Language and identity research in online environments
A multimodal ethnographic perspective

Introduction

This chapter sets out to explore new research opportunities and challenges for the study of language and identity in computer-mediated digital environments. The study of linguistic and social behaviours in computer-mediated communication (CmC) has been approached from a number of disciplines, including communication, media studies, applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, cultural studies and anthropology, to name a few. With the spread of Internet-based social networks from the mid-2000s, scholarly debates and emerging developments in this relatively new domain have expanded to include the multilingual and multimodal practices of young people in digitally mediated, transnational settings. Even in its brief history, the exploration of language and identity online has dealt with issues of different and, to an extent, new forms of representation made available through digital technologies and global contexts of communication. The pages of screens make visible the immense variability as well as stability in the ways that bi/multilingual youth are creating, sustaining and adapting their linguistic identities to engage with diverse communities in heteroglossic contexts. This chapter sets out to consider how multimodality and ethnography can be jointly applied to examine language and identity in online environments; and within this, consider the potentials and limitations of the combined approach for applied linguistics research.

This chapter has two main sections. The first covers key terms and concepts associated with multimodality to examine how language is used with other modes of communication, such as visuals, colours and layout, to compose in online environments. For example, what ‘modes’ are, and how people shape them as cultural resources, such as ‘templates of identity’ (Williams 2009) and ‘identity texts’ (Paris 2012), for communicating in digital environments. Second, it will discuss current issues with language and identity work particular to online settings and discuss the use of a combined multimodal and ethnographic perspective to explore, generate and analyse digital data that make use of ‘media mixes’ (Ito 2010). How are bi/multilingual individuals
engaging and developing their linguistic repertoires as they relate to transnational audiences using multiple languages and modes of communication? In answering this question, case studies of online research are used, and the chapter concludes with suggestions for future research in applied linguistics.

**Overview**

This section will provide an introduction to the shifting functions of writing in online contexts; and within this, consider its implications for researching language and identity in digital platforms. The section will also highlight key multimodal concepts for describing and analysing the complex combination of modes often used in increasingly multilingual and multimodal online environments.

**Language and identity in online composition**

Online composition is often described as part of a multimodal design, which is an increasingly common feature of contemporary forms of communication (Manovich 2001; Wilson and Peterson 2002; Jørgensen et al. 2011). This is to say that what counts as content in online environments often includes non-linguistic forms of representation, such as layout and framing, which are often inextricably combined with language to make meaning. One consequence of this is that it is increasingly problematic to consider the use of language, both written and spoken, in isolation from the multimodal ensembles in which it is embedded (Kress and Domingo 2013). What is clear is that how content is represented, as well as the modes and platforms chosen, is a significant aspect of language and identity research in online environments.

As communication flows continue to move at rapid rates across linguistic, cultural and geographical borders, notions of authorship and composition continue to be redefined and reimagined (Boulter 2001; Kress 2009). Digital texts are moving across online spaces in unprecedented ways and, with this change, an evident shift in communication practices that principally draw on digital devices for making meaning visible to global audiences (Hull et al. 2013). In recent years, social media sites and online environments have started occupying a prominent position in young people’s screen-based interactions and are often tied to the design of multimodal artefacts (e.g. music, videos, photographs) that make up what has been described by researchers as ‘templates of identity’ (Williams 2009) and ‘identity texts’ (Paris 2012). These sites and their potentials for shaping composition in different and often new forms of representation can be viewed as generative spaces for conducting language and identity research. For example, research in this area explores the social uses of digital technologies for developing communities and navigating belonging in the context of global and digital worlds (Dolby and Rizvi 2008; Black 2009; Ríos-Rojas 2011).

Participation in contemporary communication environments has also been described as enabling young people to draw on a range of cultural resources for shaping media and modes into ‘media mixes’ (Ito 2010) that allow for communication across cultures and spaces (New London Group 1996; Lam and Warriner 2012). Williams (2009) has detailed how template functions within social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, enable individuals to create personal sites that allow for ‘performances of identities’ (p. 93) online. While he acknowledges that the templates can limit online composition to fit particular forms, he illustrates that access to multimodal design presents individuals with opportunities to think of their identities in relation to popular culture references (e.g. movies, television programmes, books) and in relation...
to wider, global networks. His analysis of the social media sites takes into account how online composition for youth today involves a ‘culture of bricolage’ (ibid.: 64) comprised of multimodal design such as words, images, sound, animation and videos. Further, the popular culture content of individual sites can link to other pages that make the text just one collage in a wider network of constantly shifting collages. For Williams, examining social media practices is germane to the study of language and literacy in digital spaces. His work is one example of how studying composition online presents applied linguists with new opportunities and challenges for defining and identifying what counts as data in computer-mediated digital environments (see Darwin, this volume).

