



## Bronies learning English in the digital wild

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### Abstract

*This article reports on fan practices, in English, among an international community of bronies—adult fans of the animated cartoon My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (MLP). Originally directed at a target audience of young girls, MLP has become popular among men. These older male fans have been extremely active in producing multimodal and plurilingual fan practices. We explore how two different groups of bronies—one in Russia and the other in Spain—carry out fan practices in English. Applying digital ethnography, we describe six different cases of adult MLP fans. They both consume and create products such as fanfiction, translations, and fandubbing in different contexts with the use of sophisticated technologies. Not only do fandom practices allow these fans to develop digital identities and reach new audiences, they also help them to improve their English language skills—a task at which they reveal themselves to be both autonomous and self-critical. Regarding translation practices, we note several instances of bronies receiving mentoring from fellow fans who have a higher level of English. Finally, this article points out how, in the process of adapting their written output for global readerships, bronies can acquire some important transcultural skills.*

**Keywords:** *Fandom, Collaborative Learning, Digital Ethnography, New Literacies*

**Language(s) Learned in This Study:** *English*

**APA Citation:** Shafirova, L., & Cassany, D. (2019). Bronies learning English in the digital wild. *Language Learning & Technology*, 23(1), 127–144. <https://doi.org/10125/44676>

### Introduction

Much of the leisure activity that was once labeled a *hobby* now takes place on the Internet. A considerable portion of online hobbying is centered around fan practices—activities which involve not only consumption of popular culture products, but also participation in larger communities that share a similar degree of emotional engagement with those products (Jenkins, 2006). Fan practices can vary from receptive activities like watching videos, gaming, and following social media to creative activities such as fanfiction<sup>1</sup> writing, fandubbing,<sup>2</sup> and so on. According to Gee (2004), these practices are not only ludic in function but may also involve the production and exchange of tacit, practical knowledge quite unlike knowledge of a purely academic nature. Taken together, the wide variety of fan practices observable today might most aptly be labeled *the digital wild*, as indicated by the name of this special issue.

In this study we propose to explore how members of a fandom execute fan practices using a foreign language in their daily routines. Our study is based on two communities of adult fans of the TV series titled My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (MLP) who denominate themselves as *bronies* (*bro* [brother] + *ponies*). Though the cartoon was targeted at young girls when it first appeared in 2010, it has since become extremely popular among young men aged 18 to 30 who have developed a kind of ideology based on friendship, harmony, and tolerance (Kosnác, 2016). This community is famous for the intense productivity of its fan practices, which, according to some users, have invaded the Internet (Jones, 2015). Although the bulk of brony fandom is located in the US, some European countries have their own well-developed communities that communicate in their respective languages, but also use English as a lingua franca.

The current body of research on brony fandom has largely centered around gender and masculinity (e.g., Gilbert, 2015; Hautakangas, 2015; Jones, 2015; Valiente & Rasmusson, 2015), identity (e.g., Robertson, 2014), or ideology (e.g., Kosnác, 2016). Relatively little work has been devoted to the topics of language use or language learning. Based on the vast productivity of the fandom, its ideology, and the context, we suggest that it would be a relevant field of research to assess second language learning from a new literacies perspective, the perspective that views learning as embodied in social practices. In this article, we therefore explore how two different groups of bronies—one in Spain and the other in Russia—execute fan practices in English.

## Literature Review

### New Digital Literacies in a Fandom Space

According to various scholars, the use of digital technologies in informal surroundings, and specifically in fan communities, can generate new sources of learning (Gee, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Using the term *fans*, we mean those individuals who are emotionally attached to a pop-cultural product and who use digital technologies to consume and discuss the original products or create variations of them (Duffett, 2013; Sauro, 2014, 2017).

We propose to analyze language use in a fan community within the framework of new literacies. This framework draws from sociocultural approaches to literacy as a social phenomenon embedded within communities, values, norms, and social identities and regards literacy as an everyday practice situated within a specific context, timeframe, and space (Black, 2008; Gee, 1997; Lankshear, 1997).

Lankshear and Knobel (2006) claim that, with the appearance of participatory digital communication media, and Web 2.0 technology in particular, both the research approach to literacies and literacy practices themselves have changed. Specific platforms and digital communities (e.g., Wikipedia) enhance the notion of social in the reading and writing processes. They have not only a different appearance and interface, involving screens, pixels, codes, and so on, but also a new core “ethos” that is more collaborative, “participatory, and distributed than in conventional literacies (p. 25). These characteristics are conducive to a different mindset that produces different types of social practices and relationships (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The concept of these *new literacies* can be clearly observed in online fandoms, where fan communities produce unique practices and relationships driven by their shared affinity for specific pop-culture genres or products.

