The 'Institutional Effect' on Online Communities: Interactional dynamics of a Catholic Facebook Group in Singapore

Early sociolinguistic work which suggested discontinuity in interactional patterns from traditional media and new media has since evolved into work which suggests that the online and offline are not dichotomous as once thought but are in fact "porous" (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016) and fluid. Interaction is thought to be mediated by "polymedia repertoire" (Tagg & Lyons, 2021), as individuals move dynamically between platforms and semiotic resources. In this paper, I explore the online-offline relationship in institutional contexts. Engaging with the concept of communities of practice (CoP) (Eckert & Wenger, 2005), I consider the (dis)continuities in the online-offline relationship for the Catholic Church, as observed via my empirical case of a Facebook group for Catholics in Singapore. The analysis considers 129 threads from the group made in an eight-day period, where I perform a content analysis to categorize posts into respective categories, followed by analysis of the dynamics between members via an interactional sociolinguistic approach. I explore how 'sharedness' in the group results from 1) recurring discursive practices 2) the role of group administrators and 'experts' in ratifying viewpoints and 3) the sharing of personal and intimate experiences. I argue that a key dynamic in the online space is the tension between institutional power, and traditional modes of knowledge production for the Church, with the emergent means in which individual Catholics are able to shape their religious identities via their online interactions. The result is a degree of continuity with offline and historical modes of interaction, whilst also demonstrating ways in which the interactional structure of the platforms allows for new means of knowledge production.

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