While in theory any act of humour creates an in-group and out-group in that potentially some people might not understand the humour involved, we used the label 'appeal to shared knowledge/in-group' as a separate category for cases when particular groups of people are singled out in order to create affiliative humour. This is the case in (2) in which Claire announces that her confinement to her room is over without revealing why she had to stay there in the first place. Only members of an in-group would know that her confinement was work related, a fact which she reveals later. Her withholding the reason for her confinement, the use of "finally", the exclamation marks and the smiley :D give the SU a playful, humorous rather than a purely informative stance. In other cases the SU is so opaque that only in-group knowledge makes the humorous intent transparent (see (8), where we know that Peter has done none of the things he mentions). Example (3) is one of the rare cases of a canned joke based on word play and in (4) a dialogic character is imitated in the SU, which is argued to create a humorous effect. In (5) Rose's housemate Tony is explicitly named and singled out and thus made the butt of the humour. The capital

letters (hyperbole) and the smiley suggest that this SU is intended as humorous (mitigating the force of the complaint). In (6) Rose celebrates that the heating system is working again (after previously having complained about it being freezing). The repetition is argued to make the announcement humorous rather than just informative. Example (7) is an instance of easily detectable irony, while (8) needs background information in order to assess that Peter would never engage in the activities he describes. In fact, from previous SUs we know that Peter is on holiday in Miami, so the context allows us to draw this conclusion. In (9) we see an instance of personification which creates a humorous effect, since the mundane item of a book is usually not personified. We classified (10) as an act of self-deprecation on the basis of the content and the ellipsis dots. In (11) we argued that the understatement of the workload ("a meer" [sic]) and the afterthought ("for today anyway") qualify the SU as humorous. Finally, (12) and (13) contain humorous word play.

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Table 1. Humour categories and examples in alphabetical order (multiple labelling is possible)

Type	Example	# of reactions
Appeal to shared knowledge/in-group	(2) Claire can finally leave her room!!!!:D	3 (1 potentially confirming humour: "were you stuck in your room?!")
Canned jokes	(3) Rose: What did the duck say when he'd finished shopping?.....Put it on my bill please! :D.	3 (all confirming humour: "oh dear - they don't get any better Rose;-)")
Dialogic character	(4) Rose can't believe it...everyone else has exciting post...what do I have?! - A flipping internet bill!	2 (no humour confirmation)
Disaffiliative humour	(5) Rose could hear Tony's shower singing from 2 floors away, 2 WHOLE floors!:.).	1 (confirming humour: "Dont you appreciate my singing?! haha x")
Hyperbole	(6) Rose the heating's working the heating's working the heating's working the heating's working the heating's working the heating's working.	6 (1 confirms humour: "YAY YAY YAY YAY BIG HUGE FABBY CELEBRATIONS THE HEATING IS WORKING!!!!")
Irony	(7) Peter ignores facebook by updating his status.	0
	(8) Peter has applied laser hair removal, botox and gallons of protein-enhanced smoothies.	2 (1 confirms humour: "ha gwüsst die 30 mache dr angscht:)" ['I knew you're afraid of turning 30:]') ⁷
Personification	(9) Sarah is tackling the books...and they are winning:-).	4 (2 confirm humour: "Go books:P")

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⁷ In Locher and Bolander (2014), we argue that the display of multilingualism beyond the use of lingua franca English is another strategy available to individuals to engage in identity construction. In our data it was only the members of the FG-S who drew on different languages for this purpose, especially in the mini-dialogues which emerged in the comments sequences.



Type	Example	# of reactions
Self-deprecation	(10) Lauren is very excited that her holiday starts in 5 days and her birthday is in 6:) she is less excited by discovering the trail of toothpaste she has on her arm...	0
Understatement	(11) Lauren can see a light at the end of the tunnel - a mere 650 words to go and half a presentation to finish and she is done (for today anyway).	0
Wordplay	(12) Frank is pacing backwards through life	2 (no humour confirmation)
	(13) Andrew is about to get cracking...or crack up...one or the other.	1 (humour uptake: "Or smoke some crack? Eat some Crackling?")

