

# PSEUDONYMS ON THE INTERNET: A HIDDEN DISCOURSE

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## **Pseudonyms on the Internet: A hidden discourse**

**Abstract:** In order to join discussion forums, or chat rooms, the Internet user has to choose a pseudonym, whose origin may stem from various sources – the person's private life, cultural objects, individual traits etc. However, the use of a pseudonym on the Web serves only one purpose, namely the purpose of naming an individual. Thus, in the course of follow-up communication based on the online publication of newspaper articles, or while discussing a given theme in a forum, the pseudonym chosen by a user can be laden with meaning – antagonism, emotion etc. The present paper examines this multidimensional status of pseudonyms on the Internet, using examples selected from online editions of newspapers and discussion forums.

**Keywords:** discourse, creativity, virtual society, pseudonyms.

## **Introduction**

In civil society, anthroponymy sets social beings within groups. More precisely, their patronymic or matronymic is used to position them along a genealogical line, whereas their first name is a means to identify them within the family group. So what can be said about the social being's identity in the context of a digital society? In order to join discussion forums or chat-rooms, Internet users have to choose a pseudonym, which stem from various sources – a person's private life, cultural objects, individual traits etc. However, using a pseudonym on the Web is not done for the sole purpose of naming oneself. Thus, in follow-up communication to the online publication of newspaper articles or while discussing a given theme in a forum, the *nomen falsum* (or 'false name') chosen by the user can be loaded with meaning – antagonism, emotion etc. This multidimensional status of a pseudonym on the Internet will be examined using various examples taken from online editions of newspapers and discussion forums. Other questions arise from this observation. If a pseudonym is used for naming or protesting, does this not mean that its purpose is to express what cannot be said within civil society? Is this not a confusion between private and public space? And if so, what are the reasons? Finally, does digital society not stand as an opposing force to civil society?

### Anthroponomy as taxonomic procedure

A number of myths mention the birth of the organized universe as arising from chaos. For example, Levi-Strauss recalls an Aranda myth that says: “the primitive divine beings were shapeless, without limbs, and fused together, until came god Mangarkunjerkunja (fly-catcher lizard) which began to separate each other and shape them individually” (1962: 223, my translation). The manifest universe materializes once it is trapped in the nets of language formed, firstly, by lexical units designating each of its components and, secondly, by the relationships linking the components. Taxonomy is a cognitive procedure, working on the classification of objects as simple or complex trees which allow the organization of social subjects’ sociocultural and linguistic world. The particularity of an object on the level of a set of similar but not identical objects shows that, as long as its characteristics are not highlighted, this object retains the status of a unit belonging to a set. The designation and classification of objects in the world allows individuals to give meaning to the universe according to their perception of it.

In lexicology, some terms are considered to be general, as they open a class of objects: they are *hyperonyms*. For example, the lexical unit “tree” subsumes terms such as “willow tree”, “birch tree”, etc. Some *hyponyms* may also take the status of hyperonyms. Objects which are part of classes in the field of botany and entomology illustrate perfectly well this phenomenon. For example, as regards scavenger beetles, Fabre (1879: 6–7) cites *Bubas Bubale*, the *Bubas Bison*, the *Copris Espagnol*, and the *Copris lunaire*. A plain reading of this list reveals two classes of beetles, *i.e.* *Bubas* and *Copris*; these hyperonyms open a declination of hyponyms having a common point (*Bubas* or *Capris*) plus a particular specificity (*Bison*, *Spanish*, etc.).

From the research initiated by Kroeber and Rivers, Hounet (2009: 26) shows how social anthropology scored kinship systems as an organizational structure based on various human societies. The author cites Morgan:

[...] In his first researches among the Iroquois, he had observed the extent to which family relationships were the basis of social organization. Property among others was passed on by women, and only the father’s brother (paternal uncle) was considered as a father, with reference to the fact that kinship terminology was unique (the sister of the mother, maternal aunt, was also a mother) (Hounet 2009: 26, my translation).