English and Marr (2015) have similarly taken up the study of language and identity as situated in everyday contexts, including online environments such as Facebook posts, to explore ways of analysing language and language use from a social, intercultural and multilingual perspective. In the introduction to their book, they draw on Blommaert and Jie’s terminology of ‘collecting rubbish’ (p. 9) to describe a common practice among linguistic ethnographers to collect anything that may one day be useful for examining communicative activity. The ‘rubbish’ or linguistic data, that at the time of research might appear insignificant or worthless, are what they highlight as data that can offer new understandings about language, communication and social-cultural practice in day-to-day interaction. In online environments, ‘rubbish’ can be seen as other modes in use besides language and, as the examples in this chapter will illustrate, such modal resources are in fact integral to composition produced by young people digitally, particularly those who are multilingual and involved in collaborative work with other young people in transnational media contexts. In the latter section of this chapter, other examples will be discussed that exemplify how social media sites and digital platforms can be generative sites for studying language and identity, specifically when attention is given to the range of multimodal artefacts rather than a primary focus on written and spoken language. First, it is significant to describe the focus on multimodality and its affordances for a linguistic ethnography of online environments.

Multimodal approaches have provided concepts, methods and a framework for the study of social interaction and environments. As an interdisciplinary approach, it has developed over the past decade to address much debated issues about changes in society, including cultural and linguistic practices as situated within and across environments (VanLeeuwen and Jewitt 2000; VanLeeuwen 2004; Kress 2009).

Three theoretical assumptions underpin the concept of multimodality:

1. All communication draws on a multiplicity of modes to make meaning;
2. Meanings realised by any mode are always interwoven with other co-present modes to produce meaning;
3. The more a set of resources (modes) has been utilised in the everyday social life of a particular community, the more fully articulated it will have become for members of that community.

(Jewitt 2009, 2012; Kress 2009)

In this chapter, these assumptions are taken up to focus on an application of multimodality in combination with ethnography to examine online composition (Jewitt 2009; Domingo et al. 2015), and discuss its relevance for language and identity research. In what follows, key multimodal concepts are discussed in relation to online environments.
Modes, multimodal ensembles and texts in digital environments

Multimodality assumes that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes to articulate meaning. The term ‘multimodal text’ draws attention to the realisation of closely integrated meanings using a range of modes (e.g. spoken or written words; moving or still images). A blog, for example, would be considered a multimodal text just as a book would fit the same category. The book as a ‘platform’ would more or less be comprised of fixed and relatively linear arrangements; whereas online platforms (e.g. WordPress, YouTube) tend to be more ephemeral or increasingly modular in organisation (Domingo et al. 2015). This bears significance for studying language and identity. The blog platform can be seen as a ‘site’ of appearance of multimodal texts but also as a ‘field site’ for exploring traces of social and linguistic interaction among the designer, his or her imagined audience and the materialised multimodal text. From this perspective, online environments can be seen as a generative source for qualitative data (Hardey 2011).

Sites, whether online or offline, offer semiotic potentials and constraints, which have effects of a social kind: social relations of participants and kinds of social organisation such as communities of practice (see Lave and Wenger 1991). The blog as an online environment offers different and to an extent a greater flexibility for shaping multimodal texts. At the same time, meaning-making is also constrained by the ways in which the designer (blogger) is provided a pre-given set of resources, which limits what modes can be shaped and in what ways they can be materialised on the page. The choice then becomes not only which modes are best used to represent meaning but also how to shape the available resources into a ‘multimodal ensemble’. This is to say that how language is used in online composition is partly constrained by the technical affordance of the platform used. To analyse the written or spoken language within the digital environment should then take into account how the platform enables or constrains meaning-making.

Modal affordance, meaning potentials and multimodal orchestrations

Social characteristics of the blog platform and their formal compositional characteristics co-occur with the modes through which meaning as content appears on the site. Each mode carries specific affordances so that what is represented through image is not necessarily the same as what can be said in writing. This is illustrated in Figure 34.1, the ‘About me’ page of the blog Thinly Spread (2010). Thinly Spread is a UK-based parenting blog written by Chris, who is also a photographer and writer. In this blog, we see that the photograph is not merely a recount of what is expressed in words. Blog pages such as these are designed to familiarise audiences with the blogger, as well as offer a general introduction about key topics and the overall purpose of the blog.