Out of the 12 examples presented in Table 1, only nine received an uptake in the form of comments (see the third column). (This is more than the reactions received on average: of the 96 SUs tagged as containing humour, only 52 received a reaction in the form of comments.) This information on interactive uptake helped us to confirm our understanding of the humorous nature of the SU in seven of the nine instances. For example, one reaction to (3) was "oh dear - [the jokes] don't get any better Rose;-)", and one comment in response to (5) was "Dont you appreciate my singing?! haha x". In both cases, two individuals other than the researchers confirmed that the SU can be interpreted as containing humour. In two cases, the comments did not refer to the humorous nature of the SU so that no confirmation could be derived from them. In those cases where no uptake by friends was available at all, we relied on textual information and on background knowledge for our classification, as exemplified and described above.⁸ (While the like button was already in place in 2008, this information on uptake was unfortunately not retained in the process of securing data.)

We agree with Schnurr (2010: 310) that "counting instances of humour is not straightforward but is inherently difficult, and poses a range of questions, such as how to count extended sequences of conjoint humour, which typically contain numerous instances of different types of humour". We might add that the results of counting instances of humour do not necessarily tell us whether performing humour is salient or not. However, for our purposes of studying acts of positioning in light of identity construction, we have combined the qualitative acts of tagging instances of humour with the quantitative dimension in order to establish what the groups and the individuals within the groups do. Table 2 shows this frequency list after our systematic analysis of the 475 SUs. It reveals that 96 SUs (20%) were interpreted as containing humour. This frequency is surprisingly similar to what Nastri et al. (2006) report for their corpus of away messages where one in five messages also contained humour. Our original



⁸ We reached a coding agreement of 80 per cent for the presence or absence of humour in the SUs. The disagreements were resolved after discussion between the two authors.

impression that humour is important for our Facebook contacts is confirmed despite the fact that 20 per cent might not seem like much at first glance.

Since we allowed for multiple labelling of humour categories within the same SU, we find 114 acts of positioning that entailed a humour type within the 96 SUs (Table 2). Overall, appeal to shared knowledge/in-group (28%), irony (22%), word play (17%) and self-deprecation (17%) accounted for 77% of all instances. When comparing the two groups, however, we get a slightly different distribution. For example, FG-UK used self-deprecation (16%) more often than FG-S, and exclusively used dialogic character and understatement. At this stage, we should stress that we can only report on distribution tendencies that are valid for the 20 individuals that make up the two focus groups. We would hesitate to argue that "the Swiss" or "the English" in general use these humour categories more or less often based on our sample. We do, however, see differences for our two groups, which may or may not be related to geographical space.

Table 2. Humour categories and frequencies*, ordered according to frequency.

	FG-S		FG-UK		Total	%
	#	%	#	%		
Appeal to shared knowledge/in-group	10	21	22	33	32	28
Irony	16	34	9	13	25	22
Wordplay	9	19	10	15	19	17
Self-deprecation	3	6	11	16	14	12
Disaffiliative humour	3	6	4	6	7	6
Hyperbole	2	4	5	7	7	6
Personification	3	6	1	1	4	4
Dialogic character			3	4	3	3
Canned jokes	1	2	1	1	2	2
Understatement			1	1	1	1
Total	47	98	67	97	114	101
%		41		59		100

* Several categories can co-occur in one SU. FG-S had 35 SUs and FG-UK 61 SUs that contained one or more acts of humour.

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Turning from the focus on humour to the identity construction of individual Facebookers more generally, we need to discuss the acts of positioning that entail humour in connection with the other acts of positioning used in the SUs. There is thus an interactive element between all the acts of positioning that Facebookers use in their microblogging practice.

