THE INTERNET AS A GLOCAL DISCOURSE ENVIRONMENT
A Commentary on "Second Language Socialization in a Bilingual Chat Room" by Wan Shun Eva Lam and "Second Language Cyberhetoric: A Study of Chinese L2 Writers in an Online Usenet Group" by Joel Bloch

Dimitris Koutsogiannis
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Bessie Mitsikopoulou
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

ABSTRACT

The Internet as a worldwide literacy practice environment has created a new situation in communication, providing a new dynamic field for research. On the basis of the two articles under discussion, this commentary develops three main aspects of the Internet: as an informal learning environment for English as a second/foreign language; as a discursive space where identities are formed and social relationships are negotiated; and, as a space where the intermingling of the global and the local gives rise to hybrid language varieties. Taking into account that electronic environments are not neutral literacy practice environments but are involved in a complex nexus of power structures and relations that also need to be explored, this paper briefly addresses issues related to theoretical and methodological approaches for the study of language varieties in the Internet.

The Internet as a worldwide literacy practice environment has created a new situation in communication and has consequently provided a source from which research strands may develop. From the point of view of new media studies, an important issue concerning research on Internet discourse centers around how the Internet is conceptualized, theorized, and analyzed (see, among others, Schneider & Foot, 2004). In linguistics and in literacy studies, there have been a number of publications over the last decade attempting to explore the consequences of this "new communicative order" (Street, 2000). It should not come as a surprise, however, to learn that there has been limited interest on the matter from the perspective of less widely spoken languages (Koutsogiannis, 2004). Quite the opposite, there is increased and systematic research interest concerning English on the Internet (Crystal, 2001; Herring, 2001). Another category of research examines the Internet as a contact zone, a space where the local meets the global. In this case, the issue is approached either from the perspective of local language and culture, examining, for instance, the effects of English as a lingua franca in local languages and cultures (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000; Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou, 2003; Warschauer, Said, & Zohry, 2002), or from the perspective of English as a global language and the new varieties of Englishes (Crystal, 2003). In the area of second language (L2) research in particular, publications focus on, among other issues, language socialization, language learning, intercultural learning, and social or political effects in synchronous and asynchronous electronic environments.

It is in the last of these categories that Lam's and Bloch's articles fall. These texts seem to share at least three main views of the Internet as: an informal learning environment for English as a second/foreign language; a discursive space where identities are formed and social relationships are negotiated; and, a space where the intermingling of the global and the local gives rise to hybrid language varieties.

THE INTERNET AS AN INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR ENGLISH AS L2

Although the tradition of informal learning -- which in the case of languages is rather rich (Hull & Shultz, 2002) -- is not generally drawn upon, it is clear that both texts consider the Internet as a "safe house," structuring alternative spaces for social and consequently discourse participation, where ESL students have more opportunities for freeing writing from the constraints of the traditional classrooms. In Lam's contribution, the two students improved their proficiency in English through their extensive participation in a chat room with other young Chinese from various parts of the world. In Bloch's paper, Chinese students who in most cases lived in the US had the opportunity to argue, negotiate, agree, and jointly draft and redraft texts electronically. In both cases, the limitations of the traditional classrooms and the advantages of the Internet as a discursive space are mentioned. Furthermore, it is worth noting that both Lam's and Bloch's articles approach L2 not from the perspective of formal education -- discussing, for instance, issues such as L2 curriculum, standard language norms, and standardized testing (quite popular issues in academic publications lately) -- but from that of discourse.

While we do agree with the view of the Internet as an environment which "can foster the development of sociocognitive literacy in a number of ways" (Kern, 2000, p. 259), we suggest that care be exercised when comparisons with classroom learning are attempted and possible pedagogic effects are sketched out. For instance, through using her personal observations on the progress made by the two teenagers and the presentation of narratives from the interviews, Lam argues that the Internet has enhanced the two students' language proficiency by giving them "a sense of fluency in English" and has thus served as a literacy practice which has "influenced their relation to the English language in the US." This argument could further be supported by evidence from chat room exchanges showing what language skills or literacies are developed, and by more data from classroom discourse. From the examples offered, though, the language used in the chat room appears to be a hybrid vernacular variety that has little connection with the language used in schools.