In looking at Figure 34.1, the type of questions that would arise from a multimodal perspective include:

- What modes are available in this blog?
- What are the affordances of the modes?
- What are the affordances of the blogging platform as a communication environment?

The premise here is that modes and their historical uses have been shaped to achieve specific social purposes. Multimodality assumes that different modes carry different meaning potentials
Figure 34.1 Chris’s (2010) Thinly Spread ‘About me’ page

I am an over stretched, thinly spread mother of a writing, teaching, tutoring and parenting in Somerset. My family gets first call on my time, writing is a close second, teaching brings in a bit of useful money and the housework gets neglected with glee.

This blog is about all the things I like to do. There will be the odd rant about things which get my goat and pieces about things which have caught my eye.

It will be full of all the things me and my children have enjoyed doing together over the last 15 years and the new things we are finding to do as we all get older. It is the story of all those little letting-gas as my lovely husband and I encourage our birds to spread their wings and fly.

I will be posting some of our favourite veggie family recipes, most of which can be cooked in 30 minutes or less with a toddler sitting on the work surface, an older child moaning about a grumbling stomach another one asking for homework help and yet another needing to be picked up from an after school club.

We spend a lot of time outside growing stuff and the garden has been my escape since they were tiny. I feel I am still being a good Mum while I’m planting seeds and pulling weeds accompanied by various small children digging holes, making fairy houses, climbing trees and holding tea parties. So I will be posting stuff about gardening with kids (and without) too.

I am also a freelance copywriter and photographer and an unpublished (as yet) fiction writer so I will be sticking some of my writing on here too as well as some tips and ideas which have come out of the fiction writers’ workshops which I run.

I hope you enjoy sharing bits of my life with me and that you will post a comment so I know you are out there!
so that how they are taken up varies depending on the purpose and context of use. The more a set of resources (modes) has been utilised in the everyday social life of a particular community, the more fully articulated it will have become for members of that community. For example, those involved in film studies would realise different functions of an image from those involved with curating classical paintings or illustrating comics and graphic novels. Just like the meanings of words are located in social origins and change over time and across spaces, so too does the meaning potentials of modes, depending on the interests of those who make the sign in specific social contexts.

In any environment, whether online or offline, modal preference is informed not only by the interest of the sign-maker but also by the shared experiences and values of the community in which the sign-maker belongs. Interest, in this sense, can be seen as a marker of identity (see Kress 2009). While ‘multimodal ensembles’ name the bringing together of different modes to produce a multimodal text, ‘multimodal orchestration’ names the semiotic work and social action involved in the purposeful selection and arrangement of modes – which modes, for what purpose, in what order, for whom – as best suited for the environment. In Figure 34.1 we saw that what was achieved through photography is not a repeat of what was expressed in writing in the ‘About me’ page of Chris’s blog Thinly Spread. From the perspective of social interaction, her modal preference reflects a certain ‘politics of choice’ (see discussion on ‘style’ in Kress 2009).

A multimodal social semiotic approach lends insight into how Thinly Spread’s interests are realised on the page with a certain social positing. The photograph is more conceptual (see Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006), showcasing an idealised notion of family and nature as landscape. The blogger and her son, as the subjects of the photograph, appear not to be expecting the gaze of onlookers: they are casually there to be observed and they do not engage explicitly with the audience. There are different notions of personal distance evident throughout the blog, so that the multimodal text appears at times like a professional portfolio showcasing Thinly Spread’s writing and the blogger’s visual art (photography). This reading is supported by the blogger’s account in her ‘About me’ page (2010), in which she states: ‘I am also a freelance copywriter and photographer and an unpublished (as yet) fiction writer.’ What we have here, then, is a multimodal account of Thinly Spread’s ‘About me’ page. It is at this point that theories and interests drawn from sociocultural linguistics can further extend the analysis of Thinly Spread’s page.

As evidenced by the case of Thinly Spread’s blog, the application of a multimodal framework lends itself to providing a descriptive language, a fine-grained lens for examining the various features of a text. Where applied linguists may focus primarily on writing as the main unit of analysis, multimodality broadens the notions of content to also include other modes. Further, multimodality provides a means for understanding the process involved with producing the text, and the traces of social interaction (see Kress 2009) between the blogger and the blog design as well as between the blogger and her audience in the digital community. This view can lend insight into the sociocultural understanding of language and identity work online. Notions of speech communities have become destabilised not only by the mass movement of people in the physical world, but also by the mass movement of people’s multimodal texts in the virtual world – a world without borders. It seems therefore that the practices of digital communities are generative spaces for the examination of the relationship between language and identity by applied linguistics. The ‘multimodal orchestration’ that is materialised on the page, in this case the blog as environment or more specifically the blog platform as the site of research, makes it possible to analyse not only the multimodal text and its various features but also the process taken to produce that text (the semiotic work in designing meanings) and the social interaction (records of communicative exchanges between the blogger and her digital community through comments).
In the next section I turn to how a multimodal approach in conjunction with theories and areas of interest drawn from applied linguistics can inform research focused on language and identity in digital environments.