Black (2005) describes the social character of fanfiction writing, organized along participative and collaborative lines, with positive feedback, constructive criticism, and encouraging comments by voluntary proofreaders from within the fan community. Members of the community created a safe scaffolding environment for novice authors, thus fostering the development of foreign language literacies.

More recently, Zhang and Cassany (2016) explored the fansubbing of Spanish TV shows into Chinese and revealed it to be a highly collaborative, participative, and multimodal new literacy practice. However, compared to fanfiction, where the text is written by one person and then reviewed and discussed, the fansubbing process is a team undertaking from the start and involves the creation of a hierarchical structure in which each member is assigned a specific role (transcriber, translator, corrector, or editor). Such fansubbing teams are eager to achieve the best and closest to professional translation, leading to the construction of social norms according to strict quality standards and the values of the community.

These examples describe different forms of collaboration and knowledge construction in online fandoms, which vary from more flexible organizations to highly hierarchical structures. Nonetheless, these systems are always grounded in the specific practices, norms, and values of a particular community, and participation in them can develop new literacies.

## Transcultural Flows and Identity Development

Another widely debated issue is the bounded connection between digital identities and cultural flows of communities and learning (Black, 2006; Lam, 2006; Lee & Barton, 2011; Pearson, 2009). Taking a sociolinguistic perspective, Pennycook (2007) coined the term *transcultural flows* in order “to address the ways in which cultural forms move, change, and are reused to fashion new identities in diverse contexts” (p. 6). He analyzed how the English language and the popular culture of hip-hop are appropriated and localized in different countries and how this can reshape the performative identities of the users.

Studies on fandom and new literacies have also been concerned with cultural flows and identity development (Fukunaga, 2006; Valero-Porras, 2018). Lam (2006) was the first to address this issue in describing the case of a Chinese immigrant in the US who constructed his plurilingual and global identity in an anime fandom. She claims that migration processes cannot be analyzed in a monolingual and uncultured way given how digital technology facilitates the “socialisation to multiple modes of belonging and participation across national boundaries” (p. 173). This goes beyond the term *acculturation* and is better defined as *transculturation*. Black (2008) goes further and suggests that the notion of transculturation should be extended beyond migration studies. Applying it to formal education settings, she argues that transculturation can help students to develop “soft skills” to operate in a “transnational society” (p. 602).

Several publications (e.g., Blommaert, 2005; Thorne, Sauro & Smith, 2015) have pointed to the fluidity, multiplicity, and performativity of digital identity. This has further been supported by the work of scholars in the fields of both fandom and language learning. For instance, Valero-Porras and Cassany (2015, 2016) describe how a scanlation community, a fan community that specializes in translating manga, translated manga from English to Spanish. Members of this community considered it important to preserve Japanese or Asian connotations in the text, avoiding any cultural references to English culture or language, even though English was used as a mediation language. Valero-Porras and Cassany argue that the identity of a fan, in this case a fan of manga and fan of Japanese culture, is actually performed through this kind of language use. Along similar lines, Sauro (2017) claims that fanfiction writing can empower “multilingual youth” to “use their second language as a resource for indexing a global and multilingual identity” and reach “wider international readership” (p. 138).

In our case, the brony identity can be represented as a group affiliation identity which is “performed and negotiated in collaborative creative spaces” (Thorne et al., 2015, p. 226). At the same time, the choice of identifying oneself as a brony could be described as a performative act that underlines the *otherness* of adult men who choose to watch MLP.

Previous research on fan practices and language learning is clearly situated within themes such as new literacies, identity development, and transcultural flows. Within this theoretical context, we formulate two research questions (RQs):

1. How do bronies use English in their daily online routines?
2. How do bronies articulate their English language use?

## Methodology

We used digital ethnography as it was the methodology most commonly used in the fan studies discussed above (see Valero-Porras, 2018; Zhang & Cassany, 2016). In epistemological terms, this approach was suitable to work with the notion of new literacies spawned by the Internet and new technologies interconnected with social practices and meanings (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In addition, Hine (2015) underlines the importance of going to the digital field directly and not confining the gathering of data to interviews. Therefore, for our data collection, we combined semi-structured interviews (SIs) with participant observations over a 6-month period, from March 2017 to August 2017.

