LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers how communication in computer-mediated digital environments has been and could be approached from a language socialization perspective. The study of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and cyber-culture encompasses a range of disciplines, including communication, linguistics, cultural studies, and sociology, to name a few, with research findings emerging and scholarly debates becoming prominent only in the last 10 years given the relatively recent popularization of the Internet in the mid- to late-1990s. Even with its short history, the exploration of linguistic and social behaviors in online settings has dealt with issues that are germane to language socialization research. In this chapter, I review and assess how the study of online communication draws upon and extends our understanding of language socialization in new technological and global contexts of communication. The thematic areas that comprise the focus of this discussion are (1) the role of language practices in the formation of culture and community online, (2) socialization in transnational and diaspora networks as facilitated by the Internet; and (3) language ideology and language change in online contexts. Both the educational implications and promising research directions for each of these research areas are addressed.

THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES: EARLY DEVELOPMENTS (1990s)

The notion “virtual community” came into prominence in the early to mid-1990s with the popularization of the term by Rheingold (1993) in his book, The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier. This period saw the growing adoption of the metaphor of “community building” in both Web media promotion and scholarly research of CMC (Jones, 1995, 1997; Porter, 1997). Researchers of communication, media, and linguistics started to explore the linguistic construction of community in, for example, Usenet newsgroups (e.g., Baym, 1995; Tepper, 1997), Internet Relay Chat (e.g., Bays, 1998;
Liu, 1999), MUDs and MOOs (see definitions below) that allow multiple users to communicate with each other in real time and interact with objects in a virtual setting (e.g., Cherny, 1999; Soukup, 2004), and, more recently, weblogs or blogs that are online journals or discussion forums maintained by single or multiple authors (Wei, 2004).

These studies show the use of linguistic and interactional patterns, genres, and discourses as a means for creating group culture in online communication. For example, in her research of a Usenet newsgroup (rec.arts.tv.soaps) devoted to the recreational discussion of daytime soap operas, Bayn (1995) reveals the various forms of conventional expressions shared by members of the group, including the codification of acronyms for the soap operas and nicknames for the soap opera characters, the expectation that newsgroup members would disclose personal details of their lives akin to the narrative devices of the soap operas, and the development of unique forms of jokes that draw attention to the hilarity and absurdity of the soap opera world. Bayn (1998) analyzes how community is used as a frame for interaction in an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) group. IRC is a form of real-time instant messaging or synchronous conferencing. It is mainly designed for group (many-to-many) communication in discussion forums called channels, but also allows one-to-one communication and data transfers via private message. Members of the IRC group portray in words the metaphorical physical and social setting of their conversation to construct a collective sense of community that is associated with familiarity, sharing, and working together for the common good.

Adopting an ethnography of communication perspective, Cherny (1999) studied what participants of an object-oriented Multi-User Dungeons or Dimensions (MUD) called ElseMOO need to know to communicate appropriately in the ElseMOO speech community. MUDs and MOOs (MUDs of the Object Oriented variety) are programs that allow multiple people to connect simultaneously over a network, and interact with each other and with objects in a virtual setting in real time. Cherny argues that the term “speech community” aptly describes ElseMOO based on the regular recurrence of interactional rituals and routines (such as greeting, leave-taking, expression of affect, jokes, and forms of language play), the creation of new syntactic and morphological forms (mostly through abbreviation and acronyms), and identifiable patterns of turn-taking and back-channeling in dialogic exchanges that mark the behaviors of ElseMOO participants.

With regard to the more recent phenomenon of blogging, Wei (2004) argues that group conventions of informational and stylistic content are visible among blogs that belong to the same web ring, an Internet service and concept which links together a group of web sites that share a similar theme.

The sociolinguistic study of online communities, as exemplified in the aforementioned works, has been successful in showing that language practices are instrumental in creating the norms of behavior of particular online groups and how these norms function to provide sociability, support, information, and a sense of collective identity. Indeed, with the reduced physical cues of age, gender, ethnicity, or class, linguistic behaviors become one of the primary means to enact and inscribe social categories and normative behaviors in the “bodyless pragmatics” (Hall, 1996) of CMC. However, this body of research tends to focus on existing forms of behavior and interactional patterns and, hence, does not provide a perspective on the diachronic process of community formation and change. In other words, some questions that are central to language socialization research have not been adequately explored in the study of CMC and virtual communities, namely: (1) How do individuals come to adopt and develop competence in the language practices of particular online communities? (2) How do the social and linguistic practices of an online community develop and change over time? To answer these questions, it is necessary to develop research that is longitudinal in nature in order to document individual development within a community of practice and the formation and changes in group practice over time. It is also necessary to recruit research participants whose identity can be ascertained in order to obtain consent for the research and to ensure that their online participation is traced consistently across an extended period of time.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Creating Online Communities and Interactional Norms Across Diverse Cultures