**Current issues**

In past times, applied linguistics research on language and identities viewed languages as well-defined codes spoken by particular speech communities (see Joseph, this volume). Language variation and identity processes were often linked to stable characteristics such as place, social class and gender. These premises are no longer adequate given the transformations in the social world brought about by globalisation and technological innovations. Given these transformations, applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have been concerned for some time with addressing identity within contexts of ‘superdiversity’ (see e.g. Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Block 2014 [2007]) and viewing the diverse linguistic repertoires of bi/multilingual individuals as resources for communication and identity work in contexts of heteroglossia (see Creese and Blackledge, this volume).

A key aim of this section is to illustrate how multimodality can be used to examine language and identity work in the virtual world and how this could complement language and identity work in the physical world undertaken in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. The section begins with a discussion of current issues in applied linguistics research in digital environments and the implications of these issues for conducting language and identity work online. I draw on data from two research projects on blogging and video-sharing as case studies.

**The issue with content and units of analysis**

Multimodality focuses on people’s process of meaning-making and emphasises how the choices people make, selecting one mode over another or one set of resources over another, is always embedded in a network of alternative possibilities (Halliday 1978). This is evidenced not only through the modes of writing and image but also other modes such as layout, colour and framing. Mode is considered an organising principle of representation and communication and therefore treated as a central unit of analysis in multimodal research. This is to say that what is expressed in image is equally significant in analysis as what is stated using written words or spoken language. For example, in Figure 34.1 we may gather that the blogger draws primarily on image and writing as key modal resources for shaping the text (the ‘About me’ page) in her blog. Applied linguists may focus on her writing as the main unit of analysis for research. But as previously discussed, the additional modal resources used in her blog, which is comprised of a series of chronologically organised posts, can be examined to better account for how she goes about shaping the blog as reflective of her own ‘template of identity’ (Williams 2009: 99). A multimodal approach extends the linguistic analysis of online texts to include modal resources (the full range of representations) used for social interaction. In this way, the blog as a field site and as a site of appearance of texts can more attentively address language and identity work in digital environments.

**The issue with communities**

The types of questions that arise from looking at the *Thinly Spread* blog (i.e. the ‘About me’ page and ‘Explore posts’ pages) focus on the social positions and relations of participants. Specifically,
these questions draw attention to the issue of communities particular to an online environment. In terms of applied linguistics research, much can be explored with regards to language identity from a multimodal perspective. The situated and often on-going interaction in a blog is reflective of online communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) in which the social positions and relations of the participants can be examined by looking closely at their communication exchanges within the blog and across other spaces online. Notions of language affiliation, language expertise and language inheritance (Leung et al. 1997) can be explored not only within the blog platform but also by looking at the social media sites that are often linked to blogs such as Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. As each of these online platforms has a pre-given set of modal resources for users to shape their meanings, we find that what is largely expressed through images and tags in Instagram, for instance, might be differently explored and positioned on the platform of Facebook. The latter provides users with more space for writing about the image or including writing alongside the image.

While an online environment can be categorised as a site of research, I argue that online environments can be examined as communities of practice and as sites in which identities emerge in the social orientation and online interactions afforded by the technology of specific and particular online environments. In what follows, I elaborate on these points by drawing on a case of social interaction in blogs.

**The case of blogging platforms**

Weblogs, or blogs as they are more commonly known, have evolved considerably since their inception in the early 1990s and have become a significant aspect of online communication (Hookway 2008). Their widespread use as an online authoring platform has been attributed in part to free, user-friendly template designs such as those offered by WordPress or Blogger. Each blog template includes a pre-given set of modal resources to design and shape meanings (e.g. columnal layout, colour scheme, social media integration) that allow bloggers to use the social and semiotic resources afforded by the template to share personal and/or professional content. For example, the Writr blog template offers a vertical orientation; drawing on the tradition of print-based platforms like a book, the blogger and his or her imagined audiences are prompted to navigate the site from top to bottom and left to right. Here the focus is the significance of writing as the primary semiotic resource, and other modes, such as colour and image, have less prominent roles in organising the content and realising meanings. In contrast, the Landscape template offers a more horizontal orientation and emphasises modularity over linearity as the organising principle. It draws from visual design to orient the reading of images (see Jewitt and Oyama 2001; Kress and VanLeeuwen 2006). The emphasis here is on the mode of image as the primary modal resource for materialising meaning on the page. In this regard, frame as a mode is a material resource that is apparent even before the blogger creates and uploads content in the blog. So what is expressed in writing and articulated through image is very much inextricably intertwined with the affordance of the platform. To realise a coherent multimodal text, all of these factors have to be addressed by the blogger. While templates can be customised (e.g. selecting number of columns, adding more images, changing the colour palette), the features of the blog design are more or less constrained to fit the designed social and technical purpose of the template (Domingo et al. 2014).