The number of interviews and observations varied due to the availability of the participants and the complexity of their practices. Observations were divided into *active participation* (in the case of fandubbing

routines and reverse translation), where the first author actually took part in the translating team, and *passive participation*, merely involving monitoring fan output and web spaces (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). In both cases, the first author documented the process by keeping field notes and making screenshots.

This work formed part of a larger research project including exploration of the field site and data interpretation, undertaken as partial completion of the requirements for a PhD at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

### Data Collection

In the course of researching the topic of language learning through animated online cartoons, the first author carried out an exhaustive search of different cartoon-based fandoms. The brony fandom was chosen over other options (e.g., the fandom devoted to *The Simpsons*) due to its high level of activity, large-scale community, and particularities (e.g., number of the brony haters and the unexpected popularity of MLP among young men).

Both researchers did not identify themselves as fans of the show before conducting the research. Nevertheless, the first author became familiarized with the show by watching every episode and reading the most popular works of fanfiction and grew to greatly enjoy it. Being an active consumer and genuinely liking the show helped her access the participants, interpret observations, and ask relevant questions during the interviews.

For their part, the bronies became interested in the researcher as a language specialist. When declaring that the first author was researching language learning, the bronies perceived it as something positive and were eager to explain and illustrate their language practices. Also, her proficient command of English helped the researcher to be accepted by the translators' team, because she could participate in the process fully.

The participants were members of two communities, each based in a MLP fandom space, a [Russian-language space](#) with 41,247 members, and a [Spanish-language space](#) with 937 members. Both included profile-driven forums with uploaded content and private chats, and both were linked to other spaces such as [DeviantArt](#) and [FimFiction.net](#) where the participants, who created fanfiction or fan-art, posted their content seeking broader audiences. The first author approached these sites because they enabled her to recruit participants and gather their ages, genders, geographic regions, and fan-practices, as these data were displayed in open profiles. [Table 1](#) shows information about the Spanish-speaking participants in the study.

**Table 1.** *Participants From the Spanish-Speaking Brony Online Community*

Name	Age	Occupation	Interests and Fan Practices	English Learning
Derpy	19	Student of an illustration course in Galicia, Spain	He watches MLP and YouTube, reads Reddit threads, plays role games, and draws and publishes fan-art.	He started to learn English in elementary school; however, he claimed that MLP was a major influence on his English level.
Gork	20	Student of mechanical engineering in Barcelona, Spain	He watches MLP, reads fanfiction, reads and writes posts on Reddit, and draws and publishes fan-art.	He joined the community with a high level of English proficiency; however, he admitted that MLP helped him to acquire new vocabulary.
Zlos	30	Pharmacist in Madrid, Spain	He watches MLP, reads and writes fanfiction, moderates the MLP forum, and manages a Spanish podcast about MLP.	He joined the community with a high level of English; however, he admitted that reading and writing fanfiction helped him to acquire new vocabulary.

*Note.* Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

The first author registered on the Spanish forum and sent private messages in Spanish to the most active participants. For the Russian forum, she approached the active bronies in Russian using the VK social

network—an extremely popular social media platform in Russia—as it was linked to many of the forum members’ profiles. Users who were active in the forum, admitted that MLP had helped them to learn English, and were open to collaborating were selected as participants (see Table 2). Prior to data collection, the research goals were explained and informed consent obtained from all six participants. The number of participants was limited to six because of the potentially huge amount of data to be gathered. Both communities were observed for a month before data were systematically collected in order to get a preliminary idea of the different discussions, activities, and communities linked to the forum (e.g., DeviantArt).

**Table 2.** *Participants From the Russian-Speaking Brony Online Community*

Name	Age	Occupation	Interests and fan practices	English learning
Shor	25	Figurine crafter in Omsk, Russia	He watches MLP, crafts figurines of characters from the show, and posts images of the figurines online.	He started to learn English in elementary school; however, he claimed that MLP was a major influence on his English level.
Bolk	24	Employee of an IT company in Minsk, Belarus	He watches MLP, does fandubbing, and translates for foreign guests at conventions. He is also part of a team translating the fanfiction novel <i>The B.T.</i>	He joined the community with a high level of English proficiency; but he admitted that MLP helped him to acquire new vocabulary.
Nork	35	Designer in a small city in Ukraine	He does not identify himself as a big fan of MLP. However, he is the leader of the translation project <i>The B. T.</i> He produces illustrations and an audiobook for the project.	He joined the community with a high level of English. He admitted that working in a team greatly helped him to improve his English.