In Locher and Bolander (2014) we report that we found five broad identity categories that our Facebookers evoked. In addition to having a sense of "humour", we found "work" claims (references to workplaces and roles, student life, etc.), "relationship" claims (friendship claims, family claims), "pastime" claims (references to free time activities such as reading, shopping, going out), and "personality" claims (references to a Facebooker's

state of mind or character traits like being sad or happy).⁹ Several of these identity categories can be evoked at the same time so that we allowed for multiple labelling within the same SU. The category "humour" is special in so far as it co-occurs with the other acts of positioning. This is because any of the claims in categories "personality", "pastime", "work", and "relationship" could potentially be made in a humorous way. Since we felt that humour was of particular interest to the practice observed and because having a sense of humour can be constructed as a feature of an individual's personality, we tagged it separately. Our analysis showed that the 475 SUs entailed 1100 acts of positioning. The results are summarized as follows:

[T]he systematic coding of the data showed that personality acts of positioning were the most prominent, followed by pastime, humour, work and relationship. For both focus groups the order was the same as were, strikingly, the frequencies of the acts. Thus, in FG-S (N = 451), 45% of the SUs contained identity claims about personality; in FG-UK (N = 649) the frequency was 46%. Similarly, pastime was 27% in FG-S and 25% in FG-UK, humour was 10% in both focus groups, work 8% in FG-S and 10% in FG-UK and relationship was 9% in both. For both groups, highlighting components of one's personality emerges as a particularly important act which individuals perform through the authoring of SUs. (Locher and Bolander 2014: 166-167)

Having found differences in the distribution of humour types between the two focus groups, yet similarities in the extent to which humour appears as an identity category relative to other categories, we will now turn to have a closer look at the individual level, by exploring what a number of individuals do on the Facebook platform. We have chosen those four individuals who use humour most. Together they account for over half of the instances of humour (70 out of 114; 61%). Table 3 shows the distribution of their acts of positioning within the five main categories. Peter is a member of FG-S, while Rose, Claire and Lauren belong to FG-UK.

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Table 3. Individual identity compositions of four persons.

Person/Category	Personality	Pastime	Humour	Work	Relationship	Total
Peter, #	41	18	21	5	1	86
%	48	21	24	6	1	100
Rose, #	67	54	18	12	7	158
%	42	34	11	8	4	99
Calire, #	72	40	20	4	16	152
%	47	26	13	3	11	100
Lauren, #	67	28	11	25	11	142
%	47	20	8	18	8	101

⁹ The coding agreement rate was at 80 per cent and any remaining problems were resolved after discussion between the two authors.

As with the general patterning for the groups as a whole, Peter, Rose, Claire and Lauren show most acts of positioning within the category "personality" (between 42-48%). When looking more closely at these acts of positioning and establishing whether – most generally – a positive/happy or rather negative/unhappy personality is projected, we find a predominance of "happy" claims, albeit in different distribution (Peter: 62%; Rose: 62%; Claire: 70%; Lauren: 52%; per cent not visible in Table 3).

The distribution of the other categories differs slightly from person to person. In addition to personality claims, Peter uses humour in 21 of his SUs; he makes use of a number of different categories, drawing on irony, appeal to shared knowledge/in-group and disaffiliative humour in particular. He also depicts himself as having a large variety of different interests in music, books and nightlife (21% "pastime") and evokes being a student in 6%. Taken together, his identity construction is varied.

In the case of Rose, next to predominantly displaying happy personality claims, she uses humour in a self-deprecating sense (5 of the total of 14 occurrences in the corpus) and also employs disaffiliative humour (3 of the total of 7 occurrences in the corpus). As there are individuals who do not evoke these categories at all, her use of these categories is striking. Like Peter, Rose shares her pastime interests in TV shows, food, music, travel and computer-related issues (34%). The relationship claims are friendship claims (6 out of 7), and she projects a student identity (11 out of 12).

Claire projects a clearly happy identity in the category "personality" and especially foregrounds humour achieved by appealing to shared knowledge/in-group. Her pastime interests (26%) cover nightlife, pets, food and travel. Her relationship claims (11%) most often evoke friendship and she projects a student (work) identity (4 out of 4).

Finally, Lauren, next to creating a less happy personality than the others (only 54%), especially appeals to shared knowledge/in-group and irony for humour effects, and writes about theatre and musicals (pastime). Importantly, she lets her readers share two events that took place during the two months of data collection. On the one hand, she evokes the category of student by writing 22 SUs that refer to essay writing and an impending deadline she must meet; on the other hand, she got engaged during this time and evokes the relationship category of fiancée numerous times.

