

## Studying digital texts and practices

David Barton and Carmen Lee, *Language Online. Investigating Digital Texts and Practices*. London: Routledge, 2013, Pp. x + 208. Paperback US\$39.95, ISBN: 978-04155-24957.

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Technology has now become a vital part of contemporary life. This poses a compelling need as well as a challenge for scholars to investigate online interaction and literacy practices in this computer-mediated discourse. The book by David Barton and Carmen Lee engages the reader in a data-rich inquiry into the impact of the online world for the study of language, both theoretically and methodologically. It explores language users' dynamic participation in online activity, and presents very well related concepts such as language choice, identity, stance, multimodality, multilingualism, and discourses of language learning. The authors view online language from various perspectives, providing a wealth of information using a careful selection of authentic examples. At the same time, they draw on a mixed-method approach, which includes multiple case studies through interviews, a collection of chat logs, surveys, and techno-biographies.

The book comprises 13 chapters, each starting with a summary box where a number of key points are presented to guide the reader to comprehend the discussion which follows in the chapter. In the first three chapters, Barton and Lee set the scene by introducing a theoretical framework and some related key concepts, which help to pave the way for further discussion of the topics in later chapters. The first chapter introduces current research and the general approach the authors have taken to language, literacies, and the internet. They observe that three key directions were initially adopted by linguists in online research, including structural features of computer-mediated communication, social variation of computer-mediated discourse, and language ideologies and meta-language. However, they are beginning to see a fourth direction where new concepts such as super-diversity (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) and super-mobility bring new insights into language online and contemporary changes. The centrality of language in online research for linguistics is emphasized in Chapter 2, which presents ten reasons why studying

the online world is crucial for understanding language. Following this discussion in Chapter 3, the authors clarify the meanings of seven key concepts. They include literacy practices, texts, affordances, multimodality, stance, affinity groups, globalization, and writing spaces online. These concepts are used in their strict senses in the remainder of the book, which are crucial to the study of linguistics and digital literacies.

Chapters 4–13 probe into a range of specific language issues. Chapter 4 provides a succinct overview of the four key online sites in terms of their writing spaces and affordances: Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, and Instant Messaging. Building on data from these four platforms, the authors demonstrate ways in which new media provide important writing spaces for web users, with which they can creatively deploy their multilingual resources in different contexts for various purposes. The chapter reports on findings from their own research, showing that multilingual users exercise their language choice depending on their audience. Chapter 5 moves on to discuss online translanguaging practices, focusing on how online media offer new opportunities for multilingual interaction.

Chapter 6 tackles the issue of the techno-linguistic biographies which are first-person anecdotes from participants in the local or global online world. They consider the aspects of key phases in a technology-related life, online-offline linguistic repertoires, home-school online experiences, roles to play in life, and people's perceived knowledge of languages. In Chapter 7, Barton and Lee then take up the notion of stance, the positioning of self and others, so as to explore the identity-formation online. Two multimodal stance-taking case studies from Flickr are shared through language and image.



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Language has been perceived as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990) for people to act within this textually mediated social world. Chapter 8 considers what and how people actually talk about language in relation to their online participation. It extends the exploration of online stance-taking practices by focusing on meta-linguistic discourse, and 'reveals the ways in which new media sites such as Flickr provide the affordances and writing spaces that enable users to create a collaborative, supportive environment to express their vernacular theories of language through self-generated content' (p. 123). Again at a theoretical and discursive level, Chapter 9 argues that, with its forms of support and its spaces for reflexivity, the internet can provide powerful places for individuals to learn by participation in practice. Here they also argue that learning involves taking on new identities.

Chapter 10 expands on a survey of vernacular literacies and addresses the general changes in a global context as a result of new media. A key feature of vernacular literacies is that 'they are voluntary and self-generated' (p. 139). Here we can also see the growing value of everyday practices as presented in the data of Web 2.0 tools. Chapter 11 sheds new light on ideas for educators to integrate technology into the classroom, which is especially suitable for a university setting. The impact of online practices on language teaching and learning are also examined.

Chapter 12 focuses on methodological issues related to doing research on new media language and literacies. It offers a discussion of both traditional methods like observations and interviews and new methods like auto-ethnography and techno-biographies. This chapter is especially interesting and useful to post-graduate students and junior researchers when they attempt to conduct their own research on online texts and practices. The final chapter wraps up with a linguistic perspective to the relationship between online and offline contexts, to understand the increasingly diversified nature of language, life, and the global world. The authors give examples to illustrate how the online world has influenced language and the ways people communicate.

An important theme of the book is that the internet, far from negatively affecting young people's literacy, should instead be viewed as a useful tool offering a variety of new possibilities. So understanding the online world is essential for the study of language, and virtual language learning spaces in 'everydayness' could provide individuals with opportunities to concentrate on unique literacy practices (Gee, 2007; Rama *et al.*, 2012). In their book, Barton and Lee offer a well-argued discussion of specific language issues, using a mixed methodology grounded in both linguistics and digital literacies. The language used, and the clear and accessible writing style adopted to conduct discussion, together make the book reader-friendly. The book includes five appendices containing practical resources from the authors and a considerable number of bibliographical references. This makes it not only valuable to linguists and social scientists interested in language as situated practice, but also appealing to a wider range of readers, particularly those new to studying online language or interested in understanding how language is changing as a result of new technologies, and to those pursuing their own research into language use online.

To sum up, this is an inspirational book which is timely, informative and easily accessible. It makes a major contribution to the areas of new media, literacy, multi-modality within language and applied linguistics in general.

## References

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