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Verbalised speechlessness: Online mourning practices

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Digitale Praktiken der Emotionalisierung sind im Internet allgegenwärtig und betreffen auch die mit dem Tod von Personen einhergehende und als Reaktion auf einen Verlust verstandene Emotion Trauer. Längst wird in sozialen Medien, aber auch auf eigens dafür eingerichteten Seiten der Tod von Nahestehenden, aber auch von Prominenten oder gar Unbekannten (z.B. bei Terroranschlägen) betrauert. Die konkreten sprachlichen Realisierungsformen dieser digitalen Trauerpraktiken lehnen sich dabei zum einen an prä-digitale Vorgänger an und emergieren zum anderen vor dem Hintergrund der rahmenbildenden medialen Affordanzen als interaktiv und kollektiv ausgehandelte Lösungen. Dabei zeigt sich anhand empirischer Beispiele aus sozialen Medien und von Online-Gedenkseiten, dass die metapragmatische Thematisierung von Sprachlosigkeit, die ihrerseits teilweise konträre Umsetzungsmuster erfährt, eine akzeptierte Variante des digitalen Trauerausdrucks darstellt. Überhaupt entspinnt sich sowohl zwischen den Nutzer*innen selbst als auch in den Massenmedien ein reger Diskurs darüber, inwiefern der online und damit mindestens teilweise öffentlich stattfindende Ausdruck von Trauer überhaupt angemessen ist. Dabei zielt die geäußerte Kritik vor allem auch auf eine Konzeptionalisierung von Trauer, die durch die umstandslose Veröffentlichung in alltagskommunikativen Kontexten als unauthentisch bewertet wird.

Stichwörter:

Trauer, digitale Kommunikation, Emotion, Sprachlosigkeit, Online-Praktiken, Meta-Diskurs.

Keywords:

mourning, grief, digital communication, emotion, speechlessness, online practices, meta discourse.

1. Introduction: Mourning practices on the internet

Prior to giving an exemplary overview of mourning practices on the Internet in this first section, I would like to clarify my understanding of the term *practices*. "Praktiken sind in aller Munde"¹: With these words Deppermann et al. (2016) open their volume on linguistic and communicative practices and predict that practices will become a fundamental concept in various disciplines, including linguistics. This prognosis has proved true in that the term has been firmly established in linguistics, although it is by no means understood consistently. This fact may, however, be one of the reasons for the term's success: it can analytically be applied to various phenomena in different theoretical and methodological contexts, even across disciplines. Without going any further into these individual contexts of use, I will follow Androutsopoulos' (2016) understanding of the term practices, which he develops in the aforementioned volume from a media linguistic perspective. He brings together practices and

¹ Translation: "Practices are on everyone's lips." All translations are the author's.

digital communication and describes them as follows: "Mediatisierte Praktiken sind Gefüge kommunikativer Handlungen, die im Zuge der gesellschaftlichen Mediatisierung aufkommen, Technologien digitaler Kommunikation einbeziehen und an prä-digitale Vorgänger enger oder loser angebunden sind"² (Androutsopoulos 2016: 337).

Accordingly, he argues in support of an empirical determination of practices, i.e. their analysis in actual contexts of use – thereby taking into account their relationship to pre-digital or digital predecessors in order to specify their historical dimension (Androutsopoulos 2016: 342). These practices are thereby *mediatized* in so far as they can only be adequately grasped in the light of their technologically framed transmission. To a certain extent, mediatized practices are characterized and restricted by such technological framework conditions (e.g.: sign restrictions), but at the same time they also shape, explore and redefine these framework conditions. In this sense, practices in the context of digital communication are often, as Beißwenger (2016: 281) puts it, "Praktiken im Entstehen", i.e. emergent practices that are not (yet) solidified. This is certainly one of the reasons why they are often reflected metapragmatically, as will be shown below (see chapter 3). This is also true for mourning³ practices on the internet which can be performed in various ways as well as on different platforms (cf. also Frick 2019: 181f.). These include, for example, virtual cemeteries or web-based memorial sites as multimodal formations that enable practices such as the following: gravestones (with dynamic and static elements) can be designed, photos and songs can be posted, obituaries written, expressions of sympathy expressed or virtual candles lit as the following image from an online memorial site illustrates:

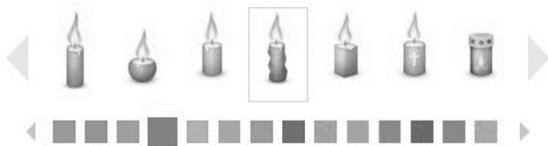
² Translation: Mediatized practices are frameworks of communicative actions that emerge in the course of social mediatization, incorporate digital communication technologies and are more or less closely linked to pre-digital predecessors.

³ The terms "grief" and "mourning" are often used synonymously, but while "grief" refers to the emotional reaction of mourning after loss events, "mourning" mainly covers the socially and culturally shaped practices that follow a death (cf. Jakoby et al. 2013: 254).