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What we can see from these brief numerical accounts of the distribution of acts of positioning is that each individual produces a slightly different patchwork of identity claims. Over time, we would argue, the repetition of these claims, which are made publicly in front of and for the benefit of the Facebook friends, will result in a more solid understanding of a person's identity construction, both with respect to humour, as well as in regard to other identity claims.

6. Conclusion and outlook

In this chapter we explored the role of humour within acts of identity construction in status updates written by members of two Facebook focus groups (N = 20). We found that the groups drew on different categories of humour, of which appeal to shared

knowledge/in-group, irony, word play and self-deprecation were the most prominent. We were able to establish differences between the two groups and also point out idiosyncratic preferences.

Our general analysis of acts of positioning revealed that the two groups evoke five main categories of identity acts in very similar distribution: personality, pastime, humour, work and relationship claims. The distribution of humour differed when looking at the individuals rather than the groups, and we could detect slightly different combinations of the main types of positioning claims. Overall, we argue that we can only understand the role of humour when also looking at the other acts of positioning and when taking into account what people write over longer periods of time. When Facebookers produce a single status update containing a humorous act of positioning, they might not necessarily succeed in projecting a sense of humour or be accepted as having a sense of humour. However, when these acts are repeated over time, such an impression is more likely to arise.

While we argued for a combined qualitative coding system with quantification, we do not wish to claim that the numbers speak for themselves with respect to humour. Our tendency to under- rather than over-represent humour may have skewed the numbers. This under-representation results from the fact that our methodology might well have missed a number of humorous status updates that were too opaque to us; not being members of the target group of the humour, and thus lacking certain background knowledge, we may have overseen instances of humour. In addition, we may have missed instances of humour that occurred over stretches of interaction. This is due to the fact that humour often only becomes evident over time when writers develop small stories (Georgakopoulou 2007) over several status updates that contain humorous elements when followed in sequence, or when mini-dialogues develop between commentators and status update writers. For this reason, we would like to underline that we can only report on tendencies for our two focus groups.

For our understanding of identity construction the participation framework and the interactive possibilities that Facebook provides are crucial (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Facebookers can take on the roles of producers, transmitters, and overhearer/eavesdroppers. Even when there is no visible uptake in the form of friends hitting the like button, sharing a post or writing comments, it is essential to acknowledge that the status updates are written in a semi-public space and are meant to be witnessed by Facebook friends. With respect to the participation framework, all individuals who are privy to the SU in question are ratified participants, i.e., both overhearers and eavesdroppers as pointed out by Marcochia (2004). Following Zappavigna (2012: 38), we wish to highlight that "the stances we adopt and observations and evaluations we share all exist relative to the meaning-making of the other members of our social network and to all other potential networks of meaning". Facebook writers are often confronted with the challenge of addressing a list of friends which is actually composed of groups of people from different offline circles. As a consequence, the potential of creating out-groups, even

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when addressing the Facebook in-group at large, is quite high. With respect to status updates, in-groups/out-groups can be created at the level of content, but also via code-switching practices, when individuals switch to languages that are not spoken by everybody and/or when they make use of multiple graphological systems (see Androutsopoulos 2012). This clearly warrants research on how status update writers deal with the potential face-threat of excluding friends. Two technical means of dealing with this are, in fact, provided by the platform itself. One allows status update writers to make their contributions visible to pre-defined groups of friends only (Zuckerberg 2010). The other is the provision of the "translate" option for status updates, with which Facebook has been experimenting since 2011 (Eldon 2011).

The technological advances in Facebook since we collected our data in 2008/2009 have been quite substantial. As mentioned before, our hunch is that Facebookers upload photos/memes/video clips more frequently and comment on them more often than in the past. In general, the interactions have become more multi-modal, which warrants the development of innovative methodologies for studying them (see Thurlow and Mroczek 2011; Herring 2013). The fact that many users nowadays only access the interface via their smartphones rather than their computers is also likely to create shifts in interactional patterns since the desktop and smartphone interfaces differ in what they display as interactive options. For example, while the "share" button allows a user to indicate that the content is worth sharing with others (i.e. topping the "like" button which signals appreciation), this option was not yet, in summer 2013, available on the smartphone interface. It remains to be seen how these technological differences and advances influence identity construction patterns online - including the display of humour.

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