

Virtual Alternatives for Creativity: the Mask of the Blogger

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Abstract: *Theorists in the area of linguistics and humanistic sciences largely base their studies on a complex understanding of reality. Indeed, the specific perception of reality has always been considered an essential element for self-development. In computer-aided communication, however, the proposed image of the self becomes an alternative reading of body and character, in an age in which words of literature or theory are no longer enough. Modern communication methods use the Internet facilities – websites, blogs or forums – and users largely prefer hiding one's image under an alternative identity: the blog owner or the forum contributor may well create for oneself a different personality, thus freeing one's linguistic creativity from any personal constraint. What prompts people to prefer the mask instead of their real identity? What is the linguistic and psychological relevance of web identity choices? These are questions to which the present study is trying to find an answer.*

Key words: *Computer-aided Communication, Creativity, Identity, Blogging.*

INTRODUCTION

Humanistic sciences (such as Linguistics, Theory of Language or Translation Theory, among others) are fundamentally concerned with theoretical studies based on experiments. Each of these sciences, however, is closely connected to the productions of the human mind, therefore, from a socio-psychological point of view, to different perceptions of reality. One of the major features of the human mind is creativity – which naturally leads us to the way in which human beings use creativity in conceiving theories and verifying them in practice. But human nature has always needed improvements outside itself. The mask, as a symbol of a darker but hidden ego, was one; the image of a distorted reality was the other. During the centuries, it has become a tradition for some to present the results of their creativity under a false name – that is, to use a mask meant to hide their real person.

Today, most efforts in the field of theory can be easily accessed through the Internet – a widely open database of human knowledge. Blogs, forums and websites are now more than a simple fashion – they are the mirror of one's personality, as well as an opportunity of using language creatively.

A simple look over any list of websites, blogs or forums shows that these have also taken advantage of this possibility of hiding users' image under an alternative identity: the blog owner or the forum contributor may well create for oneself a different personality, thus freeing one's creativity from any personal constraint. Being herself a member of several professional or literary forums, the author of this study has noted that some authors avoid telling their real name, while preferring an imagined ID which preserves their anonymity, in spite of their obvious literary talent. So, naturally, the question arises with regard not only to the (usually psychological) reasons for this choice, but also for the linguistic norms that underline it.

ABOUT WEB SELF AND ALTER EGO

Ever since the early ages of mankind, the perception of reality has been considered as an essential element for self-development. Human nature, a less perfect counterpart for the surrounding nature, has always needed improvements outside itself, so that what was called "reality" could be accepted, admired or respected to the highest level. More often than not, a "mask" was needed, because words were never enough to express feelings, opinions, attitudes or even less to achieve an acceptable presentation of everyday life.

Ever since the earliest cultures, the "mask" became the symbol for a darker *alter ego*. Whatever the real human being stands for, the mask on a face can *hide* or *bring out* the dark side of one's personality (the Alter Ego), in a ritual which is meant both to warn, and to heal. The mask has an artistic, but also a social function, that of re-creating reality by

superposing an imaginary axis of time and space, onto the existing ones. Thus, the visual, picturesque, excessively colourful representation of human moral principles being purposely ignored or infringed is mainly meant to work as a healing principle with a collective value.

Under later Greek influence, masks became typical for a whole gallery of human prototypes (according to the Greek term *prosopon* – or the *persona* in Latin), with whom they are identified by individual recognition of suggestive symbolic means. The Greek tradition actually laid the basis for the modern understanding of the function of masks, whereby each stands for a stereotype equivalent, in real life, to human defects. In Mircea Eliade's opinion, the mask is the symbol of *identification*, positive or negative, either on the formal or the deep, magical level, with the *persona* whose interpretation is intended.

Similarly, in modern terms, if a blog owner or a forum user intends to hide his/her real identity they need to identify with this alter ego and start "living" it fully. This identification is generally so thorough, that it is often difficult or even impossible to tear the mask down or at least see what lies behind it.

LINGUISTIC NORMS AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Linguistic norms seem to become more and more "flexible" when it comes to internet pieces of writing of any kind. From user ID-s to individual opinions expressed in forums or personal blogs, or to literary pieces proposed on specialized websites, any language undergoes certain (minor or major) changes, more or less justified.

One important reason is the overwhelming influence of "message coding" – a type of alternative linguistic code preferred by young people for reasons of speed and efficiency in writing. Theorists have yet to approach this topic, in spite of the fact that short-word writing determines significant changes in the way in which young generations now choose to infringe the traditional rules of academic writing. On the one hand, it reflects the pride of belonging to a specific group – certain bloggers having the same cultural, professional or leisure interests use the same type of shortened wording, making it easier to recognize and acknowledge one another. On the other hand, in the last decade, linguists seem to have lost the battle against unofficial, improvised attempts to simplify languages – similarly to what Noah Webster once did with English spoken in America.

The "mask" of modern written codes is also meant, in some cases, to hide a low level of theoretical knowledge from the part of its users. It is now a fact that educational standards have been lowered in what writing assessment is concerned, especially due to an excessive emphasis on *verbal* communicative skills, at the expense of *written* ones. Thus, some people use bad writing because they do not know the rules, or do not care to observe them. Language itself has become a product dominated by consumer rules; globalization helps us all use the same language, but also allows us to modify words at our will.

The modern obsession for an "*alternative identity*" – or the "mask" that hides all shortcomings and defects from the outside world – also has strong roots in psychoanalysis. But the deception / change due to the use of internet or media means is actually a conscious act of manipulation, even though sometimes it is based on "instinct" exclusively. Partially, this can also be said to be true of alternative internet ID-s meant to hide one's real name or personality.

In *literature*, a writer can construct his own body and identity – be it an ideal one, with little to do with actual facts – due to the *deceiving power of words*. In *web forums, sites or blogs*, the user can do the same, just by putting together fragments with a relevant significance.

In *real life*, especially in this age of extreme technology in which cyber-life already seems a possibility close at hand, the distorted image of the individual can be used to work in favour of, or against one's individual goals, just by offering a complex, yet coherent gallery of postures and attitudes.

Starting from the debate regarding the effects of cyberspace opportunities on human creativity, Christiane Paul [2003]¹ extends the discussion to the reasons for individuals' choice of alternative images: "In the age of the Internet, she states, people visit MUDs and MOOs and choose avatars to represent themselves in virtual environments; they slip in and out of character. In a virtual community, the "players" live parallel lives by cycling through windows. Windows and screens are the metaphors that influence our experience of life, and virtual life allows people to have a presence in several windows and contexts simultaneously." [p.2]

If we are talking about an "alternative reading" by media means, where distortion of reality is the main purpose, a comparison to fundamental psychoanalysis sources must also be taken into consideration. Indeed, Freud and Jung, as well as Jacques Lacan, all of whom can be considered as major representatives of European psychoanalysis, have asserted the idea that the unconscious lies at the core of all actions, beliefs and understanding of the "self".

Lacan also adds the notion that the unconscious which, in his opinion "governs all factors of human existence", is structured *like a language*. The idea of *Otherness*, and of a self identified with its own "other" or its own "mirror image" which can be understood as an alternative, ideal or modified identity makes the link to the Symbolic realm.²

However, from a linguistic point of view, fake ID-s also display an impressive degree of creativity of their owners. Of course, this is not the case of those who propose a random association of letters and figures; yet in a significant number of cases it speaks of the owners' attitude towards others, or towards the world they live in.

Being herself a member of several professional and literary debate sites / forums, the author of this study has had the opportunity to meet, in the cyberspace, a number of talented, creative persons who nevertheless avoid displaying their real names; they choose fake ID-s in spite of the fact that their pieces of writing prove a real literary talent that would be better served if the authors were known by their real name. Partly, this can be related to the respective persons' hesitation against facing potential critical views from virtual readers. However, IDs also display remarkable imaginative resources, as well as a somewhat surprising humoristic quality: "*romanpacali*" ("hoaxedRomanian") – "*poetul disparut*" ("the vanished poet") – "*misionarul*" ("the missionary") – "*bebe cool*" ("cool toddler") – "*lup alb*" ("white wolf") – "*blue star*", "*outside box*" (no need to translate these) – "*dordezbor*" ("yearn to fly") – "*eu*" ("me") – "*omul politic*" ("political man") – or even... "*stupid people*"...

A simple linguistic assessment of these IDs could result in an open to debate taxonomy of such fake identities:

- a) funny names – denoting either the user's humoristic disposition or his/her intention to take things easily;
- b) names denoting a political attitude (mainly opposing mainstream politics) – such examples abound lately but for obvious reasons their owners avoid being known;
- c) names deriving from the owners' pride for knowing a foreign language (mainly English);
- d) indifference to linguistic norms (several words put together as one)
- e) poetical alter egos – proving their owners' romantic disposition
- f) users adopting the name of certain celebrities or famous music bands

Many other categories could be exemplified in addition to those proposed above. Each of them could also be treated from a psychological point of view – which definitely is not the purpose of this study, nor a field in which the author could assume any more than average background knowledge.

