Sociolinguistics of Social Media

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Abstract: The present era of digital societies where interactions take no boundaries, there is a huge transformation from behavioural language to virtual language as the television transformed from one way communication to two-way communication through its descendant, the digital computers. This digital culture has become the part and parcel of the society where by it has become the way of life affecting the language, rather the linguistics of communication. This new media of communication can be understood only by analysing the sociolinguistics of the digital media. The present work deals with the linguistic variables and parameters of the new media, thereby putting forth the constraints and concerns of the societal acceptance of the new media and its linguistic succession. There is also a description of multicultural and multilingual agenda for new media socio-linguistics. On the whole the work brings out the digital revolution of sociolinguistics.

1. Introduction:

The age of pixels has surely altered the society that has in turn changed the tone of communication, the language. Before understanding this tagline of sociolinguistics, let us first be acquainted with the terms ‘sociolinguistics’ and ‘new media’. Sociolinguistics is the study of how language serves and is shaped by the social nature of human beings. In its broadest conception, sociolinguistics analyzes the many and diverse ways in which language and society entwine. This vast field of inquiry requires and combines insights from a number of disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, psychology and anthropology.

Sociolinguistics examines the interplay of language and society, with language as the starting point. Variation is the key concept, applied to language itself and to its use. The basic
premise of sociolinguistics is that language is variable and changing. As a result, language is not homogeneous — not for the individual user and not within or among groups of speakers who use the same language.

By studying written records, sociolinguists also examine how language and society have interacted in the past. For example, they have tabulated the frequency of the singular pronoun *thou* and its replacement *you* in dated hand-written or printed documents and correlated changes in frequency with changes in class structure in 16th and 17th century England. This is historical sociolinguistics: the study of relationship between changes in society and changes in language over a period of time.

As the norms of the society keep on changing with the count of time, so does the definition of sociolinguistics which is contemporarily being defined on the lines of new media. Before getting into the sociolinguistic perspective of the new media, let us see what it actually is.

The term new media is used ubiquitously in many different ways. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) focus on the message (i.e., the communication and its practices), the technology (i.e., the medium), and the social context in which it is used. These three aspects of the new media show up repeatedly in the literature along with other more specific technologies and practices such as collaboration, digitization, telecommunication. Gitelman and Pingree (2003) take the temporal approach, using the term "media in transition" to describe a period of time during which a medium is emergent and thus a sort of contrast to and competitor for the old media. Manovich (2002) has defined new media as cultural objects "which use digital computer technology for distribution and exhibition."

Clearly, new media may be characterized using a variety of different approaches. In large part, the confusion – such as it is – among various definitions of the new media is due to an inherent confusion of the object of study – the message, the medium, the technology, the time period, the social context. In fact, today, the term media itself may sometimes refer to the technology – i.e., the medium of communication – but increasingly to the message itself. This appears to be the inverse of what Marshal McLuhan (1964) famously argued – that the medium (i.e., the technology) is more important to society than the content of the message – but perhaps those just shows how far we've come.

The coordinates of new media and sociolinguistics has somewhere tied up in the direction of the digital society that has painted the world in pixels. Since 1996, there have been only three edited volumes in English dedicated, at least in part, to providing an orchestrated perspective
on new media language. Following Susan Herring’s groundbreaking Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives in 1996, came Brenda Danet and Susan Herring’s The Multilingual Internet: Language, Culture, and Communication Online (2007) and then, in 2009, Charley Rowe and Eva Wyss’s Language and New Media: Linguistic, Cultural, and Technological Evolutions. Of course, Naomi Baron’s highly regarded and much-cited book From Alphabet to 2 Email (2000) was another key moment for new media sociolinguistics; her Always on: Language in an Online and Mobile World (2008) is already proving to be similarly influential. Although less grounded in first-hand empirical research, David Crystal’s Language and the Internet (2001) and Texting: The Gr8 Db8 (2008) have been hugely popular and undoubtedly raised public awareness about the role of language in new media.