← Zurück Kerze anzünden

Zünden Sie ihre Kerze langsam und mit Bedacht an. Denken sie an den geliebten oder geschätzten Menschen und schaffen Sie so eine ewige Erinnerung.

Gestalten Sie Ihre Kerze:



Geben Sie eine Überschrift ein

Fügen Sie einige persönliche Worte hinzu...

Ihr Name:

E-Mail-Adresse (freiwillig):

☐ Ich bin kein Roboter.  reCAPTCHA
Datenschutzerklärung - Nutzungsbedingungen

Kerze anzünden

Fig. 1: Practice of lighting a candle on an online memorial site

As shown in the example above these virtual candles can first be designed by choosing a predefined colour and shape and then lit by mouse click. The emotionally shaped practice of "lighting candles" itself can be found in different manifestations on many such memorial pages. In the example depicted above, it is remarkable that the lighting of the virtual candle is verbally framed: users are explicitly asked to add some personal words ("Fügen Sie einige persönliche Worte hinzu..."). Further below (see chapter 2.2), different examples of these "candle texts" will be analysed in terms of the verbalization of speechlessness.

Apart from these virtual cemeteries and memorials, which emerged in the 1990ies and are still quite popular⁴, the range of mourning practices on the web has diversified. For example, platforms that were primarily conceived for other purposes are also used for articulating and communicating grief. This is

⁴ The number of visitors and active users on these sites is impressively high. For example, the memorial site www.gedenkseiten.de from which the above example originates has 25231 individual memorial pages and 2.6 million "burning" candles (per July 2021).

especially true for social media such as Twitter that is often used to spread death news – mainly of celebrities and other public characters – and to express the concomitant sadness. This gives rise to forms of collective mourning⁵ in which the death of strangers or unrelated persons is mourned – rather than the death of loved ones or related persons, as is usually the case on memorial sites.⁶ Both these forms of mourning will be looked at in the following chapter in the light of a (linguistic) topos that is particularly relevant in the context of grief (in general, but also of grief online as will be shown below): speechlessness – and its linguistic implementation in the scope of online mourning practices.

2. The online verbalisation of speechlessness caused by grief

Before analysing empirical examples of online mourning practices (see 2.2), which is the primary focus of this paper, I will first turn to the more general but complex question of how emotions can be verbalized in written form (see 2.1). At the end of this chapter the meta discourse on online mourning practices will be discussed (see 2.3).

2.1 Verbalising emotions

The verbal expression of feelings is often associated with difficulties: There hardly ever seem to be the right words to express one's feelings. This can not only be seen in various literary works⁷, but also in the numerous idiomatic expressions addressing this lack of words in emotional contexts. Here are some examples in English and German:

- English: to be lost for words (e.g. because of joy); to be speechless (e.g. with grief); words fail me (e.g. in this tragic situation); to be struck dumb (e.g. by fear); to be bereft of speech (e.g. due to surprise)
- German: keine Worte finden (z.B. für Trauer); jmd. fehlen die Worte (z.B. aus Wut); etwas nicht in Worte fassen können (z.B. den Schmerz); sprachlos sein (z.B. vor Freude); verstummen (z.B. vor Schrecken); jmd. bleibt die Sprache weg (z.B. aus Überraschung)

Schwarz-Friesel (2013: 273) sums up this difficulty of expressing emotions as follows: "Als ein Problem wird insbesondere erachtet, Gefühle als subjektive und individuelle Erlebenszustände sprachlich wirklich treffend mitteilbar

⁵ For an overview and some exemplary analysis of collective grief practices on social media see Marx 2019 and Frick 2019.

⁶ In the following I will therefore distinguish between practices of collective mourning and practices of relation-based mourning. Of course, on memorial pages it is also possible to light a candle for a person one does not know personally. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the creation of the page is done by a person close to the deceased.

⁷ See Schwarz-Friesel (2013: 236-246) for an excursus on "Sprachkrisen in der Literatur" (language crises in literature).

machen zu können."⁸ This has to do with the fact that every verbalisation of emotions is necessarily an objectification – in the sense of a transfer from an individual to a social phenomenon – and therefore reproducible (cf. Marx 2019: 115; cf. Schwarz-Friesel 2013: 238) – which is especially true for emotions that are expressed in a (more or less) public online environment where they are not only perceivable for third parties but also archived. All these factors seem to run counter to the deepness and the exclusivity of the emotions (cf. Marx 2019: 115). This is also one of the main points of criticism in the meta discourse as will be shown below (see 2.3).