In the structure of the kinship system, Lévi-Strauss mentions as invariants, on the one hand, the prohibition of incest and, on the other hand, the necessity of the exchange between various groups, as well as the pursuit of their own modalities. Hounet (2009: 32–33, my translation) shows that Morgan (1871) had already mentioned a descriptive system, which “describes collateral relatives by the addition or combination of the first terms of family relationship” then by means of a classification system that “applies the same terms to all members of the same class.” Anthropological studies have also identified other organizational forms of kinship, as is that of the Omaha system, where “same-sex siblings are identical, whereas the siblings of different sexes are different” (Héritier 2008: 39, my translation), or the Eskimo kinship system which the French society is part of. Generally, the name assigned to a social subject is a marker of identity that gives the individual a genealogical anchor (a matronym or patronym), a family anchor (a surname), and an

affective anchor with emotional hypocoristic usage, such as a nickname or a diminutive. Some types of names (e.g., matronyms or patronyms) occur within the framework of the law and allow for the inclusion of individuals in civil society. Ghasarian (1996: 48–49) specifies that to name a new member of a group “is a crucial element that determines the group membership of kinship, the relationship to the collective memory and the place in the network of social relations” (my translation); the author emphasizes: “[...] the patronym, [is] the noun of relationship that an individual receives at birth, demonstrating its identity” (1996:48, my translation). Also about the phenomenon of identity Chauchat (1999: 62, my translation) mentions that:

The act of naming is the beginning of any identity. It is the starting point, since it is the act of naming a subject that gives one a name. In our society, a person's name indicates his/her descent, that is to say his/her place in line. A name is the first symbolic act, one that can convey an identity, not only in the formal sense and administrative civil status, but also in the sense of inclusion in the symbolic order of language. Similarly, the identity of the group and its members originates in the name used to designate it. It indicates a group's origin, history, and place in society.

The identity construction associated with anthroponymy is also linked to membership. Indeed, “[...] if to name an object in the world is to give it a meaning, to identify an individual is to recognize him/her” (Martin 2005: 6, my translation) within a group. The first element through which this is achieved is one's gender, whose inscription in registers of civil status at birth renders one's administrative materialization. Naming a social subject gives him/her a single name-space, while it is also “[a] structured set of identity elements that enable the individual to define oneself in a situation and as a social actor” (Taboada-Leonetti 1990: 44, my translation). Various factors – such as nationality, sex, occupation etc. – are responsible for these identity markers and derive from various instances that bring together the group structure.

However, another type of designation exists, which is different from the previously presented instances. It is the pseudonym, the *nomen falsum*. This autonym, used by groups in conflict or at odds with civil society, has two main features: (1) it serves to mask one's true identity; and (2) it can easily be constructed by drawing on already existing anthroponymic materials or by creating new ones.

The Internet, also called “digital society”, has led to a redefinition of identity and social practices used in communication sphere. According to Chauchat (1999: 7–8, my translation), the identity of a subject is “a report in the world, a way of being and situating oneself in relation to the environment, particularly in relation to other individuals and groups.” In this case, the virtual medium, based on its proliferation (in general, it is an integral part of a person's household), is a part of a person's private territory, as well as his/her connection to the world. It may involve fascinating but also dangerous things.

This medium has made social subjects develop naming tactics that take the aforementioned things into account. Certainly, we name ourselves to be known, then to be recognized by another person, our close *alter ego*. We get the information which (s)he wants to give us via monitor screens, but this is not enough, as there are certain drawbacks: we

know very little (if anything at all) about his/her life and culture; (s)he may live in the same city, 300 meters (or even further) away. To overcome these disadvantages, Net surfers who want to participate in chat rooms, to express opinions on forums, etc., opt for a different identity, a pseudonym.

