

## **“Marked as seen” – Considerations on role ambiguity in social media**

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*A past participle of the verb “to see” refers to an ambiguous situation in social media. “Your crush marked you as seen!” is a language hybrid encountered on the internet, with two English words poured into a Romanian expression. A pun copied after a Romanian folk saying is, in posthumanism (Braidotti 2016) a representation and symbolising formula (Todorov, apud Răutu 2021). A pun, but without humour, more like a cynical ascertainment (Iftode, Voinea 2016) that imposes a sociological research, in which linguistics, communication sciences, behavioural psychology can bear adequate witness. We’ll analyse the phrase “marked as seen” in social media contexts and the explanations of those involved. We’ll try a linguistic explanation as to its formation and we’ll establish borders and resemblances with similar phrases in Romanian. Then, starting from details and general characteristics of virtual communication, we shall observe the community implications, the emotional participation rate and the depression signs, the marginalisation status. A simple question is asked in the communication field: Is “marked as seen” a limit of the virtual communication system automatization? Also, is “marked as seen” a point of view towards the ethics conceived by Ricoeur (1994)? “Our own interpretation mediated by the ethic evaluation of our actions”. The dramatization through denial and the confession of the nude truth that hides untruths (Sloterdijk 2000) send towards the idealism and the fragility of social media relations. In a territory of efficient communication, “marked as seen” creates behavioural breaks. In an area lacking “free will” (Lernier 2018), there is an inadequacy between technology and the individual. Where there is a supremacy of automatisms (Lernier 2018) individual will or disregard creates ambiguity. “Marked you as seen” can be, despite the “cancel culture” statements, at least a community gesture of post humanity explained with the means of modernity.*

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### **1. Preliminary considerations**

In 2014 WhatsApp automatically, mandatory introduced “Marked as seen”, /”The Seen”/ “blue tick”. The social network already counted billions of users that had

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received this service for free, this electronic sign in order to mark the receiving of the message. Billions of users built their socialising rituals, seeing this sign, counting every minute on it. And taking action: they answered or they didn't answer the message. The "network" socialising rituals were protected by the certainty that the sent message was seen. This certainty created the imaginary of a mandatory answer. "Marked as seen"/ "The seen"/ "blue tick" – seemed like an example of what J.L. Austin explained: to do things with words. You send the message; the message gets an answer. Instagram and messenger introduced the same type of signalling the answer. So, the number of the users that saw the sign, that built the certainty of an answer on that sign has grown exponentially.

What seemed like a sign of controlling the message from the sender to the receiver, became, in time, a sign of control of the System, a sign of the Networks' intrusion in private life (LiveMint, Bloomberg 2020). The reason? In time, the inconvenience of seen was noticed: the sender sent the message, the app marked the message as being read, but, from different reasons, the receiver didn't answer. The Network couldn't create the imperative of an answer. But the sender was intimately linked to the "seen", he didn't expect the receiver not to enter the message exchange.

We can't specify a certain date, but the anonymous "heroes" of the social networks, "The Saviours", the users that gave advice as to the "blue tick" stepped in the dispute. And the social networks found various solutions. The first one is network education. The forums, the blogs, offer advice about the non-combat behaviour. Another solution is manual and optional. The "blue tick" is still there, but it can be deactivated by the user. Messages can be read even if the ~blue tick~ is not part of the conversation.

In 2022, a Google search (3-6 August 2022) for "marked as seen" indicates 3,190,000,000 results, for "a da cu seen" 1,440,000,000 results, but the old feud diminished. The network self-education functions. The first two Google pages state the problem and its solution. Besides that, the key word in billions of researches is the word "seen" used in various situations.

Why is nevertheless necessary to talk about "Marked as seen", "a da cu seen"? Because it is one of the details that shows opposing attitudes in appropriating technology. "Marked as seen"/ "A da cu seen" changes loving technology in hating technology, in other words idealisation into fear (Moise 2013, 24).

This emotional balance is not unique, the users have, from time to time, the revelation of social networks as a hostile environment. At a much larger scale, in the case of Facebook – Cambridge Analytica, in 2010. In the "marked as seen", "a da cu seen" case, the users debated and decided to remain in the network. In the

Facebook – Cambridge Analytica case, the moral debates determined the users to migrate towards other social networks.

## 2. Marked as seen in Romanian, from a linguistic point of view

A past participle of the verb "to see" designates an ambiguous situation in social media. "Your crush marked you as seen!" is a hybrid of the internet language, an English word moulded into a Romanian formula. It is a verbal phrase imitating traditional Romanian formulas, like "a da cu tifla" (to make a snook at smb), "a da apă la moară" (to bring grist to smb's mill), "a da cu oiştea-n gard" (to get the wrong sow by the year), "a da colţul" (to turn the corner), "a te da de ceasul morţii" (to be at one's wit's end), "a da cu firma-n cap" (to mess up), "a da cu chirie" (to let out on lease), "a da cu împrumut" (to lend) etc. (filologisme.ro, 2018).

The phrase is also encountered in Romanian without the preposition, "ţi-a dat seen"/ "ţi-ai luat seen", being close to the slang phrase "a-ţi lua muie/ to get a blowjob", the meaning of the phrase being more clearly expressed: "Hai, bă, lasă-mă ţi-a dat aia seen, ţi-a dat muie cu toporul, eşti prost"/ "Hey, dude, leave me alone, that one marked you as seen, gave you a blowjob with the axe, you're an idiot!", "Seen is a blowjob and leave me alone" (Reddit, 4 June 2017).

In its whole, the idiom is made of a verb, "to give", which is productive in building phrases in Romanian (see above) and an English participle, "seen", that means "(to be) seen". In this respect, filologisme.ro (2018) gives a few examples from the years of the argument: „Odată ce ai oprit conexiunea la internet, poţi să uiţi de seen şi să citeşti mesajele liniştit"/ "Once you have interrupted the internet connection, you can forget about seen and you can read the messages peacefully." (www.noizz.ro), „Citeşte mesajele de pe Messenger şi WhatsApp fără seen"/ "Read the message on WhatsApp and Messenger without the seen" (www.androidro.ro), „de ce nu mai apare seen la mesaje"/ "Why is there no seen in the messages?" (https://ro-ro.facebook.com/help/community/question/) etc.

The participle taken over from English is turned into a noun by some of the speakers, in certain situations, adding it a definite or an indefinite article, as in the following examples: "Dacă ai luat şi tu un 'seen' la un mesaj şi nu ţi-a răspuns, dă un #Share!"/ "If you were marked as "seen" at one of your messages and he didn't answer you, give it a #Share!" (http://www.youtube.com), „Multe ar da orice să fie cu mine şi tu nici un Seen nu dai?"/ "A lot (of girls) would give anything to be with me, and you don't even give me a seen?" (www.modapebune.ro), „Mulţi agaţă pe facebook şi sunt foarte frustraţi când primesc un seen"/ "Lots of people pick up others on Facebook and they are very frustrated when they are marked as seen." (www.tpu.ro), „Şi, din experienţa mea vastă cu partea asta, pot să îţi spun că există

și ceva mai rău decât să dobândești un seen. Să nu primești”/ “And from my vast experience with this I can tell you that there’s something worse than getting a seen. Not getting one.” ([www.beatricecretu.wordpress.com](http://www.beatricecretu.wordpress.com))

When it is enclitically articulated, the participle is separated by a hyphen from the article, following the pattern of other lexical units taken over from English, even if, in this case, the hyphen is not necessary. “SEEN-ul este un fel de armă secretă care, de fapt, nu reprezintă un așa mare secret”/ “The SEEN is some sort of secret weapon that isn’t, in fact, so secret.” ([www.beatricecretu.wordpress.com](http://www.beatricecretu.wordpress.com)), „Ce e nebunia cu seen-ul?”/ “What’s with all this seen madness?” ([www.nic4ole.wordpress.com](http://www.nic4ole.wordpress.com)).

### **3. The play on words “a da seen/ to mark as seen”**

“To mark as seen” is a verbal phrase, its history doesn’t exist without its action in the chat app. If “a da cu tifla” (to make a snook at smb), “a da colțul” (to turn the corner), “a da cu firma-n cap (to mess up) are phrases built starting from something concrete, but further became abstract, “to mark as seen” is difficult to imagine outside the chat app, and also not to take into account the receiver’s ignoring gesture. Thus, “to mark as seen” is instrumental. The other formula, “you’ve been marked as seen”, “he marked you as seen”, is a pun upon words.

Delabastita (1993, apud Răuțu 2021, 29) notices that the pun upon words gives priority to interpretation and less to linguistic reason. In Răuțu (2021)’s terms, we show that “to mark as seen” has an intentional character and a self-conscious one, that the intention of the phrase can be benevolent (it amuses), but also malevolent (it ridicules). Quoting Attardo (1994, 47), we can place this pun upon words in the category of humour hostility – the phrase “your crush marked you as seen” being a warning, but also a cynical observation that hits a target. We have a situation in which the humour comes from a feeling of superiority of the observer as to the sender of the message.

### **4. “Your crush marked you as seen” - About meaning**

Those who look at the story of “seen” recorded by Google understand that it was a technical detail, that created a momentary misunderstanding. If you search on Google the expression “Mark as seen” the basic answers are:

"Dubbed "Mark as Read", the feature allows you to mark a message as read right from the notification center. In simple words, you do not have to open the message to let your friends know that you have read their messages."

2 August 2018

"However, Facebook has brought this feature, not for the purpose of hiding the seen messages, the Mark as Unread option is just an inbox sorting tool and won't retract the read receipt."

20 May 2020

But is there a meaning of this happening in the internet fights? We can decipher a narrative, behavioural pattern that can metonymically speak about the global situation of the moment.

Greimas (1975, 245-260), quoting Propp, explains to us the community's need for searching meaning through narrative structures. And we mention here again the narrative structure named by Greimas "The searching for fear". We can interpret the encounter with "seen" as a loss and a recapture of social order, we can identify at least three types of participants of the "seen" ritual and, why not, we can identify a certain type of hero that recovers the lost order.

Some marked others as seen. Seen cast spells on others. Disenchantment, disobedience, credited the deviation from the rules. Two territories already appear. One of staying within the rules and another one of alienation. From the idealisation of the app (how good to have such a service, altogether new and safe as to previous ones in the mail department) it changed into the fear as to the situation in itself (Who's to blame? The app or The Other that doesn't automatically answer?)

Under such uncertain situations the chaosmos doesn't nevertheless languish for a long time. The heroes, in Greimas' story, are the ones that explain the situation (there is an online game "Ana that answers"), that dominate the anxiety created and recover the social order in the community, but with human actions and means.

But, as Greimas also shows, a lot of users remain dispossessed, remain in between worlds on the way, the ones that don't know the novelties as to the personal control of the seen, that don't understand that to answer is a human option. These remain in the bullying area.

Heroes, Greimas comments, have the dismissal of fear as a target and they tend to be caught in paradoxical situations.

What does victory mean in the chaosmos of the internet? It means getting out of the automatized equation imposed by the app and entering one of personal

judgement. How to tell the ones around that there is free will, judgement, when the internet users' judgement is reduced? It is the lack of judgement that created the whole situation. The hero, a victim of the system, advises as to the manual use of the app's options and he thus ended his mission. Does the hero eventually know about the other world?

The one of free will and judgement? Isn't the hero only trying to create a momentary solution? And aren't the users continuing to head towards the option of ignoring him, of entering a new fight, in an amnesic way?

## 5. Conclusion

The "marked you as seen" game, the conversation developed through technology, wanted to create "automatically" predictability and safety. In fact, it creates security and anxiety. But security and anxiety are forms of searching for meaning and formulas for creating experiences. We can thus "read" a story about the big nothing, like in Seinfeld or Reitzer. We can also read the "brain in a vat" theory. Hillary Putnam explains how technology can create the reality and illusion of safety. Reality is a simulated environment.

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