However, this understanding of the verbalisation of emotion essentially depends on the modelling of the relationship between language and emotion. While some approaches assume that emotions are an internal phenomenon that precedes its verbalisation – in other words, a complex, cognitive and physical inner state⁹ that has to be transferred into language¹⁰ – other approaches emphasise the verbal imprint on emotions or at least assume an interdependency between the formation and expression of emotions (cf. Fiehler 2002). In the empirical examples that are to be investigated in the following chapter, there is no access to inner states as the persons behind the postings are anonymous.¹¹ Therefore, I would rather like to follow Fiehler's approach to emotions. He defines them from an ethnomethodological perspective: "emotions are not regarded primarily as internal-psychological phenomena, but as socially proscribed and formed entities, which are constituted in accordance with social rules of emotionality and which are manifested, interpreted and processed together communicatively" (Fiehler 2002: 79). This approach allows the examination of emotional expressions and their functions "independent of whether the participants also actually feel the manifested emotions" (*ibid.*: 81).

2.2 Speechlessness in online mourning

In the following chapter, empirical examples from various online sources are used to illustrate how grief-induced speechlessness is realized and which function these realisations may have. In a first step I will explain the data on

⁸ Translation: The appropriate linguistic communication of feelings as subjective and individual states of experience is considered to be especially problematic.

⁹ This is, for example, how Schwarz-Friesel (2013: 48) defines emotion, whereas "feelings" are the experienceable and verbally communicable part of emotions. Fries (cf. 2004: 3 and 2007: 294) also assumes an internal state, even though he defines the terms "emotions" and "feelings" contrary to Schwarz-Friesel. I am not going deeper into the distinction between emotion and feeling at this point, but cf. Schwarz-Friesel (2013), Fries (2004, 2007) or Frick (2020).

¹⁰ Obviously, such translation processes always come at a cost.

¹¹ Many users only go by their first name or their relational role (e.g. mama or papa) in the analysed "candle texts" on the memorial site www.gedenkseiten.de. I do assume, however, that most of them use their actual names; considering the delicate topic, I would nevertheless like to protect their identity by keeping all the names anonymous in the examples used here. The exploration of actual feelings behind these verbalisations of speechlessness is of no interest to me.

which the analysis is based as well as the methodological approach (see chapter 2.2.1). In a second step the empirical examples will be qualitatively analysed in terms of their dealing with speechlessness.

2.2.1 Data and methodology

Both the compilation of the German¹² examples and their analysis are committed to the methodological approach of *digital ethnography*, as this approach is particularly well suited to "capturing the shape and nature of [...] communicative practices" (Varis 2016: 55f.). In this sense, digital ethnography as virtual field research is also a learning process that is controlled by either the experience gathered in the course of it, or by what appears to be relevant – respectively is marked as relevant by the users (cf. *ibid.*: 56, 60). The advantages of such an approach lie in the possibility of (re)contextualising the phenomena discovered in the process and thereby gaining a deeper understanding of communicative practices. A disadvantage, however, is the fact that it cannot be quantified and generalized; for this reason, digital ethnography can, in my opinion, only represent a first step in the description of such communicative digital practices.

On the one hand, tweets connected with mourning events were unsystematically collected and searched with regard to the issue of speechlessness for the following exemplary analysis (see 2.2.2). On the other hand, the memorial page www.gedenkseiten.de was ethnographically observed for candle texts that in some way address the topic of speechlessness (see 2.2.3). In any case, it should be emphasised once again that this is not a quantitative study. Rather, the collected examples are examined regarding the question of how speechlessness is thematised and implemented in online mourning contexts.

2.2.2 #sprachlos: Mark emotional intensity

Grief-induced speechlessness manifests itself by relying on formulaic expressions that are connected to pre-digital predecessors. The following examples from Twitter illustrate this phenomenon:

¹² The research project to which this study is assigned to deals with practices of online mourning in German-speaking countries. For this reason, the examples shown in this article are mainly in German.



Fig. 2: Use of the hashtag #sprachlos in mourning contexts on Twitter

In these examples several things become apparent: One is the already mentioned recourse to stereotypical formulas, which can also be found in offline, digital and pre-digital (analogue) mourning contexts¹³ (e.g. *in stiller Trauer* – *in silent mourning*; *es fehlen einfach die Worte* – *to be at loss for words*). Using stereotypical formulas is an effective means to avoid – and at the same time display – speechlessness: One does not encounter the general difficulties of verbalising emotions (see chapter 2.1) when relying on already proven codifications. One does, however, reveal their objectifiability precisely because

¹³ Although *online* is usually correlated with *digital*, the distinction between *online* and *offline* as well as between *analogue* and *digital* lies on a different level. The application to contexts of grief shall clarify this: writing a condolence card by hand is offline and analogue; printing an obituary in the newspaper is offline but digital; posting that same obituary on social media would be online and digital; displaying the handwritten condolence card on social media would probably be a mix between online, analogue and digital (because the card needs to be digitalized in order to be displayable on social media).

of this. This observation applies not only to the verbal parts, but also to the integrated visual elements and symbols (e.g. the crosses as religious symbols, black as the colour of grief). We are hence also dealing with a graphic intertextuality to pre-digital predecessors (e.g. obituaries in newspapers that usually do have a black rim; cf. von der Lage-Müller 1995: 109).