2. The variables deciding Sociolinguistics of New Media:

The changing definitions of sociolinguistics and new media are linearly related to certain variables that determine the statistics of the digital society. Susan Herring (e.g., 1996, 2001a, 2004) characterizes her own work as computer-mediated discourse analysis, which she organizes around a series of analytic priorities that continue to direct a lot of research in the field; these are

1. technological variables such as synchronicity, size of message buffer, anonymous messaging, persistence of transcript, channels of communication (e.g., text, audio, video), automatic filtering;
2. situational variables such as participation structure (e.g., public/private, number of participants), demographics, setting, purpose, topic, tone, norms of participation, linguistic code; and
3. linguistic variables (or discourse features) such as structure (e.g., typography, spelling, word choice, sentence structure), meaning (i.e., of symbols, words, utterances, exchanges), interaction (e.g., turn taking, topic development, backchannels, repairs), and social function (e.g., identity markers, humor and play, face management, conflict).

This basic framework—a shopping list of new media discourse variables—informs and grounds a great deal of sociolinguistic research in the field, and reference is made to them throughout Digital Discourse. Others have, however, wanted to push the field a little further and suggested a more refined and perhaps also up-to-date research agenda for sociolinguists.
interested in new media—or what is often referred to as computer-mediated communication (cf. Thurlow et al., 2004). In the introduction to his special issue of the Journal of Sociolinguistics, for example, Jannis Androutsopoulos (2006b) offers some specific suggestions; for example:

1. the need to challenge exaggerated assumptions about the distinctiveness of new media language;
2. the need to move beyond early (i.e., 1990s) computer-mediated communication’s simplistic characterization of—and concern for—asynchronous and synchronous technologies
3. the need to shift away from an undue emphasis on the linguistic (or orthographic) features of new media language and, related to this, the hybrid nature of new media genres;
4. the need also to shift from “medium-related” to more ethnographically grounded “user-related” approaches.

In more recent work (e.g., 2010), Androutsopoulos has continued to promote the value of research shaped by this type of discourse-ethnographic rather than variationist approach, something he also addresses in his contribution to the current volume (Chapter 13). In this regard, Androutsopoulos’ driving concern is that scholars move beyond a one-track interest in the formal features of new media language (e.g., spelling and orthography) and a preoccupation with delineating individual discourse genres; instead, greater attention should be paid to the situated practices of new media users (i.e., communicators) and the intertextual and heteroglossia inherent in new media convergence (i.e., people’s use of multiple media and often in the same new media format, as in social networking profiles). Along much the same vein, and in both an earlier article for the journal Pragmatics and in a commentary for the Androutsopoulos special issue, Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2003, 2006) summarizes and create problems to recurrent linguistic topics in the broader field of computer mediated communication. She also offers her own recommendations for future research, which parallel many of Androutsopoulos’s concerns and include: 5

1. the need to accept as read the way new media blend spoken and written language (this is no longer news);
2. the importance of attending less to the “informational” functions of computer mediated communication and more to the playful identity performances for which it is used;
3. ensuring that the study of language is grounded in a concern for the broader socio-cultural practices and inequalities of communities (or social networks);
4. always considering the connections between online and offline practices, and between different technologies;
5. a general move toward emphasizing the contextual and particularistic nature of new media language;
6. relying on the combination of both quantitative and qualitative (particularly ethnographic) research methods.

3. Agenda for New Media Sociolinguistics:

Caught in the net of internet, the global village has turned into a digital village, where the language of communication is more often affected by the intercourse of digital dialogues which doesn’t have a history to stand by. One persistent problem in new media scholarship (sociolinguistic or otherwise) has been the apparent dominance of English—as both the medium of publication and, more importantly, as the subject of analysis. This has certainly been a central criticism in the reviews by European colleagues like Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou. In their groundbreaking collection The Multilingual Internet, Brenda Danet and Susan Herring (2007) made a concerted effort to rectify the situation, drawing together a wide range of work about the use of languages other than English on the Internet, work that was written largely by scholars whose first/preferred language was not English. In the introduction to their book, Danet and Herring set out the following list of topics for organizing its chapters; this is a list that likewise helps set a more multilingual/multicultural agenda for new media sociolinguistics:

1. language and culture (e.g., speech communities, context, and performance);
2. writing systems (e.g., the restrictions of ASCII encoding, ad hoc improvisations by users);
3. linguistic and discourse features (e.g., orthography and typography);
4. gender and language (e.g., politeness, turn taking, social change);
5. language choice and code switching (e.g., language use in diasporic online communities);
6. linguistic diversity (e.g., small and endangered languages, the status of English).