The fan practices of the Russian-speaking participants were more diverse and recent than those of the Spanish-speaking participants, probably due to differences between the two communities as a whole in terms of size and level of activity. All six participants were men due to the overall imbalance in the international community.

**Table 3.** *Data Collected From the Participants*

Participants	Research Techniques	Online Chat Interview Word Count	Other Data
Derpy	2 SI, FPO	8,385	10 scrolling screenshots from DeviantArt
Gork	1 SI, FPO	2,968	10 scrolling screenshots from DeviantArt
Zlos	3 SI, FPO	5,643	-
Shor	1 SI, FPO	6,132	10 scrolling screenshots from DeviantArt
Bolk and Nork	1 SI, FPO, PO, CCs	7,888	Field notes ( $N = 3$ , 624 words), 8 screenshots, translated chapters of <i>the B.T.</i> ( $N = 12$ , 388 words), YouTube narrations (76 minutes), dubbing process recording (30 minutes)

*Notes.* SI = semi-structured interview; FPO = fan product observation; PO = participant observation; CCs = chat conversations

We analyzed the interviews and field notes (see Table 3) using a bottom-up qualitative content analysis

with [Atlas.Ti](#) software. In doing so, we followed Fukunaga (2006) and Cho and Lee (2014), who suggest that this type of analysis is the one best suited to thoroughly and systematically describing meaning. To analyze specific participants' fan practices, we carried out a discourse analysis (DA) focusing on language use (Gee, 2011).

## Data Analysis

The first author open-coded interviews and field notes twice to ensure reliability. For each interview or field note, she then created analytic memos to label all main observations and interpretations by means of a tool built into the Atlas.Ti application. This helped us to interrelate the codes and then construct categories while keeping the two RQs in mind. In order to induce the main categories, a schematic diagram of different levels of codes was made (Yin, 2016). Main categories (e.g., *the viewing routines*, *the fan practices*, *English improvement with MLP*, *the use of technologies*) emerged as we contrasted the gathered data.

Subsequently, the first author applied DA to the specific practices such as fandubbing and comment writing on DeviantArt. She coded how bronies used English in order to achieve their objectives, using the toolkit described by Gee (2011). In this fashion, she determined that the main themes of the two particular practices were *the sociocultural translation of idioms* (in the case of fandubbing) and *changes in the use of articles and connectors* (in the case of DeviantArt comments). This helped her to triangulate them with such subcategories such as *cultural value in fan translation* and *English improvement with MLP*. Finally, the second author revised the main categories and subcategories in order to facilitate the interpretation of results (Yin, 2016).

## Results

We divided the results into two parts, following the two RQs.

### RQ1. How Do Bronies Use English?

#### *The Viewing Routines*

Several conclusions could be drawn about participants' MLP viewing habits on the basis of their interviews. All six participants preferred to watch MLP streamed online in English. In both communities, the original English voice track was more popular, while official dubbed foreign language tracks were ridiculed by the members of both communities. However, with different levels of experience with English use, the participants described diverse strategies in order to improve comprehension. For two of them (Shor and Derpy), MLP was the first show they had ever watched in English and they depended heavily on subtitles. Other participants mentioned having previously relied on subtitles to help understand MLP or other shows. Nork even called this "the subtitles phase" of the learning process.

Shor started to watch MLP in 2013, developing a specific viewing routine. He watched each episode twice: the first time, with subtitles in Russian and socially (with his brother), and the second time, on the following day, without subtitles, and by himself. During the second viewing, undistracted by subtitles, he paid close attention to every detail in the animation. He never used a dictionary or paused the video, always either remembering the meaning from the previous viewing with its subtitles or deriving understanding from the context. Although he labeled these cartoons "easy to comprehend," he admitted that this routine had helped him gain a large amount of new vocabulary.

Derpy started out watching MLP in English with Spanish subtitles from 2013 to 2014, when he chose to watch it raw. When watching without subtitles, doubts about meaning would occasionally arise, at which point he would pause the video and go through the transcript of the episode on a MLP fan [page](#). There, he was able to find phrases he had not understood and decipher them. Furthermore, if he did not know the meaning of a word or a phrase, he used [WordReference](#) to translate it. Gork reported following a similar procedure.

All in all, for Shor and Derpy, MLP had provided the crucial initial motivation to move from viewing

audiovisual content in their respective mother tongues (Russian and Spanish) to viewing it in a foreign language.