Secondly, the examples show the emergence of innovative condolence practices which make use of means that are typical for digital media. In addition to the above-mentioned linking of text and image to a coherent "Sehfläche" (Schmitz 2011: 23ff.), it is above all the use of hashtags, which are fundamental for online sharing contexts.¹⁴ Especially within the context of tragic events such as terror attacks or plane crashes specific hashtag customs (or even conventions) have been developed – their hallmark is their citation-like mass circulation. The hashtag #jesuischarlie¹⁵ that "began trending on Twitter following the attack against the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo" (Giaxoglou 2018: 14) thereby marks the beginning of this practice, which, in various variations (e.g. #ichbinberlin, #iamorlando, #yosoybarcelona), has subsequently become an integral part of collective online mourning. Apart from the #jesuisX formula, which is used in different languages and with different subjects, other formulae have become established in this context, such as #prayforX or #weareallX. As Giaxoglou (2018: 14) emphasizes, the use of such formulae is not only a means to inscribe oneself in the (mourning) discourse, but above all a means of stancetaking.¹⁶ This is, of course, especially true for politically-induced contexts whereas other patterns are more important in the light of celebrity deaths (e.g. #RIP¹⁷ or quotes/songs of the person concerned, cf. Frick 2019).

Finally, speechlessness manifests itself through metapragmatic thematization. As Marx (2019: 124) notes in her article on collective grief, remaining silent is indeed the preferred reaction to such events; but then again, one does not exist on social media if one remains silent. Metapragmatically stating one's own speechlessness is therefore an adequate way of escaping this dilemma – and, apart from this, it also functions as an intensifier. Marx (2019: 115) gets to the heart of it: "Die eigene Sprachlosigkeit festzustellen ist somit auch ein Zeichen besonderer Gefühlsintensität, aus der sich das Schweigen als notwendige

¹⁴ Tienken's (2013) study deals in detail with the practice of sharing in online contexts.

¹⁵ For an in-depth analysis of this hashtag in ecstatic sharing contexts see Giaxoglou 2018.

¹⁶ Hashtags – probably because of their simple implementation on different platforms, but also due to their meanwhile great potential as socio-discursive micronarratives (cf. Giaxoglou 2018: 13) – seem to be a particularly suitable measure for online stancetaking; this is more up-to-date than ever, having in mind the current protests in America, for example (#blacklivesmatter). On the role of hashtags in the formation of debates, see Bernard (2018).

¹⁷ #RIP is, however, generally a very widespread acronym in online mourning contexts and as such closely related to pre-digital predecessors.

Konsequenz ergibt."¹⁸ While this is certainly true for social media on the one hand and collective grief on the other, it does not necessarily apply to mourning practices in relation-based contexts (such as the aforementioned memorial sites). In the next chapter, I will have a look at additional implementations of speechlessness originating from the memorial site www.gedenkseiten.de.

2.2.3 Wordless or wordily: Realisation strategies

As already mentioned above (see footnote 4), the online memorial site www.gedenkseiten.de is quite popular and has high user numbers. In order to create a memorial page for a deceased person a login is needed. This is not necessary, however, if one just wants to visit the site, read obituaries, or light a virtual candle. The latter practice has already been briefly described in chapter 1 and will be looked at in detail in the following section. After choosing the colour and the shape of the candle, users are requested to fill in the text fields (cf. Fig. 1). Whereas the indication of a title ("Geben Sie eine Überschrift ein" – *enter a heading*) and an email address are optional, filling in the text field ("Fügen Sie einige persönliche Worte hinzu..." – *add some personal words*) and name are mandatory. If the title line is left blank, an automatic title for the candle text is generated ("Eine Kerze für [name]" – *a candle for*), as can be seen in the following examples:

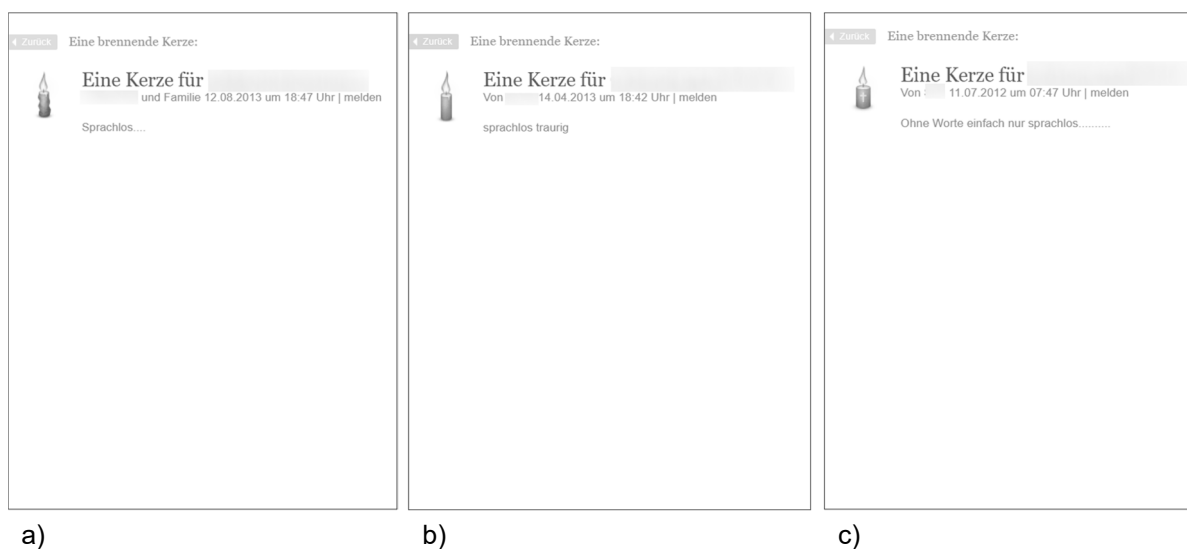


Fig. 3: Performative implementation of speechlessness

First of all – with regard to the topic of speechlessness – it must be noted that the medial respective technical affordances (cf. Tienken 2015) of the site do not allow the production of a textless candle at all; an actual implementation of speechlessness through wordlessness can therefore not exist. The users therefore make use of the strategy already identified above in relation to

¹⁸ Translation: The acknowledgement of one's own speechlessness is thus also a sign of special emotional intensity, of which silence is seen as a necessary consequence.

collective mourning practices (see chapter 2.2.2): They verbally refer to their own speechlessness. Interestingly, the thematization of speechlessness is framed by other visual-graphic means, for example the use of ellipsis dots (see images a) and c) in Fig.3)¹⁹ that iconicise speechlessness by visually hinting at a lack of words. This impression is supported by the fact that there is a lot of empty textless space in the images depicted above, which is another iconic means to realize speechlessness: Instead of filling the space with words, speechlessness (already indicated by the ellipsis) is demonstrated by an actual (although not complete) and prominently displayed lack of words. This may also be a reflex of either verbal helplessness ("verbale Hilflosigkeit", Schwarz-Friesel 2013: 273) or language scepticism ("Sprachskepsis", Marx 2019: 116).

Apart from this visual-graphic strategy of iconically displaying speechlessness or wordlessness, a quasi-contrary strategy can also be found on the memorial page: In the following examples (see (1)-(3) speechlessness is turned into its opposite. It is marked by verbosity:²⁰

- (1) Ich bin **sprachlos**, immer noch, kann ich mir das nicht vorstellen, dass wir seine **Stimme nicht mehr hören werden** [Hervorhebungen KF]. Wir haben vom Beginn des Studiums viele Sachen zusammengatan. Er war für den Freundeskreis eine große Motivation für Lernen, Wiederholen, stundenlange Vorbereitungen. Geduldig, Mühsam und in seiner Art laut und lustig, aber absolut positiv lernbereit. Vielseitig und humorvoll kam er jeden Menschen entgegen. In guten und in schlechten Zeiten blieb er immer treuer Kamerad. Er spielte in meinem Studienleben eine motivierende Rolle und nach dem Studium vermittelte mir häufig gute kontakte für Arbeitsmarkt. Seine Schmerzen hatte er verheimlicht, damit sein Freundeskreis nicht mitbekommen und leiden. Mein tiefste Beileid an Angehörige, Freundeskreis, grosse Bekanntenkreis und kommilitonen. [Name] bleibt immer in uns als ein stolzer Bergmann, der nie aufgeben wollte und versuchte bis zum Ziel zu durchbohren. Friede sei mit ihm mit Himmlischen Lieben. (Gedenkseiten, 26.12.2012, 16.26)²¹
- (2) Wir hatten doch noch so viele gemeinsame Plaene... DU hattest noch so viele Traeume und Wuensche fuer die Zukunft. Diese sind einfach geplatzt wie eine Siefenblase, so ploetzlich und unvorhersehbar. Wie oft hast Du gesagt:"Wenn ich gross bin..." Wir werden diesen Moment nicht mehr erleben koennen Dich weiter aufwachsen zu sehen... Manchmal wollen wir Dir noch so viel sagen, **manchmal fehlen uns die Worte und wir sind einfach nur sprachlos** [Hervorhebung KF]. Aber unsere Liebe zu Dir ist immer da und wird immer bleiben. Fuer ewig, denn wir haben Dich ganz tief in unseren Herzen. [Name], wir lieben Dich bis zu den Sternen und noch viel, viel weiter... Te iubim mult pana la stele. In Liebe Mama und [Name] (Gedenkseiten, 18.03.2012, 01:31)
- (3) Liebe [Name]...ich bin **sprachlos** [Hervorhebung KF], fassungslos und vermissee dich ganz schrecklich. Gleichzeitig bin ich unglaublich dankbar für die Zeit die wir gemeinsam hatten. Du bist für immer in meinem Herzen und bleibst unvergessen! Danke für alles! Deine Schnulle [Name] (Gedenkseiten, 18.03.2012, 01:31)

As is obvious in the quoted candle texts, speechlessness may also be described extensively. The detailed content of these extracts is of no further importance in the context of my paper, but I would like to point out three observations that nicely illustrate the concept of speechlessness manifested therein. In the first

¹⁹ See Androutsopoulos (2020) on ellipsis dots in interaction-oriented digital communication.