*Thinly Spread*, in using a pre-formatted blog template, can only choose from a finite number of possibilities for designing the blogger’s text. Given that layout is the primary mode used by the WordPress blog platform to organise contents, the images and writing in each of *Thinly
Spread's blog posts can only be arranged in a limited number of combinations. Formatting the size of images or adding custom layout arrangements beyond those offered for the template Thinly Spread selected require significant technical work and technical knowledge of programming languages used for websites.

The basis for the technical design of Wordpress blog templates is also socially, historically and culturally informed. As a contemporary digital authoring platform, widely kept and read across different social and cultural groups for a range of different purposes, Wordpress has garnered a significant following with more than 60 million blogs created by its users. Since early blogs were primarily organised chronologically, with links to other sites and a commentary by the blogger, subsequent blogs became more diary-like and offered more interaction, such as up-to-date feeds on new content generated and comments uploaded by audiences (Garden 2011). Blog uses and templates have since expanded to include categories such as professional portfolios, travel journals, photographic exhibitions, culinary displays and so on. While the introduction of free-blogging platforms is often referenced as pivotal in the widespread adoption of blogs, the general structure for integrating writing in blogs is still reliant on Western notions of composition. Top to bottom and left to right are the primary means for navigating blogs, as Figure 34.1 illustrates. This method of blog navigation is a culturally situated practice associated with reading print-bound and page-based writing in Western societies. Accessing meaning in this instance requires following a relatively linear reading path; however, when the linearity of an online page becomes less apparent, much can be explored with regards to the change in pattern. The choices in pattern can be examined for changes in modal preference and language use, and these can be used to index the identities materialised through the multimodal text. At this point, the initial questions raised above may yield more complex answers.

From a multimodal perspective, it is clear that data generated and collected in online environments is informed by its technical affordances and also its social orientation. It follows that what is analysed should also bear the platform potentials and constraints in mind. From this understanding of the blog's social and technical orientation, we can turn again to Thinly Spread and consider what can be said using a multimodal social semiotic approach.

Thinly Spread's blog offers itself to its readers as highly edited and reflective of a particular social positioning. Even the selection of the blogger's template is suggestive of a certain politics of choice (Kress 2009). This is evidenced through the use of 'Elegant Premium Wordpress Themes', which is not a standard, free template, but an option for purchase. As Figure 34.1 illustrates, this enables Thinly Spread to orchestrate multimodal ensembles – framing, layout and colour – and to draw on these modal resources to engage with the imagined audiences for the blogger's text. This enables us to see how identity may be indexed in Thinly Spread's blog. The photograph on the 'About me' page functions as a conceptual image with an idealised notion of family. The gaze in the photograph does not explicitly engage with the audience and establishes personal distance, so that the blog appears like a professional portfolio showcasing the blogger's visual art (photography). This reading of the blogger's use of image and framing is supported by the writing 'I am also a freelance copywriter and photographer and an unpublished (as yet) fiction writer'.

Online communities are likely to invest considerably in developing the mode of image as a major means of communication. Yet, the specific and situated ways in which images are taken up, shaped and designed will vary largely on the preferences of each group, such as the distinctive values and interests particular to their community. This is to say that how each community will approach the multimodal orchestration of image with other modes will differ, due in large part to the social shaping and situated uses of image in their respective disciplines. In cases where members of an online community are bi/multilingual and a part of extended and other
communities of practice, the interaction as materialised on the online platform becomes more complexly articulated. In the example in the following section, I elucidate this point by referring to a group of multilingual youth and their video-sharing practices on YouTube.

**The case of video-sharing platforms**

In the previous case, I described the social orientation and technical affordance of online platforms. Mainly, the argument detailed the need to account for the pre-given set of design resources bloggers use for meaning-making. In the case of video-sharing, I further address the potentials and constraints of online platforms with an emphasis on media use in transnational contexts.