In addition to elevating these topics for consideration by researchers, Danet and Herring’s book also gave space to a world of non-English-language scholarship. The fact remains that, for all sorts of problematic institutional and geopolitical reasons, valuable research by scholars such as Michael Beißwenger, Chiaki Kishimoto, or Silvia Betti, to name only three, is still too easily overlooked. This is something that we were certainly very mindful of when putting together Digital Discourse, and we are pleased to be able to offer a collection that engages with multiple languages (specifically, Irish, Hebrew, Chinese, Finnish, Japanese, German, Greek, Arabic, and French), as well as a number of other important nonstandard and/or nonofficial ways of speaking. Our primary concern is not with the abstract, “grammatical” language of linguistics, but rather the everyday life of language in use—or just discourse.

Whatever theoretical variations and methodological styles they encompass (see Jaworski & Coupland, 2006), sociolinguistics and linguistically oriented discourse analysis are grounded in a shared commitment to the following: the social function of language, the interactional accomplishment of meaning, the significance of communicator intent, and the relevance of social/cultural context (cf. Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). This has two specific implications for new media sociolinguistics. First, we should accept the inherently mediated nature of all communication (cf. Norris & Jones, 2005; Scollon, 2001) and not just in the case of so-called computer-mediated communication; communication is always contextualized (i.e., mediated, embodied, emplaced) by, for example, relationships, setting, layout, gesture, accent, and typography. Sometimes, the medium (i.e., “technology”) is the least of the mediators. Along these lines, we might also usefully draw a distinction between mediation and mediatisation (cf. Couldry, 2008) for instances where language is mass-produced or broadcast in, say, newspapers, magazines, or websites.

The second implication of a strictly social-cultural approach to language is a need to think about its technologisation (cf. Fairclough, 1999), before, that is, we even get to thinking about literal technologies for communication (Thurlow & Bell, 2009). In other words, we should engage with the particular historical-political context of contemporary language use: its commoditisation and its re-contextualized use as a lifestyle resource or marketing strategy to be sold back to us, or as a workplace tool used to “manage” us (cf. Cameron, 2000; Heller, 2003).
This is the real stuff of symbolic power (cf. Bourdieu, 1991) and an important part of the way new media language is nowadays also being organized, talked about, and (re-)valued (Thurlow, 2011a). In many ways, new media language simply adds another dimension (or domain) to these larger cultural shifts.

4. Technology: from Digital to Linguistic

Technology is not a straightforward matter. People readily think of computers, telephones, fax machines, and perhaps also of washing machines, hearing aids, and rockets. But what of paper clips, pencils and paper, or writing? It is not only the machinery of clocks that is designed to enhance our basic human capacities, but also the mechanism of time itself (Thurlow et al., 2004).

New media sociolinguistics needs an altogether more critical, carefully theorized take on technology before even contemplating its role in human communication. Against the backdrop of technological determinism and extreme social constructionism, we should accept a certain materiality to communication technologies; undeniably, they afford certain communicative possibilities and not others (cf. Hutchby, 2001). Technologies—even “new” communication technologies—are, however, often not as spectacular or revolutionary as many would have us believe (cf. Thurlow, 2006). Indeed, they are usually embedded in complex ways into the banal practices of everyday life (cf. Herring, 2004). Technologies are thus best understood as prosthetic extensions of people’s abilities and lives, rather like the hearing aid and the paperclip (Keating, 2005; cf. McLuhan, 2005 [1964]).

It is for this reason—the embedded, prosthetic nature of technologies—that we have privileged the notion of media over that of technology (cf. Buckingham, 2007; Kress, 2003; also Livingstone, 2002). For us, speaking of “new media” is a way to debunk—and reflexively acknowledge—the tendency for popular and scholarly writing to fetishize technology at the expense of its social meanings and cultural practices (cf. Herring, 2008; Thurlow, 2006). Mark Nelson (2006, p. 72) puts it rather nicely: “Power tools do not necessarily a carpenter make.”