²⁰ Translations of all examples can be found in the appendix.

²¹ All German examples are translated in the appendix.

example (1) the speechlessness of the writer is closely associated with the eternal silence of the deceased by pointing out that his voice will never be heard again. In this way a virtually impossible connection between the writing subject and the subject of his text is established – through the lack of speech. Example (2) shows that speechlessness is not necessarily exhaustive but can rather also be a condition that occurs temporarily or only partially. The time of writing the candle text may not be affected by this condition, as the example suggests. Finally, in example (3) speechlessness is established as something that does not stand alone: The writer is speechless *and* aghast *and* misses the person *and* is very grateful at the same time. This pattern (speechless *and* X) is quite often observable in these online contexts (see also Fig.3, image b) and it shows that speechlessness is much more than just the lack of words. This will now be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

2.3 *Interim conclusion: Speechlessness is rarely wordless*

In the previous chapters I tried to show that the performance of speechlessness in mourning contexts is an important part of both collective and relation-based mourning practices. There are, however, different linguistic strategies for the realisation of speechlessness – always in the light of the fact that actual speechlessness is not observable in online contexts, especially not from a researcher's perspective. In the scope of the empirical analysis of speechlessness in online mourning practices on Twitter and on a German-speaking memorial page the following patterns were found:

- a) recourse to stereotypical formulae
- b) emergence of specific hashtags
- c) metapragmatic thematization
 - i. wordlessness
 - ii. verbosity

These patterns show varying degrees of explicitness with regard to their reference to speechlessness. While the metapragmatic thematization of speechlessness (c) – which can be of varying linguistic complexity and detail – is consequently the most explicit one, the use of stereotypical formulae (a) is a rather implicit way of dealing with speechlessness (although one that is also very popular in pre-digital and offline contexts). Finally, the closely related²² emergence of specific hashtags (b) testifies to a media- and environment-specific solution of the speechlessness problem as it also enables and facilitates forms of collective mourning. However, as will be shown in the following chapter, these are not always received positively on a metalevel.

²² Accordingly, a relatively close connection to pre-digital predecessors could be assumed here (cf. Androutsopoulos 2016: 337 and chapter 1 above).

Apart from these coping strategies, the empirical examples are also reflections of the concept of grief-induced speechlessness. The most important insight gained in this respect is certainly that speechlessness, firstly, is rarely wordless and, secondly, rarely unaccompanied. With regard to the latter, for example, it is striking that the use of the adjective *speechless* often occurs in pair formulas (*speechless and X*) or other combinations (e.g. with graphic means or punctuation) and is therefore only able to describe part of the emotional state. This is plausible because emotions are never one-dimensional, but usually very complex. All in all, it is evident that speechlessness is by no means necessarily associated with an actual lack of speech or language; rather it is a highly interactive multi-layered phenomenon whose roots go back to a topos originating from pre-digital offline contexts (cf. also Schwarz-Friesel 2013: 273-277 who deals with the tabooing of grief in everyday communication).²³

3. External shame? The metadiscourse

In the following, the focus will be broadened from the realisation of speechlessness to online mourning practices and their perception in general. As mentioned above, these practices are to some extent received critically – not only by the users themselves, but also by the mass media. This is, of course, due to the fact that verbalising emotions is difficult in general (see above, chapter 2.1). The following comment on an article – dealing with digital valediction of deceased – of the German newspaper *Zeit online*²⁴ illustrates this.

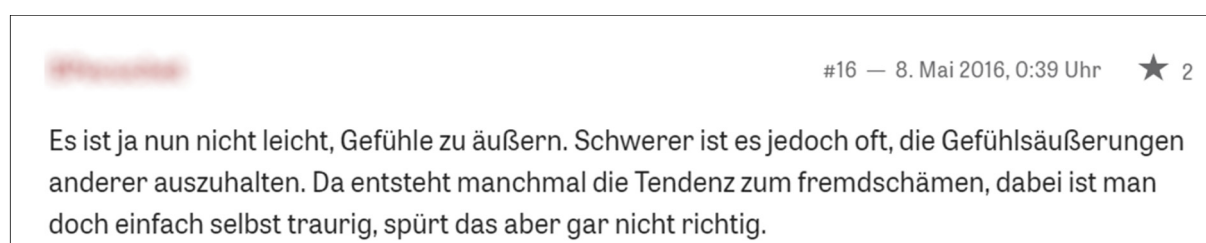


Fig. 4: Critical comment to a newspaper article on digital valediction²⁵

The comment writer opens his statement by saying that it is not easy to express feelings. He continues by stating that it is even more difficult to endure the expression of other people's feelings. In doing so, he focuses on a very central point of digital mourning practices: The fact that they take place online and thus at least partially in public – which of course means that other people can also

²³ In this context, Schwarz-Friesel (2013: 273) asks: "Macht die Trauersituation sprachlos?" (*Does the grief situation leave you speechless?*). Based on the findings of this empirical analysis, I would have to answer this question in the negative; however, this must also be put into perspective, as evidence for actual speechlessness is simply not accessible in these online contexts.

