Language Online. Investigating Digital Texts and Practices
David Barton and Carmen Lee

$39.95
ISBN: 9780415524957
Book (paperback)
Routledge
208 Pages
2013

Reviewed by
Eirene C. Katsarou
Democritus University of Thrace, Greece


Written in a clear and accessible manner, the volume focuses on the implications of the online world for the study of language from different perspectives. Barton and Lee bring together ideas and concepts related to language online, examining both theory and methodology and drawing upon extensive data and detailed authentic examples of young people and adults with diverse linguistic backgrounds from different parts of the world and in an extensive range of online platforms.

The first three chapters set the scene, providing a strong theoretical framework and introducing key concepts that are necessary in the examination of language online. More specifically, Chapter 1 introduces current research that addresses language and literacy practices online, highlighting the three key directions most commonly applied within linguistics. The authors further discuss overarching issues with respect to online language learning and offer an explanation of the social practice view of language and literacies. The centrality of language in online research for linguistics and all those interested in the digital world is emphasized in Chapter 2 via the presentation of the ten most important reasons for studying the online world to understand language. Chapter 3 clarifies issues of terminology necessary to online language research: (i) practices reflecting our orientation to language as meaningful activity, (ii) writing in a textually mediated social world, (iii) affordances as perceived and drawn upon by people in order to fulfill particular purposes when utilizing online writing spaces, (iv) multimodality in the process of meaning-making online, (v) stance as a prominent aspect of people’s communication towards what they are saying, including views about language, (vi) the creation of affinity groups where people participate when using language in relation to other groups and communities, and (vii) globalization that provides an important context for understanding language online. A quick overview of the main features and aspects of four popular sites (i.e., Flickr, Facebook, YouTube and Instant Messaging) used for data elicitation throughout the book follows.

Chapters 4-13 investigate a range of specific language issues drawing on extensive data starting with studies of multilingualism (Chapters 4 and 5) and then exploring the notions of identity (Chapter 6), stance (Chapter 7), multimodality (Chapter 8) and metalinguistics (Chapter 9)
in online language use. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on learning as well as on the significance of vernacular practices and their implications for education while the final two chapters seek new ways of researching texts and practices online (Chapter 12) and examine online-offline interaction (Chapter 13).

In this respect, Chapter 4 discusses the extent to which a global Internet strengthens the global status of English or gives rise to linguistic pluralism. The chapter empirically demonstrates that the web and its users are increasingly multilingual with web users creatively deploying a range of multilingual resources for different purposes as is evident by their writing practices in synchronous and asynchronous online media communication sites. Chapter 5 observes people’s actual practices using different languages and the important factors that shape their multilingual practices in online spaces related to the user, the intended viewer, the content posted, and the medium used. Global online multilingual encounters and translilingual practices such as online use of translators to maximize access to online information, maintenance of minority languages in the written medium and increasing use of local languages among diasporic communities in web-based communication are also outlined. In Chapter 6 multilingual practices online are discussed as a means of facilitating participants’ local/global online participation and their assertion of new kinds of identity. As examined through a techno-biographic approach delving into new media users’ relationship with technologies through their life histories, identity performance has been associated with the extent to which participants intend to project global identities online “writing multilingually in their effort to explain their local culture to the world” (p. 84).

Chapter 7 discusses stance-taking as a key interactive and intersubjective act in public online spaces where participants frequently articulate their opinions, feelings, or attitudes through specific word choice. Multilingual and multimodal stance-taking is also illustrated via an analysis of two Flickr photo pages, given the dynamic relationship between the stance-takers, their stance-resources (images and words) and writing spaces (e.g., tagging and comments) and the stance objects. Stance-taking is further viewed as a useful analytical tool for language and literacy studies of online texts to understand language and meta-language online. Chapter 8 extends this exploration of online stance-taking practices by focusing on one specific stance object—metalinguistic discourse. Various web spaces are used to exemplify the ways in which people publicly reflect upon and discuss language-related topics through self-generated writing while self-deprecating metalinguistic discourse is also examined in relation to the meaningful social purposes it serves in online writing spaces. Chapter 9 examines how online spaces change the ways in which people learn and the ways in which they support informal language learning using Flickr, Facebook, and IM examples to underline the role of other people and networks for learning in relation to reflexivity, identity and discourses of learning.

Chapter 10 addresses questions to what extent online writing practices constitute new literacy practices, and to what extent the characteristics of vernacular literacies are valued and used by people participating in global online writing spaces. As a case study, this chapter illustrates how popular photography, as one specific vernacular practice, has been transformed by new media based on Facebook and Flickr data. In Chapter 11 two education-related issues are discussed: (i) the incorporation of specific digital media into classroom-based teaching and learning and (ii) the impact of online practices on language teaching and learning especially in the context of language education. Relatedly, Chapter 12 raises issues of methodology usually adopted in research projects on new media language and literacies and offers an overview of both traditional methods (e.g., observation and interview) and newer ones (e.g., auto-ethnography and techno-biography). Other topics discussed include the importance of combining both texts and practices, developing a responsive methodology, and the researcher’s stance and challenges of carrying out research on the Internet. Finally, Chapter 13 offers a linguistic perspective on the relationship between online and offline contexts to understand the increasingly diversified nature of language, life, and the global world.

Overall, this volume provides an excellent discussion of specific language issues, based on empirical data available from various online platforms. Its highly informative content is also supported by useful bibliographic references promoting a deeper understanding of different aspects
of online literacy practices and fostering the perspective of future coordinated research projects in the area. It is a valuable contribution to a rapidly expanding body of literature on the topic and will be of interest to linguists and social scientists alike who are studying and researching language online as a socially situated practice.

**REVIEWER’S BIODATA**

Eirene Katsarou is a full-time EFL teacher of secondary education in Greece and holds a BA in English Language & Literature (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece), an MA in Applied Linguistics (University of York, UK), and a PhD in Descriptive & Applied Linguistics (University of Essex, UK).

**REVIEWER’S ADDRESS**

ekatsai@otenet.gr