Video-sharing websites have increased in popularity with the onset of the World Wide Web. Created in 2005, YouTube is among the top-visited websites, with millions of users and thousands of daily uploads. Adami (2009) has written about the social and semiotic affordance of YouTube as a video-sharing platform, namely its ‘video-response’ capability, which was introduced in 2006. YouTube is of particular interest to applied linguists interested in multimodal approaches to language and identity research given its ease of access, its widespread and worldwide use and its interactive content-sharing potential. In what follows, I discuss the use of YouTube in research that I undertook with a group of Filipino British youth, who call themselves the Pinoys, focusing on their multimodal design and the affordances this created for identity work (Domingo 2012).

YouTube as a video-sharing website allows users to upload and disseminate content to a wide audience. Like the blog platform, YouTube enables comments in response to video posts and discussion threads. However, a key distinction between these two platforms is that design resources for making the video are not as extensive or readily available within the YouTube platform as in Wordpress. YouTube users, like the Pinoys, must rely on other platforms before they can upload and disseminate their videos on YouTube. It is therefore essential that YouTube users develop a level of proficiency with other digital devices beyond the video-sharing platform (e.g. using a variety of modes such as moving image, colour, speech and sound). Such practices have been referred to as a form of remix (Knobel and Lankshear 2008), whereby digitally enabled tools become cultural resources for shaping modes into creative blends through photo-shopping images and layering audio. Scholars looking at these processes have theorised them in terms of hybridity (West 2008), crossing (Rampton 2005) and in-betweenness (Bhabha 2004). Current research draws from these notions to describe communication practices with media use as transnational (Madianou and Miller 2011; Lam and Warriner 2012). Research attentive to these concepts frequently examines changing notions of communities, identities and belonging in the context of globalisation (Appadurai 1996; Dolby and Rizvi 2008; Ríos-Rojas 2011).

As we will see in Figure 34.2, the Pinoys’ use of YouTube demonstrates how video-sharing is linked to other digital platforms. The Pinoys employed both digitally enabled and print-based resources to compose multimodal texts. In the case of their YouTube music videos, this blending and moving across environments (both online and offline as well as across platforms) was a critical component of how they engaged with a transnational audience. This is illustrated in their rap song, ‘Kapag A’koy Bumabalik’ [When I return], written and performed by KidCras and KyD, key members of the Pinoys (see Appendix for the lyrics). ‘Kapag A’koy Bumabalik’ was first composed as written lyrics and later turned into a rap song. It was filmed and edited using a variety of digital devices, including video camera, audio recorder, mobile phone, microphone and a desktop computer, before being uploaded onto YouTube. In creating this multimodal text, KidCras and KyD collaborated with other members of their hip hop group Lirikong.
Supremo, both locally in London and internationally; the platform Ulead was used to edit an assemblage of video footage captured across different spaces, including iconic and historic sights, such as the Andres Bonifacio Monument in Manila and Westminster in London.

My discussion of ‘Kapag A’koy Bumabalik’ in this chapter draws on my three-year ethnography (Domingo 2012), in which I had the opportunity to watch the Pinoys both online and offline and observe their movement across digital and physical environments. This music video, much like other videos they created, became a generative site for an analysis of hybrid identities, transnational exchanges and global belonging. As I will show, analysis of their multimodal orchestrations made evident how their music videos were shaped both semiotically and socially, with an awareness of language as imbued with social, political and cultural narratives (Nero 2006; Brutt-Griffler 2007).

One example is that, as the Pinoys’ transnational community became increasingly diverse, so too did their appropriation of digital platforms (see Figure 34.2). Additionally, they used Tagalog, British English, Spanish and other languages in online conversation with youth around the world in the various digital platforms. For example, in the case of ‘Kapag A’koy Bumabalik’, there were a total of 86,386 views and 119 comments for the video uploaded on YouTube. Feedback was given by youth in their group in London and also transnational audiences from a range of countries, including the United States, China, Sweden, the Philippines and Switzerland. Comments were given mostly in Tagalog and English and ranged in scope from praise of the video, affirmation of the political message and general approval of the music, to more specialised...
commentaries focused on the historical sites featured and their clothing design. There were also questions raised about translation of the lyrics and explanation of its meaning, as well as queries about how to download the video and music. The video garnered significant attention and communicative exchanges particular to cultural heritage, language use and the political issues the Pinoys raised in the video.