A dictionary dedicated to the Internet and to computer science and telecommunications reports the following definition for the term in question: “alias chosen by a user when communicating online with others” (*Office of the French Language* 2001: 806). *Nomen falsum* is a name under which a user is known among his/her peers in a particular virtual community. It is characterized by creative richness. However, all these virtual identities co-exist with that of the *nomen verum*, the legitimate name delineated by law. Whereas a proper name, or *nomen proprium* induces a relationship between an individual (one’s “I”), on the one hand, and civil society, on the other, a *nomen falsum* shows the relationship between an Internet surfer and virtual society.

A pseudonym is a particular type of naming. It differs from other names discussed previously for several reasons:

- The “I” names himself/herself, and it is not the “other” who names the “I”;
- It can be changed *ad libitum*;

– According to French law, it does not have any penal consequences. On the website *Légifrance*, there are only regulations concerning the usage of pseudonyms in family names. Likewise, with respect to the protection of authors’ rights of works published under a pseudonym or anonymously, see the code for intellectual property, art. L. 113–6 and L. 123–3.

### Various articles on pseudonyms on the Internet

The main feature of the pseudonym on the Internet is its richness in terms of creativity, as can be seen in the following examples collected from an online survey conducted among 300 Internet users (June 2002–June 2003): *yackninja*, *Psychomath*, *LoloFromParis*, *monstred90*, *gothic-dragon*, *alcoolikUnanyme*, *Le surfeurd’Argent*, *unelephantcatrompenormement*.

Based on the same survey, Martin (2006: 156, orig. French, my translation) states:

The analysis of the creative process of pseudonyms shows that there is an antinomy between anonymity on the Internet and the nature of onomastic choice. Indeed, figures indicate that the thematic classes into which interviewees’ choices can be grouped are as follows: 139 subjects chose the thematic class called ‘personal history of the subject’, while all of the other two thematic classes entitled ‘societal objects’ and ‘indexical marks of the subject’s personality’ can be related to 145 respondents.

Thus, the pseudonym *unelephantcatrompenormement* refers to the chorus of a nursery rhyme. This lexical unit, “that elephant trunk”, entails the word “enormously”. In this lexical and semantic game, users can also employ tropes. For example, pseudonyms like *Psychomath*, referring to the term “psychopath”, and *alcoolikUnanyme*, referring to the association “Alcoholics Anonymous” are based on puns. Table 1 presents other pseudonym creations, which are listed with their grammatical analysis.

**Table 1. Analysis of the formation of three examples of pseudonyms**  
(Martin 2006: 37–38, orig. French, my translation)

Grammatical forms	Examples and observations
Proper name phrases • Fixedness of trends; • Interchangeable elements	• <i>moniquevallin</i> (Q.457.282.a). This type of collocation can consist of any combination of (usually) personal proper names whose position is interchangeable: the first name occurs in initial position, while the surname comes last (or vice versa).
Specific collocations • Fixedness less stringent than in compounds, as they can function without.	• <i>angebleu8</i> (Q.289.198.a). The two words in the collocation recall the actress Marlene Dietrich, who was known as “The Blue Angel”. This phrase is fixed in relation to the person it initially designated. The evocation of this particular colour for an angel makes (potential) implicit reference to the artist. • As regards the number 8, it reveals the attempt to avoid the occurrence of homonyms on the Internet, as it does not accept duplicates.
Common collocations • Fossilisation; • No change in the structure of the phrasal unit.	• <i>idiotduvillage</i> (Q.117.86.a). We witness here the fossilisation of the phrasal unit. Indeed, the first term can be rendered alone by means of expressions like “that’s stupid” or “he is an idiot”, but the partitive lexeme ensures the unity of this phrase.

Net surfers can also use pseudonyms to suggest their position relative to a social issue. From a forum dedicated to environmental sustainability, a stock of 200 autonyms was compiled. As of September 4, 2010, the number of users registered on the forum is 3452. The analysis of this corpus shows different classes of pseudonyms. Table 2 presents 35 autonyms constructed directly or indirectly (in relation to the topic of the forum).