In Bloch's article, the reader quite often encounters analogies drawn between what is happening on the Internet and what is happening in the school classroom. Examples are given and the point is made that classroom teaching has a lot to gain from the adoption of Internet practices. At this point in our view, Bernstein's (1996) principle of recontextualisation should be seriously taken into account. Recent research shows that the incorporation and use of the Internet in L2 seems to be much more complex than it first appeared (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

We think this is a point worth dwelling on, because a reading of the articles promotes the optimistic view that synchronous and asynchronous communication on the Internet offers a considerable potential for language socialization and language learning. The global media of the Internet may well allow immigrants the opportunity of language socialization in a less stifling environment than that of the average school, but we must bear in mind that this process will involve forms of literacy which may differ significantly from traditional forms of school literacy (Christie, 1989). We must also remember that all too often in the past we have been led into a logic of technological determinism (Barnes, 2000). For example, innumerable articles have been written over the last 20 years extolling the ability of Word Processors, Local Area Networks, Hypertexts, and the Internet to support literacy education and, especially, assist second language learners (Hawisher & Selfe, 1999). Yet, despite the wholesale technologisation of education, all the evidence shows that improvement has been slight, if indeed there has been any at all (Lankshear, Snyder, & Green, 2000).

THE INTERNET AS AN IDENTITY FORMING DISCURSIVE SPACE

"In the contemporary period of globalization, the construction of identity and social relations is taking place increasingly within the trans-border circulation of cultural and discursive materials," says Lam in her article. The Internet, in particular, can be seen as a discursive space where traditionally marginalized

groups, such as immigrants (see Lam's article) have the opportunity to find a "place at the table," express themselves, and engage in a dialogue with a global audience (Mitra & Watts, 2002, p. 488). By challenging traditional rhetorical structures (as in Bloch's article) and by creating new forms of Englishes, the participants in the two studies become "speaking agents" who create a "dwelling space" which they inhabit and from where they address the public sphere (Mitra & Watts, p. 486).

In the two articles currently under analysis, young Chinese immigrants learning English as a second language are in the process of constructing their individual and collective identities in the discursive space of the Internet. The construction of identity is primarily and explicitly addressed in Lam's article, one of the most interesting articles in this emerging area of study. It successfully connects the tradition in socio-cultural studies of language and literacy with the new possibilities created by virtual Internet communities for language practices, socialization, and consequently, for building identities. The evidence is persuasive, as is the author's explanation of how, through their participation in an "affinity group" (Gee, 2003), the two teenagers form their collective ethnic identity.

In Bloch's article, while the issue of identity construction may not be explicitly addressed, it is found in at least three parts of the text. The first is when the relationship between the individual and the group is discussed. Through an analysis of argumentative forms, the author briefly outlines the differences in the cultural construction of collective and individual identities and illustrates the ways in which individual identities are negotiated in terms of group identities, taking into account that in Chinese culture "a person sees herself as part of a group rather than as an isolated individual, as is often seen in the West." In another part of the paper, there are conflicting construed identities shown for the journalist who is described as being "trapped between her Chinese heritage and her role in the U.S. media." Finally, in the process of organising a collective response, a discursive identity is outlined here for the Chinese student who lives and studies in the US.

Two points are worth discussing here. The first relates to group-member relationship in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments. In his discussion of group membership, van Dijk (1998) suggests that social groups and their members are generally distinguished by who they are, what they do, what they want, what they believe, where they stand, what they have or don't have (p. 154). He further argues that participants in communicative events share knowledge (personal, social, and cultural) about each other and have a model of self and others (pp. 225-226). In the case of synchronous and asynchronous communication encounters, it seems particularly interesting to expand research in the direction of examining the different ways through which the negotiation of the imagined self and of the other is construed. The two articles under discussion offer two characteristic examples in this direction.

The second point refers to the disappearance of physical boundaries of cyberspace and the effects this may entail for the constitution of the self and of the other. For instance, Mitra & Watts (2002) argue that "the definition of the other and the dispossessed is often predicated upon where they are and how they are placed within that real space" and suggest that most discussion about diaspora has been primarily predicated upon a rigorous construction of space (p. 485). The point here seems to be that, due to the specific nature of the Internet, a shift has been noted both with respect to what is considered to be the center and the margin, and with respect to the ways power is distributed and legitimated. For instance, according to Mitra & Watts (2002, p. 488), the "placeless" discourse of cyberspace explodes the scope for collaborative activism by marginal communities to global levels. This can also be seen in Bloch's discussion of data when the possibility of a collective response is being explored by the members of the group, and a form of a "collaborative activism" is being considered. This view of the Internet as a medium through which forms of "collaborative activism" develop among group members and among L2 learners in particular, seems to be a direction worth exploring further in future research.

A GLOBAL-LOCAL DIALECTIC

The fact that the Internet has become a contact zone between the local and the global in everyday literacy practices is beginning to receive important priority in the field of literacy, cultural, and educational studies. Most studies approach these cross-cultural and cross-linguistic computer-mediated literacy practices in the context of a contradiction noted in postindustrial societies between global networks and local identities, leading to a construction of hybrid postmodern identities. The concept of "glocal," which has been recently employed in fields such as economics, sociology, and architecture, is used as a refinement of the concept of "global" and as a more descriptive term for what is happening in the world today. Accordingly, global culture should not be treated monolithically as "unified" or as a "socializing institution" into which local cultures integrate, but as a contradictory phenomenon, which entails a dialectical relationship between the global and the local. To describe this process, Robertson (1995) has coined the term "glocalization," which he describes as "the universalization of the particular and the particularization of the universal." This view of glocalization assumes a dynamic negotiation between the global and the local, with the local appropriating elements of the global which are of use, while employing at the same time strategies to retain its identity.

We could say that the two articles not only move in this direction but also make, from this perspective, two important contributions to L2 research. The global-local dimension is explicitly addressed in Lam's article and related research is successfully employed to enable the author to attempt the connection. Moreover, the glocal aspect constitutes part of the analytic process and it is clearly shown in the discussed data. Bloch searches the degree to which literacy practices on a Usenet (especially in the argumentation strategies employed) are shaped by factors of locality. Specifically, Bloch's study focuses on "how non-native English speakers can take control of the discourse on the Internet for their own purposes even when having to write in a second language" by tracing elements of "a global form of rhetoric" on an asynchronous Usenet where individuals from different parts of the world discuss issues of particular interest to them. The main contribution of this paper could be considered to be the analytic emphasis on the rhetorical structure in CMC environments, an area which is not often addressed in related research (Cubota, 2002; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002), and an implied element of contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996) which would be of interest for future analysis.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we would like to raise two general points. The two texts avoid Manichaeism stances about literacy practices on the Internet: They do not search for homogeneity or heterogeneity, imperialism or resistance, but rather they focus on what "third cultures" or "third spaces" are constantly being created (Kramsh, 1993). On the other hand, it is exactly at this point where we have to be particularly careful when it comes to forms of local Englishes. This approach is interesting from the point of view of the English language, since it draws attention to the existence of new varieties. However, this descriptive account could establish a stance toward other languages as being subordinate to English, by placing emphasis on traces that these other languages mark on varieties of English and by totally ignoring aspects of power structures. The danger here is that we may be led to an apolitical relativism (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2001) focusing exclusively on a description of what is happening in the contact zone and missing the effects of power and the point that electronic environments are not neutral literacy practice environments (Koutsogiannis, 2004).

In discussing the two articles' scope and findings, we have already presented some new directions into which literacy research in CMC environments could expand. Further, the "new communicative order" poses a number of questions concerning the expanded new agenda and the methodological approaches employed. For instance, the qualitative thematic analysis found in Bloch's paper is exclusively based on text analysis and restricts discussion when it comes to cultural issues. Whereas in cases of traditional

literacy practices the researcher often has information available concerning the participants' background (e.g., language socialization, linguistic history), when investigating CMC literacy practices, this information may not be available to the researcher. This background knowledge, however, may prove to be quite important and necessary when influences from L1 and/or L2 are explored.

Moreover, although it is commonly accepted in related research that new forms of analytic and research tools are needed in the investigation of the new media, there is still much to be done. On a final note, we do agree with Luke (2002) who states that the new generation of critical analysis of discourse

> must contend with blended and hybrid forms of representation and identity, and new spatial and temporal relations generated by the technologically enhanced "flows" of bodies, capital, and discourse that characterize economic and cultural globalization. These are likely to require new, hybrid blends of analytic techniques and social theories. (p. 98)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dimitris Koutsogiannis is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Philology, at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Deputy Director of the Portal for the Support of Greek language teachers, Centre for Greek Language. His areas of special interest include educational linguistics, literacy and technology, literacy education, and distance learning. He is the editor of *Information-Communication Technology and Literacy: The International Experience* (2001, Thessaloniki: Centre for the Greek Language)

Email: dkoutsog@lit.auth.gr

Bessie Mitsikopoulou is a Lecturer in the Department of Language and Linguistics, Faculty of English Studies, at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Her research interests are in the areas of critical discourse analysis, educational linguistics, applications of new technologies in education, and critical and academic literacies. She is the co-editor of *Policies of Linguistic Pluralism and the Teaching of Languages in Europe* (with B. Dendrinos, 2004, Athens: Metaihmio Publications & the University of Athens) and *The Periphery Viewing the World* (with C. Dokou & E. Mitsi, 2004, Athens: Parousia).

Email: mbessie@enl.uoa.gr

REFERENCES

Barnes S. B. (2000). Bridging the differences between social theory and technological invention in human-computer interface design. *New Media & Society, 2*(3), 353-372.

Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity. Theory, research, critique.* London: Taylor & Francis.

Canagarajah, A.S. (1999). On EFL teachers, awareness, and agency. *ELT Journal, 53,* 207-214.

Christie, F. (1989). *Language education.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Cubota, R. (2002). The impact of globalization on language teaching in Japan. In D. Block & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Globalization and language teaching* (pp. 13-28). London & New York: Routledge.

Gee, J. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hawisher, G., & Selfe, C. (1999). Reflections on research in computers and composition studies at the century's end. In J. Hancock (Ed.), *Teaching literacy using Information Technology* (pp. 31-47). Victoria: International Reading Association & Australian Literacy Educators' Association.

Hawisher, G., & Selfe, C. (Eds.). (2000). *Global literacies and the World-Wide Web.* New York: Routledge.

Herring, S. (2001). Computer-mediated discourse. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 612-634). Oxford, England: Blackwell.

Hull, G., & Shultz, K. (2002). *School's out.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Kern, R. (2000). *Literacy & language teaching.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Koutsogiannis, D. (2004). Critical technoliteracy and "weak" languages. In I. Snyder & C. Beavis (Eds.), *Doing literacy online: Teaching, learning and playing in an electronic world* (pp. 163-184). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Koutsogiannis, D., & Mitsikopoulou, B. (2003). Greeklish and Greekness: Trends and discourses of glocalness. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, 9*(1). Retrieved July 6, 2004, from http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol9/issue1/kouts_mits.html

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C., & Thorne, S. (2002). Foreign language learning as global communicative practice. In D. Block & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Globalization and language teaching* (pp. 83-100). New York: Routledge.

Lankshear, C., & Snyder, I., with Green, B. (2000). *Teachers and technoliteracy. Managing literacy, technology and learning in schools.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Lankshear, C. & Knobel, M. (2003). *Planning pedagogy for i-mode: from flogging to blogging via wi-fi.* Melbourne: IFTE Conference. Retrieved February 25, 2004 from http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/1160/ifte2003.html

Luke, A. (2002). Beyond science and ideology critique: Developments in critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 22,* 96-113.

Mitra, A., & Watts, E. (2002). Theorizing cyberspace: the idea of voice applied to the internet discourse. *New Media & Society, 4*(4), 479-498.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Robertson, R. (1995). Glocalization. Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash, & R. Robertson (Eds.), *Global modernities* (pp. 25-44). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schneider, S. M., & Foot, K. A. (2004). The Web as an object of study. *New Media & Society, 6*(1), 114-122.

Street, B. (2000). New literacies in theory and practice: What are the implications for language in education? *Linguistics and Education, 10*(1), 1-24.

Toyoda, E., & Harrison, R. (2002). Categorization of text chat communication between learners and native speakers of Japanese. *Language Learning & Technology, 6*(1), 82-99. Retrieved July 6, 2004, from http://llt.msu.edu/vol6num1/TOYODA/

van Dijk, T. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach.* London: Sage.

Warschauer, M., Said, G., & Zohry, A. (2002). Language choice online: Globalisation and identity in Egypt. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, 7*(4). Retrieved August 31, 2003, from http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol7/issue4/warschauer.html