YouTube allowed the Pinoys to upload videos that encompassed their membership across communities and to reach wider social networks. The Pinoys specifically described their use of social media, digital technologies and hip hop for reaching other youth whom they may not otherwise have been able to meet in person. Using online platforms like YouTube enabled them to share their music with transnational audiences from Europe, Asia and North America and to develop a sense of belonging in local and global networks.

Unlike the digital platforms the Pinoys used (listed in Figure 34.2), YouTube is more constrained when it comes to customising a multimodal text. For example, still and moving images, written texts and audio files could be uploaded; however, the ability to manipulate their layout was very limited, as were fonts, frames and colours. For the Pinoys, this meant harnessing these limited technical orientations and finding ways to shape them to achieve their social purposes, namely to reach a wider network of transnational youth who did not always share their linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds. To do so, they used other digital platforms, such as Ulead, Photoshop, Cubase and FL Studio, to customise and personalise the videos that they uploaded on YouTube.

All of the modes used for ‘Kapag A’koy Bumabalik’ acted as cultural resources to signal the membership of the Pinoys across communities. For example, the Pinoys made use of colours (clothing and accessories to represent their hip hop affiliations), frames (zooming in and panning out to capture landscapes and portraits of people), rhythm (film footage corresponds to the beat of the music) and writing (visual effects of words appearing on the screen and inscription on the clothing they designed and wear for the video). Filipino and hip hop identity is indexed, for example, in the chain that KidCras wears in the video, which makes use of the Philippine flag, featuring three stars and a sun along with blue, white and red beads.

In sum, multimodal social semiotics as the sole framework would yield different understandings of identity as experienced by the Pinoys in digital environments. By combining multimodal analysis with theoretical perspectives on identity in applied linguistics, it is possible to develop notions of hybrid identities by examining the language affiliations, language expertise and language inheritance of bi/multilingual youth, such as the Pinoys, using multimodal tools that consider the interrelationship of language with other modes of communication (see Domingo 2012).

Future directions

This chapter has focused on a multimodal approach to identity research in online authoring and video-content sharing. Given their social and semiotic functions, blogs and video platforms make it possible, perhaps more so than other media sites, to look at the present state of social interaction online, and to consider how identities are indexed in these online spaces. However, there are a number of issues to which applied linguists interested in multimodal approaches need to pay attention. First and foremost, it is important to remember that content online is shaped by the potentials and constraints of the virtual environment and by the pre-given modal resources of the platform, and that these potentials and constraints impact on online identities. Additionally, writing has to be considered in its context of use in the
virtual environment and as it is configured with other modes. In this regard, what is examined online, such as social interaction and text making, should also consider the social and technical affordances of a particular site.

Second, online communities are often fluid entities with less bounded communication practices. Relationships among diverse groups of people and their creative blends of multimodal texts have changed with the onset of digital innovations. Fixed notions of belonging, communities and identities are not adequate for conceptualising research on identities, as they are remixed and hybridised online. Consequently, applied linguists would need to consider how new media and digital technologies mediate the social interactions of participants, how these ‘local’ exchanges relate to the global and transnational and what identities are made possible in the virtual world.

Third, global and technological changes are remaking how people navigate borders to access and disseminate cultural resources (Madianou and Miller 2011; Lam and Warriner 2012). For language and identity studies in applied linguistics, the online space is a rich site for exploring changes in the social and semiotic aspects of people’s interactions online. For the future, more research can be conducted that explicitly links the social, semiotic and technical affordances of platforms to examine transnational communication practices with media use and the identities that these afford.

It is evident that current social trends, alongside the innovative and creative capacities of new media, afford people with new ways of making meaning. How we see writing is changing on online platforms; what counts as text is increasingly less linear and more modular, less stable and more ephemeral – sentences, paragraphs, extended texts and narratives are not always readily available for analysis. More and more, we see a confluence of modes, a variety of layout configurations and multimodal ensembles that are remaking how we read, interact and reach imagined audiences. For applied linguists interested in language and identity, multimodality offers a means for describing and accounting for these shifts with a micro-analytic lens for examining the nuances, patterns and fluid movement of people, their texts and their cultural resources as they are made and remixed online.

Summary

New digital environments are constantly introduced and those that have existed are perpetually transforming. With these expansions in our social world, people are constantly given new semiotic tools to arrange, select and share meanings. This chapter is an attempt at illuminating some of the ways in which multimodality can begin to address these social shifts when doing language and identity studies in online environments.

To date, multimodal approaches have not often been integrated into language and identity studies in applied linguistics. This chapter demonstrated how the application of a multimodal approach can broaden notions of content in researching language and identity online. Content online increasingly integrates modes beyond writing and speech; multimodality provides a framework to analyse identity in texts and social interaction in digital environments.