Just as we are interested in language for its social uses, so, too, are we interested in technology for its cultural meanings? As sociolinguists and discourse analysts, we are also mainly concerned with what technology tells us about language. To complicate the relationship between language and technology a little further, we might even consider
drawing a distinction between mechanical or digital technologies and between semiotic or linguistic technologies (cf. Leupin, 2000; Nusselder, 2009). Although not everyone would agree (see Pinker, 1994), language is, at heart, a cultural construction (cf. Pennycook, 2004). In other words, it is a technology just likes, well, “technology.” Working with the idea of language as a technology forces an ongoing consideration of the constant interplay of the message and the medium (cf. McLuhan, 2005 [1964]; see also Hutchby, 2001) and of any overly neat or artificial separation between language and technology.

5. The Disciplining of Technology and Language

Linguistically oriented discourse studies, especially those falling under the rubric of critical discourse analysis, often also orient to the notion of Foucauldian discourses—what we dub discourse as opposed to L-discourse (“language in use”; cf. Gee, 2010, on d-discourse and D discourse). In practice, what this means is that scholars are interested both in the ways micro-level interactional and textual practices constitute our social worlds and in the ways that our everyday communicative/representational practices are structured by the social order, by larger systems of belief, and by hierarchies of knowledge. Insofar as Foucault (e.g., 1980, 1981) thought about the normative, naturalizing, and “neutralizing” qualities of discourses, they are not far removed in their effect from Marxist ideologies or Barthesian mythologies. To start, digital technologies are themselves inherently ideological, both in terms of their political economies of access and control (see below), and also in terms of their potential as mechanisms or resources for both normative and resistive representation (cf. Kress, 2003; Thurlow, 2011b). This is quite apparent when one thinks of the symbolic power of the news and broadcast media (see Durham & Kellner, 2001); no less is true, however, of any number of seemingly mundane mechanical, medical, or digital technologies (cf. Headrick, 1981; Feenburg & Hannay, 1995). Technology or not, language, too, is fully ideological.

Online or offline, spoken or typed, face-to-face or digitally “mediated,” what people do with language has material consequence (cf. Foucault, 1981), and language is instrumental in establishing categories of difference, relations of inequality, or at the very least, the social norms by which we all feel obliged to live our lives (see Thurlow, 2011c). Whether it is done by academics, journalists, teachers, or “non-experts”, talk about language (or meta-language—cf. Jaworski et al., 2004) always exposes the vagaries of the symbolic marketplace.
(cf. Bourdieu, 1991): competing standards of “correct,” “good,” or “normal” language; debates about literacy and occupational training; the social categorization and disciplining of speakers; and the performative construction of language itself (cf. Cameron, 1995; Pennycook, 2004). And some people’s ways of speaking inevitably come out better than others; some are voices of authority and reason, some speak “street talk,” “pidgin,” or a “sub-cultural anti-language.” Needless to say, as work on language ideology (Blommaert, 1999; Schieffelin et al., 1998; Woolard, 1998) reminds us, talk about language is usually, at root, a matter of disciplining the bodies of speakers rather than the niceties of their speech.

6. The “New” in New Media:

To these four organizing principles, we also want to add one obvious but no less important caveat about the supposed newness of “new media sociolinguistics.” There is a contradiction inherent in any book such as the one we have put together here. On the one hand, its existence is predicated on and justified by a claim to novelty—to reporting something new (as in “new media” and “fresh sociolinguistic perspectives”). On the other hand, by the time the book has been published, disseminated, and more widely read, the digital technologies/media will have moved on, will have already started to mature, and will have embedded themselves deeper and/or differently into people’s lives. Inevitably, the sociolinguistic and socio-cultural practices of which these technologies are a part will also have changed.

None of this precludes scholars from wanting to keep up to date as best they can. There is much to be gained from simply tracking and recording developments and changes. Nonetheless, it is important to think twice before making overextended claims and wild predictions about the stability or endurability of the techno-linguistic changes of the moment. It is also important to keep in check our academic enthusiasm for the newness of “new media” and any undue presents (cf. Sterne, 2005) by which technological change is regarded as somehow removed from its historical or “developmental” context. For the most part, technologies unfold gradually out of previous technologies and emerge into broader, complex systems of technological practice. Besides, moderating our own uptake of in-the-moment buzz phrases like “Web 2.0” can help us stay one step ahead/above of the excitable rhetoric of corporate discourse that is deeply and unavoidably invested in obsolescence and the marketing of newness (or the rebranding of oldness). It behoves us to remember, for example,
that Facebook profiles bear a strong formal and functional resemblance to personal home pages, and that interactivity, user comments, and online collaboration existed before the so-called Web 2.0. In the early 1990s, we also heard many of the same hopeful/idealistic claims for the liberate/participatory (“global-conversational”) potential of the Internet that circulate in the 2010s about social networking sites, wikis, folksonomies, and so on.

In this regard, it is equally important that scholars keep a constant check on their enthusiasm for, and very real investment in, the new media and acknowledge how it all continues to be structured by entrenched—albeit variable and slowly changing—inequalities of access, control, and opportunity (cf. Alzouma, 2005; Castells, 2009; Rodino-Colocino, 2006). While we appreciate the excitement (and genuine hope) that underpins sweeping visions for a “global communication network,” the fact remains that so-called global flows of wealth, information, and technology are also marked by stoppages, blockages, trickles, and any number of non-flow metaphors. The opportunities of new media may span the globe, but they certainly do not cover it, nor do they span it in equal measure (Herring, 2001b; cf. also Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010). Closer to home, these same political-economic realities are such that much of the academic work on new media studies is also done by rich-country scholars writing about the experiences of their own people—with the occasional dabbling in other people’s places. Just as sociolinguists are coming to terms with the utterly local and tightly bounded realities of some people under globalization (e.g. Block, 2004; Blommaert, 2005; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010a), so too must new media scholars see through the presumptions of phrases like “global networks” and “global media.”

7. The old media versus the new media: through the perspective of sociolinguistics

Sometimes the best way to explain a phenomenon is to convey what it is not. One way to define the new media and their associated technologies is to contrast them to the old media. Old media – newspapers, magazines, radio, television – are communication delivery systems. These are relatively independent, static, historical. Today, old media are almost always paired with new media – newspapers and magazines have online versions, as well as their own blogs, television networks produce a great deal of online content related to their programming, etc. Some of this evolution has been due to the concern that the new media is growing at the expense of the old media; and old media must evolve to survive. Voithofer (2005) specifically contrasts the new media with old media counterparts by describing the "newness" of the new media in terms of changes in production due to convergence of
technology and media, storage (digitization and indexing), presentation (in a video display of sorts), and distribution over telecommunication networks.

The past few years have brought wholesale transformations of established and existing media e.g., photography, animation, television, film, newspaper, Computer-mediated communication and collaboration - e.g., email, chat room, IM, discussion forums, teleconferencing, avatar-based virtual worlds, VOIP, mobile telephony, blogs, wikis – have changed our organizations in profound ways. Even consumption is different in the age of new media; we are seeing more active post-purchase behaviour – in the form of, e.g., mashups, media sharing, and the modding of digital media.

In comparing new media to the so-called "old" media – newspapers, magazines, radio, television, we may very well ask the question: Have the new media rendered the old media obsolete? Is this a "new world" – similar in scope to the broad societal transformations of the industrial revolution? The term "old media" would cause us to think so. However, what we have been seeing is more like a fusing of old and new. Newspapers have online blogs. Television channels have fan sites for their shows. In the historical perspective, we explore the various influences on today's new media, which could not exist without the convergence of media or, indeed, without the convergence of technology of the past several decades.

8. Conclusion:

On a concluding note, new media has coloured the old media with its characteristics, henceforth affecting the sociolinguistics in all dimensions. One cannot imagine life without digital media in today's society. Even if one is disconnected from the virtual world for just an hour, it seems as if he is cut from the society that has digitalised the linguistics.
References:


