

BAAL Language and New Media SIG 2018 seminar

Changing language and communication practices in contemporary networked societies

Open University, Thursday 19th July

The aim of the seminar was to bring together applied linguists researching changing digital practices in order to further our understanding of the complex and multiple roles that social media plays in contemporary networked societies. In the process, we wanted to move beyond public discourses – be they dystopian or utopian – about the implications of digital technologies for social life.



Image 1: Caroline Tagg opens the seminar

Throughout the seminar, the presenters' focus on the detail of communicative encounters highlighted how social practices are diversifying and diverging across communities and media. **Christian Ilbury** (Queen Mary University of London) showed how teens in his London-based ethnography exploited Snapchat in ways that differ from the dominant discourses around social media as a repository of cultural memories, instead focusing on the here and now. **Ruth Page** (University of Birmingham) charted changes in the social practice of selfie sharing on Snapchat with the development of the 'ugly selfie', showing how young people exploited nuanced distinctions in camera angle and gaze to challenge existing understandings of the selfie as a narcissistic and self-branding resource and to co-construct new ways of envisualising/portraying the self online. **Dorottya Cserz6** (Cardiff University) situated her study of video chat in the history of telecommunications, showing how video chat was designed to address the lack of access to gestures and facial expressions in telephone conversations, and exploring how its use has gone on to shape social interaction, including the way in which interlocutors can draw on the visual as a resource in conducting small talk through 'noticings'. **Erika Darics** (Aston University) explored the ways in which online workplace collaborations serve to blur the boundaries between private and public spaces and to challenge institutional hierarchies, as well as changing conceptions as to what actually constitutes a team in virtual work environments. And **Christina Lyrikou** (The Open University) in her poster presentation pointed to how the blurring of formal and informal forms of contact on mobile communication can prove useful for language learning purposes. These studies highlight the agency of users in shaping how they, and others, experience digitally mediated encounters. As shown in the poster presentation of **Samantha**

Ford (University of Birmingham), users do not act all in a vacuum, but in user-designed environments where colours – among other resources – are used to attract their attention and guide online behaviour.



Image 2: Christian Illbury presents his research on Snapchat use among London teens

In charting this complexity and change, the talks challenge celebratory discourses that tend to assume the internet is changing the world for the better. Instead, the talks pointed to a more nuanced picture in which digital technologies can be used in ways that are empowering and liberating, but which can also serve to reproduce and at times strengthen dominant ideologies, existing inequalities and power relations.

In her keynote, **Mirca Madianou** (Goldsmiths, University of London) laid out the wider international backdrop to these issues in her discussion of ‘technocolonialism’, a concept she uses to explore the ways in which the use of digital technologies and big data in humanitarian work reinvigorate and rework colonial relations of dependency. Although technologies are often assumed to involve ‘beneficiaries’ of aid in the humanitarian process and to decentralise power, in practice they can be harnessed to facilitate other interests – that of big business or of technology communities looking to be disruptive. In turn, the relationships of dependency in which aid-receivers find themselves hinders the extent to which they can resist or subvert ‘technocolonialism’.



Image 3: Mirca Madianou gives her keynote on ‘Technocolonialism: digital innovation and big data in humanitarian work’

A similar reproduction of existing hegemonies is also evident in the specific context of language practices, prestige and visibility. Our keynote speaker **Rachelle Vessey** (Birkbeck, University of London) focused on the reproduction of language ideologies, showing how the ‘two solitudes’ of French and English communities in Canada are reproduced, rather than resisted or replaced, via social media. To some extent, people are simply voicing online the same positions and orienting to the same boundaries that are constructed in traditional media sources; but, at the same time, particular affordances of social media can in fact promote dominant ideologies, making it harder for minority views to be heard and discouraging communication across the language groups.



Image 4: Rachelle Vessey gives her keynote on ‘Language ideological practices online: exploring Canada’s ‘two solitudes’ in the digital age’

Similar conclusions regarding the online reproduction of existing ideologies and discourses were drawn by a number of other talks. In her analysis of language attitudes in online reviews of audiobooks, **Cathleen Walters** (University of Leicester) found that reviewers did not only evaluate accents in terms of their ‘authenticity’, but that they also drew on traditional essentialist categories to do so, including nationality, ancestry, and linguistic background. **Agnieszka Lyons** and **Vittoria Moresco** (Queen Mary University of London) showed how new mothers in a WhatsApp group drew on discourses of naturalness and motherhood, albeit in order to empower themselves. In contrast, **Fatima Alhalwachi** and **Lise McEntee-Atialanis** (Birkbeck, University of London) focused on how Muslim women bloggers used the online space as a way to resist the stigma attached to infertility and to co-construct a positive identity online, showing how technologies can be used to affirmatively disrupt existing power structures and social constraints.



Image 5: Fatima Alhalwachi presents her research (with Lise McEntee-Atialanis) on infertile Muslim women bloggers

Taken together, the seminar presentations offered empirical insights into how people purposefully use social media for their own practical, personal, relational, and emotional objectives. They also showed how change in social media communication practices can be located at the local level of individual or group practices in individual platforms, driven either by ‘new’ platform affordances (e.g. Snapchat, Skype, virtual work platforms) or by users themselves (e.g. developing new visual repertoires in reaction to existing ones; ‘uglie selfie’ vs ‘selfie’). Change was also located at a global level of capitalist and market forces which not only transform social media sharing into marketable and surveillance data, but also impact on the configuration of power relations nationally and internationally. The seminar highlighted the importance of the nuanced insights of applied linguistics research for complicating public discourses on social media communication. Looking ahead, there is ample scope for applied linguistics research to extend its methodologies and analytical frameworks to make possible the close study of communication across platforms and to seek out connections between local and global change in language and communication practices in contemporary networked societies.

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