A recent study by Cassell and Tversky (2005) provides some insights into the process of community formation through their investigation of an international virtual forum hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, called the “Junior Summit ‘98,” that brought 3,062 youth from 139 countries online to discuss global issues. The participants, representing a wide variety of economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, posted messages to the forum over a 3-month discussion period that culminated in an online election of 100 delegates who would meet in person with one another and with world leaders in a face-to-face summit. Using computational word frequency analysis of over 19,000 posted messages written in English, content analysis of 4,377 of those messages, and post-hoc interviews with a sample of 37 forum participants, the researchers were able to show the ways in which the diverse participants modified their language use over the
solidarity, and educational opportunities (as described in Cassell and Tversky’s (2005) “Junior Summit ‘98 example above), recent research on diaspora and transnational online networks shows that individuals and groups at the grassroots level are already capitalizing on the global reach of Internet communications to build social, cultural, and political alliances across national borders among people from the same ethnic backgrounds (Kitalong and Kitalong, 2000; Lam, 2004; Landzelius, in press; Miller and Slater, 2000; Mitra, 2001; Valverde, 2002).

For example, Kitalong and Kitalong (2000) chronicle how people from Palau, an island nation in the Western Pacific that gained independence from the USA in 1994, construct Internet Web sites and e-mail lists to build connections among local residents and expatriate Paluans. Some of the Web sites are created for the express purpose of representing and teaching Paluan culture in contradistinction to the ways it was represented in colonial times by using a variety of media such as Paluan proverbial sayings, music, and paintings. Kitalong and Kitalong (2000) argue that a “postcolonial Paluan identity” is constructed through the Internet to signify both the autonomy of the Paluan nation and its interconnection with ethnic Paluans living overseas and in its surrounding island countries.

In Miller and Slater’s (2000) in-depth ethnographic study of Trinidadians’ use of Internet communications, they found a “natural affinity” between the everyday, mundane networking possibilities of the Internet and Trinidadians’ intensely diasporic relations, because “being a Trinidadian family has long meant integrating over distances through any means of communication.” (p. 2) The researchers provide ample evidence that Trinidadians in diaspora have appropriated the Internet to facilitate sustained contact and mutual support with their extended families, educate people of other nationalities about Trinidad through personal webpages to counter the global positioning of Trinidad as marginal or unknown, and recreate through the chat medium a unique form of Trinidadian social interaction called “liming” or “ole talk,” full of banter and innuendoes. Miller and Slater (2000) argue that the Internet has provided Trinidadians a global platform to reconcile their national pride as a postcolonial society and their cosmopolitan outlook and diaspora condition.

Kieu Linh Valverde’s (2002) study of the transnational linkages between Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese nationals shows that Internet Web pages and listservs have emerged as important sites for the Vietnamese-American community to engage in the exchange of personal and political opinions with Vietnamese nationals. In some virtual sites, such as the Viet Nam Forum, Vietnamese-Americans are able to mobilize across the Pacific Ocean to voice concerns and press for changes regarding labor abuses in foreign-owned companies in

Diaspora and Transnational Relations Within Ethnic Groups

Whereas more research is needed to examine both the potential and limitations of using Web-based media to promote global understanding,
Vietnam and the civil and political rights of Vietnamese-Americans living in Vietnam. Kieu Linh Valverde argues that these trans-border connections fostered through Internet communication have allowed Vietnamese-Americans to develop a transnational identity that extends beyond their ethnic identity as an immigrant group in the USA.

More explicitly framed in terms of language socialization, my research with Chinese adolescent immigrants in the USA shows that English is used by these youth in networked communications to foster alliances with young people around the world through their common interests in Japanese popular culture and through creating diaspora Chinese relations represented in the mixing of English vernacular and romanized Cantonese into a hybrid linguistic code (Lam, 2004; Lam and Kramsch, 2003). Within these Web-based youth alliances, the focal students constructed multicultural and multilingual identities as English speakers that diverged from the monolingual imperative of their schooling experiences as minority immigrants learning English in the USA.

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

From an educational perspective, the forging of diaspora and transnational relationships through Internet-mediated communication compels us to re-think the notion of acculturation in language socialization and development beyond a nation-centered perspective. Acculturation has been a major concept used to understand the adjustments and changes that take place within individuals as they move from one society to another (Fuligni, 2001) and appropriate new languages and forms of language use in the new context. Even though the concept of acculturation is meant to depict processes of change, its frame of reference is primarily anchored in the host society; in other words, migrants are studied as to how well they adapt to the structural conditions and cultural practices of their adopted country, and to what degree they are able to reconcile their “home culture” (and its languages/practices) with the “host culture.” Yet, digital communications are extending the scope for diasporic populations to sustain and recreate social relations of various sorts, and to foster multiple forms of group belonging and cultural participation across national borders. What challenges do these forms of digitally enabled transnational relations pose to the meta-narratives of assimilation or even cultural pluralism that still take the nation as the delimiting territory? How might the sustaining of social and cultural ties through online communication affect language maintenance and development among people in diaspora? The ways in which transnational virtual communities are contributing to new forms of identities and linguistic development is a promising area of research as we seek to understand language socialization among diverse populations in the digital age.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Linguistic Hegemony, Hybridity, and Change

With the expansion of the Internet in different regions of the world affecting as many as a billion users and its integration in the global economy, issues of language ideology and language choice have rightfully begun to gain more attention in research on online communication. While studies of CMC that are published in English language journals have so far tended to focus on the practices of native speakers of English, some recent journal issues have called attention to the multilingual nature of the Internet in diverse societal contexts (e.g., the November 2003 issue, “The Multilingual Internet,” of the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, and the February 2004 issue, “Multilingualism on the Internet,” of the International Journal on Multicultural Societies). Notwithstanding this belated acknowledgement of the linguistic heterogeneity of Internet use, English is still a powerful and prominent language of choice online. The dominance of English could be attributed to its postcolonial and late capitalist status as a world lingua franca and the fact that Internet communication was originally designed on the basis of the ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) character set that relies on the use of the roman alphabet and the sounds of the English language (Crystal, 2003; Sue Wright, 2004).

The pervasiveness of English is seen in all of the diaspora social networks described in the previous section where English is used as a key medium of communication in conjunction with the native, national, or heritage languages shared in common by the particular population. English also seems to be emerging as the language of choice for online communication in officially multilingual states such as Switzerland (Durham, 2003), and at the regional level in public online forums sponsored by the European Union (Scott Wright, 2004). In the latter contexts where language input is not constrained by technological factors, language choice is more a matter of ideology—beliefs and practices—surrounding the use of a language. These trends illustrate how the adoption of the Internet as technology for wider communication tends to privilege English as a language that has already gained broad circulation around the world and is perceived as a more neutral language to use in multilingual contexts (Durham, 2003).

Yet, the interlingual contact of English and ASCII with other languages and writing systems on the Internet has also given rise to new hybrid languages and orthographic codes. For example, in a study of instant messaging among Gulf Arabic speakers in Dubai, Palfreyman and Al-Khalil (2003) found that the local university students had
developed a unique way of writing colloquial Arabic online that shows influences from computer character sets, standard Arabic script, English orthography, and other latinized forms of Arabic used in contexts before the introduction of the Internet. In other words, the college students invented a new code for a language, namely spoken Arabic, that has no formalized script. Palfreyman and Al-Khalil’s (2003) analysis demonstrates that this ASCII-ized form of spoken Arabic is used to create an in-group culture that signifies the cosmopolitan youthful creativity of the university students. (See a similar argument in Warchsauer, El Said, and Zohry, 2002, regarding online use of Egyptian Arabic.)

My research with a bilingual Chinese/English chatroom where young people of Chinese descent from around the world gathered shows the use of a variety of writing systems, including (1) Chinese writing in the Cantonese dialect, (2) written vernacular English, and (3) a hybrid code of vernacular English and romanized Cantonese (phonetic renditions of Cantonese with the roman alphabet). The hybrid blending of English and romanized Cantonese was adopted by young Chinese migrants to signify their dual linguistic identity and differentiate themselves from monolingual speakers of either language (Lam, 2004). In a reverse fashion, Su (2003) found that college-age students in Taiwan engaged in creative uses of the Chinese writing system in college-affiliated Electronic Bulletin Board Services, which includes the rendering in Chinese characters of the sounds of English, or Stylized English. Stylized English was used to down the elevated status of English in the local Taiwanese context and to produce humor that is derived from the playful dissonance between the phonological and orthographic meanings of the written words. Other forms of stylization involve the rendering of Taiwanese, which has no standardized script, and Taiwanese-accented Mandarin in Chinese characters.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The blending of multiple voices and codes in the hybrid linguistic practices described above seems to indicate that a new linguistic consciousness is developing among the younger generations who are versatile with digital and online communication. This is a new youth culture that thrives on metalinguistic awareness and creative experimentation with multiple orthographic systems and representational resources in electronic communication. Included in this culture are youth who are expressing their hybrid linguistic and cultural identities in wholly new codes. Given the co-existing realities of linguistic hegemony and hybridity in online communication, are young people being socialized into English or new kinds of Englishes and multilingual identities on the Internet? This question calls for more research that considers processes of interlingual contact in online socialization. Specifically, the blurring of linguistic boundaries as exemplified in the remixing of languages and orthographic codes in online contexts may offer new opportunities for resisting the hegemony of English and envisioning the acquisition of dominant languages as a process of interlingual deconstruction and re-invention.

With each new confluence of communication technologies comes new conditions for the creation of social relations and collective identities. Just as “print capitalism” (Anderson, 1991)—the mass production, distribution, and reading of newspapers, pamphlets, books, maps, and other printed texts—was instrumental in creating an imagined community of citizenry for the modern nation-state, the development of electronic capitalism and trans-border circulation of cultural and symbolic materials is creating new imagined communities on a global scale (Appadurai, 1996). Networked electronic communication is redefining not only the scope of time and space in practices of socialization and group formation, but also the various ways in which linguistic and cultural boundaries are elided and re-inscribed. From collectivities based on common interests to those that extend and transcend the interests of the nation-state, online communication holds opportunities to examine language socialization at multiple scopes and scales.

REFERENCES


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