Table 2. Pseudonyms based on terms from the semantic field of sustainable development				
<i>abeille</i>	<i>cosmetique bio</i>	<i>evydemmentbio</i>	<i>laurence-aboneobio</i>	<i>patteblanche</i>
<i>becfigue</i>	<i>cotenature</i>	<i>fan2reva</i>	<i>ma cantine bio</i>	<i>pau</i>
<i>bioeco</i>	<i>DELAIR</i>	<i>formazur</i>	<i>main verte</i>	<i>pays</i>
<i>bioetglamour</i>	<i>Ecologo</i>	<i>GGreen</i>	<i>mareebasse</i>	<i>recupelec</i>
<i>chacunsonbio</i>	<i>ecopartners</i>	<i>greenzer</i>	<i>mariniere</i>	<i>sol94</i>
<i>cielnature</i>	<i>Elyazalée</i>	<i>hamafrance</i>	<i>Natur L Beauté</i>	<i>tomatesdelatreille</i>
<i>colibri</i>	<i>EnergieVair</i>	<i>jurancon</i>	<i>ofleury</i>	<i>VM ENERGIE</i>
Source: Ongoing study submitted for publication (end 2011/beginning 2012); <a href="http://www.developpementdurable.com/">http://www.developpementdurable.com/</a> (accessed September 4, 2010).				

The aforementioned category illustrates that the distribution of autonyms pertaining to it can be integrated into more specific sub-categories, such as the one in which pseudonyms are built around the term “bio”, including 7 occurrences (see Table 3).

Table 3. Autonyms built with the root “bio”			
<i>bioeco</i>	<i>chacunsonbio</i>	<i>evydemmentbio</i>	<i>ma cantine bio</i>
<i>bioetglamour</i>	<i>cosmetique bio</i>	<i>laurence-aboneobio</i>	
Source: Ongoing study submitted for publication (end 2011/beginning 2012); <a href="http://www.developpementdurable.com/">http://www.developpementdurable.com/</a> (accessed September 4, 2010).			

The prefixed element *bio* “is a borrowing from Greek *bio*, and it refers to the noun that means the *bios*, not the facts of life, but how to live in the manner of humans (sometimes animals), which concretely means experience, resources, and, lately, the crowd, the world” (DHLF 2006: 403). One can note that each of the aforementioned examples synthesizes both a membership (the world’s “bio”) and a benchmark for other similar names. The pseudonym *Bioeco* shows an ideological positioning built around the prefix *bio*, which is amplified by the prefix *eco* relating to the term “ecology” (However, as the prefix *eco* can be applied to a large number of derivative terms, it is impossible to say that its referent is “ecology.”) The *nomen falsum bioetglamour* shows that the Net surfer pertains to a universe that subsumes ecology and glamour. *chacunsonbio* highlights the notion of choice and individual freedom through the possessive pronoun *son* ‘its’. *cosmetique bio* infers a claim of domain ownership through the term *cosmetique* ‘cosmetic’. The autonym *evydemmentbio* is built in an assertive way, with the prefix *bio*. With *laurence-aboneobio*, the Net surfer uses the third person singular to refer to his/her nominal identity; it can be decrypted as “Laurence (is) a subscriber to the bio”. This is a sentence unit that consists of an assertive speech act written in the present tense. The last example, *ma cantine bio*, is an autonym which states the user’s membership in the food sector of the world’s bio (Fr. *cantine* ‘canteen’). An analysis of these pseudonyms shows that Net surfers use pseudonym as a discourse that synthesizes a message that highlights a particular aspect of his membership in the world of “bio”.

With online news articles, Net surfers have the opportunity to make comments. To illustrate this phenomenon, some pseudonymous will be presented, in relation to an important event: the FIFA World Cup of 2010, held in Johannesburg, South Africa. When the French team (the Blues) lost, their coach, Raymond Domenech was fired. This information, relayed through the MSN portal, was the subject of an article which ran along the following lines: AFP Last Updated: Monday, September 6, 2010 18:15, Raymond Domenech dismissed “for gross misconduct, without negotiation” according to the FFF. It was followed by 308 comments as of 6 September 2010. As of September 8, 2010, 150 pseudonyms were recorded.

The creation of Internet names refers to different aspects including issuing judgments on the world of football, support of a particular football club, or the formulation of criticism of the protagonists of the events recounted by MSN (see Table 4). On this sporting occasion, several incidents occurred, including the refusal of the Blues (French football team) to train following the exclusion of Nicolas Anelka. This decision is announced by Raymond Domenech, the team’s coach. Furthermore, the accommodation costs of the French team (who resided in a hotel selected by the State Secretary of Sports, Rama Yade) was a source of controversy.

Table 4. Aliases referring to judgments or opinions about the world of football				
<i>anti_FFF</i>	<i>DecuDuFoot</i> ("déçu du foot")	<i>monsieur le ministre</i>	<i>psg 91</i> (Football Club du Paris Saint-Germain)	<i>une bonne vérité</i>
<i>deal deal</i>	<i>GIRONDINS DE CŒUR</i> (Football Club Girondins de Bordeaux)	<i>politicards-profiteurs</i>	<i>poubelledu13</i>	<i>vive Domenech</i>
Source: Ongoing study submitted for publication (end 2011/beginning 2012); <a href="http://news.fr.msn.com/m6-actualite/france/article.aspx?ucpg=9&amp;cp-documentid=154588161#uc2Lst">http://news.fr.msn.com/m6-actualite/france/article.aspx?ucpg=9&amp;cp-documentid=154588161#uc2Lst</a> (accessed September 8, 2010)				

An analysis of the autonyms in Table 5 shows that some Net surfers wanted to express their agreement or disagreement with the tragic events that were included in the coverage (e.g., the dismissal of Raymond Domenech without serious negotiation): *anti\_FFF* ('against the French Federation of Football'), *DecuDuFoot* ('disappointed by football'), *deal deal* (associating the world of football with that of commerce), *une bonne vérité* ('a good truth') (some Internet users approve of the sanction given to Domenech), *vive Domenech* (this Net surfer is an admirer of Domenech). Other Net surfers assume their pseudonyms as a reference to their support or their rejection of other clubs: *GIRONDINS DE CŒUR* (Girondins de Bordeaux Football Club), *poubelledu13*, *psg 91* (Paris Saint-Germain Football Club). Finally, two names refer to Rama Yade and the controversy he created in the selection of the hotel in South Africa: *monsieur le ministre*, *politicards-profiteurs*.

### Pseudonyms as a means of emotional valuation

While there are Net surfers that build their pseudonyms to mirror their demands or opinions, there are others who choose to reveal an emotional content. Plutchik (2003 in Blumenthal 2009: 44) identified eight families of basic emotions: *grief, fear, anger, joy, trust, disgust, anticipation, and surprise*. To illustrate this, there are 24 autonyms (taken from a separatist forum of the province of Quebec, Canada), which are perceived as statements of "emotion" (see Table 5).

Table 5. Pseudonyms that mirror opinions/emotions (24)				
<i>BéniOuiOui</i>	<i>JaYa</i>	<i>qarnacier</i>	<i>shokin</i>	<i>The Godfather</i>
<i>Deicidus</i>	<i>Le Magnifique</i>	<i>QuebecEnRuine</i>	<i>Somnobilis</i>	<i>Vielhomme</i>
<i>Diantre!</i>	<i>Néant</i>	<i>Respect</i>	<i>Tabarnack</i>	<i>ViRuZ</i>
<i>Héhé</i>	<i>necro99</i>	<i>Shacal</i>	<i>Temps Noirs</i>	<i>ZeRyT</i>
<i>Insomnia</i>	<i>Obi Wan Celeri</i>	<i>shadow of light</i>	<i>TestaMora</i>	
Source: Ongoing study submitted for publication (end 2011/beginning 2012); <a href="http://www.independance-quebec.com/forum/forum-18.html">http://www.independance-quebec.com/forum/forum-18.html</a> (accessed August 27, 2010)				



We find some interjections in the form of insults: *Diantre!* ['damn'], *Shokina* for 'shocking', *Hehe*, *Tabarnack* (a Quebec insult created from the word *tabernacle*). Some pseudonyms revolve around feelings like doubt or defeat: *BéniOuiOui* ('Yes man'), *Insomnia*, *Néant* ('nothingness'), *necro99* (the form *necro* – the result of an apocope – refers to a Greek element meaning 'dead body', used to build nouns and adjectives that are learned borrowings), *Obi Wan Celery* (mocking Obi-Wan Kenobi, a character from the *Star Wars* series). *QuebecEnRuine*, *shadow of light*, *Somnobulis*, *Temps Noirs* ('black time'), *TestaMora* are anthroponyms that relate to despair or disillusionment. Two autonyms show support for the independence of Quebec: *Deicidus* ('I've decided', a neologism resembling a Latin form), *Jaya* ('yes, yes'). There are names that mirror anger or fear: *qarnaciel* 'carnivorous', *Shacal* 'jackal', *ViRuZ* 'viruses'. Finally, there are some miscellaneous pseudonyms: *Le Magnifique* ('the beautiful'), *Respect*, *The Godfather*, *Vielhomme*, *ZeRyT* ('the rite').

On forums which deal with elements affecting subjects' private lives, the construction of autonyms relates to the field of emotions in a more intimate setting. This is the case of *Doctissimo*, a forum organized into chat rooms dedicated to various health problems, including anorexia and bulimia. Some examples of pseudonyms taken from this source are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Autonyms collected on the forum <i>Doctissimo</i> , from chat rooms dedicated to anorexia and bulimia					
<i>aapel</i>	<i>Embuee</i>	<i>help-me-please99</i>	<i>lost44</i>	<i>mon-mal-de-vivre</i>	<i>The-heart-of-a-girl-broken</i>
<i>Acoeurperdu59100</i>	<i>etouffe</i>	<i>isuffer</i>	<i>mal 2 vivre</i>	<i>noiram49</i>	
Source: Ongoing study submitted for publication (end 2011/beginning 2012); <a href="http://forum.doctissimo.fr/">http://forum.doctissimo.fr/</a> (accessed August 17, 2010)					

A semantic analysis of these eleven pseudonyms shows that if the categories already identified are pertinent, they can vacillate when they refer to same semantic field. Thus, the heading called "emotion" can overlap that of "feeling". On performing a lexical analysis of the words *food*, *anorexia*, and *bulimia* – the first is regarded as a generic term that subsumes the other two –, we obtain the following definitions:

- Food: what is used to feed people (DHLF 2006: 774), semantic field: *food*;
- Anorexia: pathological loss of appetite (Ibid.: 151), semantic field: *health*;
- Bulimia: continual feeling of intense hunger (Ibid.: 471), semantic field: *health*.

Furthermore, the terms *anorexia* and *bulimia* are part of the semantic field of *illness*, namely of "health impairment in humans" (Ibid.: 2107). Consulting the dictionary of synonyms and antonyms, Dupuis (1961: 355) shows that the word *disease* is synonymous with "bad, unwell, illness, disease, disorder, distress, calamity, infirmity". This set of synonyms can be correlated with the range of emotions listed by Plutchik (in Blumenthal 2009: 44) and, more specifically, with grief and suffering.

Table 6 includes 11 autonyms: *AAPEL*, *Acoeurperdu59100*, *Embuee* ('misty'), *etouffe* ('smothered'), *help-me-please99*, *isuffer*, *lost44*, *mal 2 vivre* ('unhappiness'), *mon-mal-de-vivre* ('unhappiness'), *noiram49*, *The-heart-of-a-girl -broken*. These pseudonyms consist of



terms belonging to the semantic field of illness and suffering (as shown in Table 7). In this case, the creative pseudonyms highlight an actual suffering of the Net surfer, which is thus synthesized by means of a particularly indicative autonym.

<b>Table 7. Comparison of lexical units from the semantic field of <i>disease</i> and <i>suffering</i> with pseudonyms on the forum <i>Doctissimo</i></b>	
<i>Disease</i>	
bad, unwell, ailment, disease, disorder, distress, calamity, disability (Dupuis 1961: 355)	
<i>Suffering</i>	
grief, sorrow, pain, sorrow, evil, torture, torment, anger, discomfort, illness (Dupuis 1961: 543).	
<i>aapel</i>	'call (call for help)'
<i>Acœurperdu59100</i>	the term <i>perdu</i> 'lost' refers to the emotional suffering of Internet users
<i>Embuee</i>	'to confuse, upset' (DHLF 2006: 548)
<i>etouffe</i>	'suffocate' (Ibid.: 1330)
<i>help-me-please99</i>	a cry for help
<i>isuffer</i>	'I suffer'
<i>lost44</i>	relating to disappearance
<i>mal 2 vivre</i>	These autonyms are used with the explicit meaning of the phrase <i>mal de vivre</i> 'unhappiness'.
<i>mon-mal-de-vivre</i>	
<i>noiram49</i>	The term <i>black</i> refers to 'having dark thoughts'.
<i>The-heart-of-a-girl-broken</i>	With the term <i>broken</i> , this <i>nomen falsum</i> summarizes the suffering endured by the surfer.
Source: Ongoing study submitted for publication (end 2011/beginning 2012); <a href="http://forum.doctissimo.fr/">http://forum.doctissimo.fr/</a> (accessed August 17, 2010)	

## Conclusion

A number of phenomena have emerged from this study. On the Internet, creativity is plethoric, and if the salient purpose of virtual names is to label Net surfers, there are also peculiar purposes that these names fulfil, which depend on the sites where they occur. Pseudonyms on the Internet are not fixed anthroponyms as are those used in civil society. These autonyms can highlight expectations or supposed qualities (for instance, on a dating site; Batard 2007), or relate to users' personal story (Martin 2006: 126). In the case of comments on forum topics or articles from online newspapers, Net surfers employ names to amplify a point of view, a claim, an emotion etc.

The present analysis of pseudonyms shows that they are used in the first person singular, because they are indicative of speakers' status and name purpose. The personal pronoun "I" is a deictic that situates a speaker in the communication situation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980: 40). In this case, as the multidimensional status of a pseudonym relates to a single entity, the autonym comes in the form of a disguised "I", and its value could be that of a deictic. The multidimensional status of pseudonyms on the Internet also points to bearers' personal involvement (their demands, affiliations, opinions, emotions, etc.), which gains ground over the general role of anthroponyms.

While digital society is rooted in civil society, it does not duplicate it. The Internet lies at the crossroads of two conceptually and practically opposite phenomena: *anonymity* and *privacy*. Even within organizations, computers that Net surfers work on define a (more or less) private space, thus maintaining a certain physical. However, Net surfers are also linked to intimate groups, because computer usage is a social practice that tends to take place at home. On the Internet, there seems to be some overlapping between actual physical distance – which can at least be identified with the distance listed by Hall (1966: 143) as defining intimate space (where direct contact is possible up to ~ 0.45 m), within which one can access this media –, and the symbolic distance between Net surfers and interlocutors, which is salient in the use of the pronouns *tu/vous* that in French mark emotional distance: “*tu/tu* for familiarity, *vous/vous* for distance” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1996: 47, my translation). Regarding the familiar use of *tu* and within the framework of a survey on the social practices of Internet users, one of the questions included in the survey was about the existence/nonexistence of hierarchy on the Internet (question 19). 1063 people have responded to this question: “22% (229) said ‘yes’, while 78% (834) said ‘no’. Therefore, 78% of the interviewees said hierarchy did not exist” (Martin 2012: 102, my translation). Do not these aspects of naming reveal a space of freedom, where what cannot be expressed textually (in conversations, comments etc.) is implied creatively and, by extension, what cannot be said in civil society is referred to in virtual society through pseudonyms?

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