²⁴ The article can be found online here: www.zeit.de/2016/20/trauer-david-bowie-lemmy-kilmister-prince-oeffentlichkeit <07.06.2020>

²⁵ Texts in fig. 4 and 5 are also translated in the appendix.

read these expressions of emotionality. Considering that grief used to be a private emotion – especially in the western culture of the 20th century (cf. Jakoby et al. 2013: 254) – and still seems to be strongly associated with privacy²⁶, it comes as no surprise that this is one of the main critical points discussed in the metadiscourse. For one thing, this explains why the metadiscourse only plays a significant role in the context of collective mourning (see chapter 1) on social media, but not when it comes to relation-based forms of online mourning on memorial pages; the latter seem to be perceived as more private communication spaces. Furthermore, it explains the standard of silence that has been elevated to the ideal (cf. Marx 2019: 124, see above chapter 2.2.2), although this contrasts with the expectations of social media: "In den sozialen Medien existiert nicht, wer nicht kommuniziert"²⁷ (Marx 2019: 124). One way out of this dilemma is therefore a meta-communicative discussion of the adequate (verbal) behaviour in these contexts (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, the status of these practices as "Praktiken im Entstehen" (Beißwenger 2016: 281, see above) is a central point of discussion. However, public mourning itself is not a new phenomenon (see footnote 18) and collective mourning for celebrities or unknowns does not originate from the Internet.²⁸ Thus, it seems that it is precisely their digital materialization, their mediatization (i.e., their medial framing) and their location in an online setting that makes them criticisable. Next to their publicness (see also example (4) below) the effortlessness of their production is also a controversial topic: it does not cost much effort to post an acronym (such as RIP), vary an already existing hashtag (such as #jesuisX) or share a picture (of course the situation is different when one creates this picture oneself). It is, among other things, precisely this effortlessness that is sharply criticised, as example (5) demonstrates.

- (4) Heuchler alle sammt! Diese widerwärtige Pseudosolidarität, die hauptsächlich dem Sammeln von Likes dient und immer mehr zu einem Betroffenheitswettbewerb ausartet ist der Gipfel des Zynismus, denn in 4 Tagen ist die ganze Sache wieder allen so etwas von egal und statt der Träne in schwarz, rot, gold prangt da wieder das Selfie von der letzten Safttour [...] (<https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ausland/europa/trauer-im-netz-ich-bin-ein-berliner/story/22721930> <08.06.2020>)²⁹

²⁶ The tendency to shift mourning (norms) to the private sphere was particularly significant in the 20th century. Nevertheless, dealing with mourning in public is by no means something new: In the Middle Ages, for example, the death of one person was a matter for the whole community (cf. Jakoby et al. 2013: 256f.). And in other cultures, too, mourning continues to be dealt with in a much more public manner (cf. Kotthoff 2003).

²⁷ Translation: In social media, users who do not communicate do not exist.

²⁸ See in detail Brennan (2008), who examined condolence books following the 1989 Hillsborough soccer stadium disaster and the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997.

²⁹ The quote originates from a comment that was written as a reaction to the linked article. While the article itself is still online, the comments are not anymore; this is due to the relocation to a new website.

- (5) Da gibt es diejenigen, die ein schnelles "R.I.P." (Ruhe in Frieden) auf ihre Facebook-Timeline, bei Twitter oder unter eine der zahlreichen Veröffentlichungen von Nachrichtenportalen schreiben. Manche schleudern die Kommentare gar ins Netz. Das Mitteilungsbedürfnis scheint manchmal über der Trauer zu stehen. Das ist Gedenken 2.0. (www.shz.de/9314936 <08.06.2020>)

Both these factors – publicness and effortlessness – seem to justify the frequently expressed accusation that participating in online mourning practices is more an act of performance and self-promotion than a reflection of actual emotional involvement. Therefore, it is considered inauthentic.

4. Conclusion

Despite all these negative evaluations, online mourning practices are still becoming more relevant and ubiquitous. Another comment from the already mentioned *Zeit online* article (see above) illustrates this:

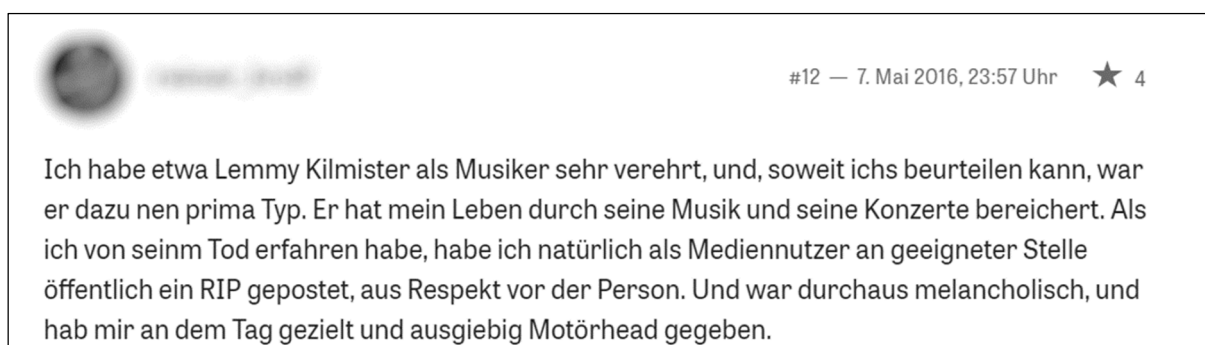


Fig. 5: comment to a newspaper article on digital valediction

The writer of this comment states that when he learned about Lemmy Kilmister's death, as a media user, he had *of course* [highlighting KF] posted a public RIP out of respect for the person. He thereby indicates that there is a certain routine to his actions. Even though online mourning practices are still emergent there seem to be certain tendencies pointing towards their stabilisation (and broader acceptance). One sign of this is certainly the need to talk about these practices on a meta-level; a need that seems to be very present and manifests itself on different levels (and eventually through various intermedia references). This includes the metapragmatic thematization of speechlessness as analysed in this article. This is, in fact, a means that, on the one hand, reflects solidified verbal mourning patterns, but at the same time may also indicate their absence. In order to fully understand the socially coined communicative function(s) of these online mourning practices, we probably need to get away from understanding them as somewhat authentic expressions of underlying emotions.

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APPENDIX

Translation of German examples

- (1) I am speechless, still, I cannot imagine that we will not hear his voice anymore. Since the beginning of our studies, we did many things together. He was a great motivation for his circle of friends when it came to learning, revising, and preparing for hours. Patient, tedious and in his own way loud and funny, but absolutely and positively willing to learn. Versatile and humorous, he approached everyone with an open mind. In good and bad times, he always remained a loyal comrade. He played a motivating role in my study life and after my studies he often provided good contacts for the job market. He hid his pain so that his circle of friends would not notice and suffer. My deepest condolences to relatives, friends, the large circle of acquaintances and fellow students. [name] always remains with us as a proud miner who never wanted to give up and tried to drill to the end. Peace be with him with heavenly love. (Gedenkseiten, 26.12.2012, 16.26)
- (2) We still had so many plans together. YOU still had so many dreams and wishes for the future. They just burst like a bubble, so sudden and unpredictable. How often did you say: "When I grow up..." We will not be able to experience this moment anymore to see you grown up... Sometimes we still want to tell you so much, sometimes we lack words and we are just speechless. But our love for you is always there and will always remain. Forever, because we have you deep in our hearts. [Name], we love you to the stars and much, much further... Te iubim mult pana la stele. With love Mum and [Name] (Gedenkseiten, 18.03.2012, 01:31)
- (3) Dear [name]...I am speechless, stunned and miss you terribly. At the same time, I am incredibly grateful for the time we had together. You are forever in my heart and will remain unforgettable! Thanks for everything! Your [nickname] [Name] (Gedenkseiten, 18.03.2012, 01:31)
- (4) Hypocrites all together! This disgusting pseudo-solidarity, which mainly serves the purpose of collecting Likes and has degenerated more and more into a contest of dismay is the peak of cynicism, because in 4 days nobody will care about the whole thing anymore and the tear in black, red, and gold, will have been replaced by a selfie taken at the latest pub crawl. (<https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ausland/europa/trauer-im-netz-ich-bin-ein-berliner/story/22721930> <08.06.2020>)
- (5) There are those who write a quick "R.I.P." (rest in peace) on their Facebook timeline, on Twitter, or under one of the numerous publications of news portals. Some even hurl the comments into the net. The need to communicate sometimes seems to take precedence over grief. This is commemoration 2.0 (www.shz.de/9314936 <08.06.2020>)

Fig. 4: As you know, it is not easy to express feelings. But it is often even more difficult to endure the expression of other people's feelings. This can sometimes result in a tendency to experience external shame, even though you are just sad yourself without really feeling it.

Fig. 5: I admired Lemmy Kilmister very much as a musician, and as far as I can tell, he was a great guy. He has enriched my life with his music and his concerts. When I heard about his death, as a media user, I naturally posted a RIP in an appropriate place, out of respect for the person. And was quite melancholic and listened to Motörhead on that day purposefully and extensively.