The chapter also highlighted the potentials and constraints of multimodal design in digital platforms and the ways in which semiotic resources are used to shape an online identity for an imagined audience. This chapter also elucidated the key features of digital platforms, namely blogs and video-sharing websites, and their effects on writing and multimodal text making, as well as social exchanges among global and transnational audiences. Finally, this chapter provided a number of cases to illustrate how multimodality could be of assistance to applied linguists.
The two case studies offered initial findings that draw on the potentials of an interdisciplinary approach for understanding conceptualisations of language and identity in an increasingly global and digital world.

Related topics

Historical perspectives on language and identity; Language and identity in linguistic ethnography; Critical discourse analysis and identity; Linguistic practices and transnational identities; A linguistic ethnography of identity: adopting a heteroglossic frame; Challenges for language and identity researchers in the collection and transcription of spoken interaction; Straight-acting: discursive negotiations of a homomasculine identity; Language and identity in the digital age; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.

Further reading


Notes

1 The chapter draws on data from a research project on food blogs and multimodal principles of composition. This research is a part of a larger project on multimodal methods for researching digital environments (MODE) (mode.ioe.ac.uk) and is funded by the ESRC.

2 Each online platform carries with it a particular social affordance. Such affordance is often described in categories associated with age, gender and class. For example, the Pew Research Internet Project (2013) identifies that 71 per cent of online adults use Facebook and only 17 per cent use Instagram. In terms of social impact, the average Facebook user has been identified as having more ‘close relationships’, and their distant communal ties often benefit through the social affordances of the platform for ‘reviving dormant’ relationships (e.g. provide newsfeed updates about daily activities and big life events such as the birth of a child or marriage). The findings from this report, while drawn from US demographics, align to a great extent with findings from other reports about social media and online behaviours. The UK-based OFCOM Report on Adults’ Media Use and Attitudes (2014) also reports that Facebook remains the default service for most online adults. In both reports, distinction is made about the experiences and attitudes of users, dependent on age group. Young adults are often cited as having a more liberal approach to regulating their profiles while also being more proactive in managing their online experiences. In contrast, adults are often seen as having more conservative attitudes for protecting their identity online. This chapter departs from such bounded categorisations to attend to the more fluid movement of people and their texts within and across social media sites.

3 The discussion of the Pinoys in this chapter is drawn from a larger research project on adolescent literacy and bridging in-school and out-of-school literacy multimodal practices. It is funded by the National Academy of Education and Carnegie Corporation.

References


Myrrh Domingo


Appendix

‘Kapag A’koy Bumabalik’ lyrics*

Intro, KidCras:
Hey yo, this is KidCras
Back in the Philippines
Check this out, alright
Lirikong Supremo, Check it out
Chorus, KidCras and KyD:
Masarap ang pakirandam kapag a’koy bumabalik (bumabalik)
Makikita ang lugar kung saan ko nakuha ang aking katapangan
Ang loob ko ay lumalakas kapag a’koy bumabalik (bumabalik)
Daladala ko sa puso ko ang aking bansa kahit saan makarating (kahit saan makarating)
[It makes me feel good whenever I return (return)
See the place where I learned to be courageous
I get stronger within whenever I return (return)
I carry my country in my heart no matter where I go (no matter where I go)]

1st verse, KidCras:
Back in Manila from London
Jump off the plane, touch down
Kamusta ka, yeah I’m back again
With a fresh style, not one of the best style
But bet I’ll still be standin on feet on the next round
Like Pacquiau, this kid is a killa
Yea, the modern day thrilla in Manila
I set trends of my own, but don’t copy it,
So many of your shirt designs are whack and that’s obvious

2nd verse, KidCras:
Three stars and the sun yeah, I’m reppin it
You ain’t really representin, you disrespectin it
I’m proud of my country but ain’t proud of the government
The cops are corrupt and the system dysfunctionate
How can our nation not solve the situation
Survivin everyday over minimum wages
But this is my country, I will rep til the death of it
Put the flag in the air if you’re proud of your heritage

Chorus, KidCras and KyD:
Masarap ang pakirandam kapag a’koy bumabalik (bumabalik)
Makikita ang lugar kung saan ko nakuha ang aking katapangan
Ang loob ko ay lumalakas kapag a’koy bumabalik (bumabalik)
Daladala ko sa puso ko ang aking bansa kahit saan makarating (kahit saan makarating)

* I take responsibility for the transcription of the lyrics from the music video and do not associate any potential errors in translation to the Pinoys.

The video can be accessed on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzcsKjwMSVg