Exploring the 'rhizomatics' of text-based virtual action: Deictic third-person constructions across modes of computer-mediated communication

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This paper examines the increasingly popular practice in text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) of referring to the user (or the user’s online character) in the third person, as illustrated by the second clause of the following post:

Now I’m hungry!!! *runs to the kitchen*

Originating in game environments where standard commands for what is typed in as ‘said’ (e.g. Hello!!!) and what is typed as ‘emoted’ (e.g. *waves*; *is confused*) constitute an integral part of the program, the deictic third-person construction serving as a performative for virtual action or emotion has in recent years spread to other modes of social media such as discussion forums, social network sites, microblogging and texting. In these contexts users take the trouble of typing in asterisks and other signals that mimic the screen view of chat, in order to single out the third-person construction from the rest of the text, where they refer to themselves in the first person. Such third-person constructions are grammatically innovative, and the linguistic and social conventions of the practice are very much on the move. While the program-generated construction has been subject to early study (Cherny 1995; Werry 1996), little attention has so far been paid to the use of the third-person performative in other modes of text-based CMC which lack such an automatic command (but see Herring 2012; Schlobinski 2001; Virtanen 2013). Based on data from different kinds of text-based CMC in English, this paper contributes to the understanding of the ‘rhizomatics’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) of the deictic third-person construction in and across posts and modes of CMC. Special attention is paid to the context-sensitivity of the language resources that help construct person, time and space for text-based virtual action.

Keywords: rhizomatics, third-person performative construction, text-based virtual action.