¹ See the complete article at <http://www.artlab23.net/issue1vol1/Cyborg.html>

² A complex presentation of Lacan's main views, concepts and theory can be found in Leader, Darian, and Judy Groves. *Introducing Lacan*. London: Totem, 2000

But apart from the amusing side of the matter, the choice of alternative ID-s in the open cyberspace could be an important database for thorough linguistic or even interdisciplinary studies. It is a vivid proof of the lively character of any language, which is prone to unexpected changes. These changes often ignore linguists' expectations and place the usage before the norm.

In his iconic-signs theory, Charles S. Peirce stated that language is characterized by three sets of functions: the iconic, the indexical and the symbolic ones. Similarly, the "language" of web identities can focus, according to the user's wishes, on the iconic, indexical or symbolic element. Personal websites – or blogs, for that matter – are *iconic* in that they are obviously a spoken-and-visual equivalent of what the owner wants us to see – and this is where he is at full liberty to disclose what is hidden or, on the contrary, to hide what should be disclosed. It is *indexical*, because the defining linguistic elements can be recognized in the final product; and it appeals to the *symbolic* function for the sake of emphasizing a unique type of rhetoric. In Keeler's opinion [1996:39], the key is often left for the potential readers to discover on their own, especially if the three different elements are purposely intermingled.

Iconic identities have been, for a long time, the outspoken goal of web users; contemporary requirements, however, brought a more nuanced understanding of human representations. With the same *ideal* "body" and "spirit" in mind, web users have started to bring into play an intentional incorporation of non-linguistic codes meant to determine an attitude in the reader: old-time worship was soon and willingly replaced by the critical eye. The human face may well wear its mask - they seemed to say - for it can no longer evade the keen scrutiny of the public eye. Conventional tolerance for all-too-human defects is no longer acceptable. In a conscious effort to desist all traditionalist rules, they considered it an act of natural courage to unveil body and spirit alike. It was the right time for the bare truth itself.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The age of the Internet culture has brought along a new quest for a alternative representations of the self; mediated communication *excludes* the face-to-face dialogue and masks can be born so much easier.

Indeed, a venture into the world of personal presentations made the author of this study aware of the extent to which people would go to hide various details of their personality, if these are thought to be negative or at least posing a threat to human relationships. Such people usually tend to invent a fresh personality for themselves, one that would satisfy the presumed expectations of unknown, potential cyber-viewers.

Alternative identities used for this purpose are sometimes surprising, often serious and always deceiving. Net users define themselves according to the icon of "*whom they want to be*" rather than in terms of "*what they really are*", and such deception surely adds to their frustration by communication results that invariably go wrong in the end. Net presentations are supposed to act as representative fragments of one's whole personality – in the spirit of the traditional *pars pro toto* – but their purpose is lost if the aesthetic game does not act in full compliance with its authentic personality counterpart. The "*image of thought*" – equal to that which is often connected by critics to Deleuze's cinematographic projects, must be more than an intended harmony of contraries; it should be deeper than a passive composition, however complex, explained with language means aimed at discovering the limits of the others' sensibility.

The main aim of the present study has been to state a number of basic assumptions related to this new but rapidly developing creative area of cyber-communication. The main emphasis was placed on inquiring the reasons for user's choice of an alternative identity when stating their opinions or participating in open forums on the Internet.

Following a research which extended over a few months, the author came to the conclusion that most users prefer to use a "mask" in order to identify themselves, instead

of sharing their real identity in front of their virtual friends. The study presents a number of potential psychological reasons but also some underlying linguistic facts which may be relevant for language studies. Language seems to have become a consumer product which is constantly modified according to individual or group preferences. Cyberspace fans use specific codes in order to recognize one another or to state their belonging to a specific group, with clear purposes or preferences.

The topic proposed in the present study has yet to unveil its complexity – the more so as it has great potential for continuing developments and changes. More than a simple psychological matter, it affects language (or languages) both in the spoken and written variant.

A thorough research with respect to the social, psychological and immediate motivation of such changes is definitely needed, and it is the author's intention to expand this study, using a larger database of examples extracted from various types of websites, forums and blogs, ranging from the professional and specialised to leisure or humoristic ones.

More surprises are to be expected, from a purely linguistic point of view, from such a research. A survey based on a questionnaire (including both open questions and suggested variants) proposed to website /blog administrators and visitors could also clarify the yet unknown variables in this case.

Such an enterprise involves a lot of hard work, but it is surely worthwhile, because results could help explain, at least partially, the intricate mechanisms which govern language changes under the pressure of modern communication means. And the author is ready to assume this difficult but challenging task.

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