### **English Use in Fan Practices**

The bronies' use of English was closely tied to the specific linguistic demands of the fan practices they were engaged in. Below, we focus on fandubbing and inverse translation.

Bolk had been producing the fandubbing project of the last season of MLP (Season 7). This project was constructed in the form of an experiment in which Bolk would translate an episode phrase by phrase after hearing it and then dub it into Russian almost simultaneously. In the process, he recorded his output as a Russian language track for the cartoon sequence in question. He used Mumble software both to record and to share it with his fandubbing partner, V. For Bolk, it was a way to challenge himself to translate an audiovisual product extremely fast while also applying some acting skills. He followed four main steps:

- **Step 1. Watching an Episode in English and Writing Notes**  
This was a useful technique for the more challenging English phrases, which could become difficult to translate spontaneously during the recording process, such as specific names from the pony world, puns, idioms, or inside jokes. See these examples:

*Oh, my bustles and bows!* (Season 7, Episode 6) This phrase was difficult to translate because of its specific relation to fashion, with which Bolk was unfamiliar. In this case, he resorted to using [an online dictionary](#) and the Russian-language Wikipedia site to find an acceptable translation (*турнюры и бантики*).

*Eternal Elegance Empire Silhouette* (name of a dress in Season 7, Episode 6) This was difficult to translate literally because it did not sound right or natural in Russian from Bolk's point of view. He ruminated on a better translation for a while and even asked my opinion. Finally, he looked through the subtitles of a popular fansubbing MLP group and was pleased with their translation: *Силуэт Империи Непроходящего Лоска* (roughly, *The silhouette of Empire of Eternal Gloss*). However, he ultimately preferred to invent a new interpretation, *Имперский Силуэт Вечногo Изящества* (*Empire Silhouette of Eternal Elegance*).

- **Step 2. Recording Translations Directly into Russian**  
Bolk's technique consisted of playing the video in raw format and listening to an English phrase, then pausing the video, translating it into Russian, and within seconds, recording it. He tried to reproduce the same pacing as in the original episode and also act out the emotions of the character. In addition, Bolk was eager to replicate the various accents heard on the show. For instance, Bolk transformed the Latin American accent (due to the [MLP fandom page](#)) of one of the characters (Zipporwhill, in Season 7, Episode 6) into the accent of an English-speaker talking in Russian, which he felt was most appropriate in a Russian-speaking context.
- **Step 3. Repetition of the Process if Initial Attempts Are Unsatisfactory**  
The most frequent difficulties came from the acting or the translation chosen. See these examples:

According to Bolk, the first phrase in [Figure 1](#) cannot be translated literally, because it includes a pun. It means that the characters were beaten up at their party. Bolk wanted to save the wordplay with cupcakes, which was an important element of the ponies' world. He made five attempts to reproduce it. Firstly, he focused on the meaning: *Нам только что надрала круп самая ужасная гостя* (roughly, *We just got our croups beaten up by the worst guest*). Secondly, he replaced *croups* with *the cupcakes*. At his third attempt, he was able to reproduce the pun itself: *Нам только что надрала по самые кексики самая ужасная кайфоломщица в мире!* (*We just got our cupcakes beaten up by the worst hype-crasher ever*). He then made two further attempts to slightly improve the phrase: *Нам только что надрала крупы по самые кексики самая ужасная кайфоломщица в мире!* (*We just got our croups beaten up to cupcakes by the worst hype-crasher ever*) and to act out this phrase at a fast pace and in a high voice to mimic the character Pinkie. We

can see how our participant is eager to reproduce the meaning of the phrase, the wordplay, and accurate acting.

Likewise, another phrase consisted of an idiom with a joke: *Easy as pie... Oh, I love pie!* Here, the challenge was to replace the English *easy as pie* idiom with a Russian idiom that could be similarly followed up, which Bolk managed to do by translating it as *как конфетку у ребенка. oo я обожаю конфетку!* (*As easy as taking candy from a child. I love candy!*).

- Step 4. Sharing Results and Publishing the Translation

When Bolk finished the dubbed audio track, his collaborator, V, would listen to his work, eliminate faulty segments, synchronize the dubbed audio track with the original video, and then publish the result online.



Figure 1. MLP movie trailer dubbing process, fan products, and translation

Cultural mediation played an important role in both the translation (idioms, jokes) and dubbing processes (voice acting, reproducing accents). The translator perceived his job to be not only showing the feelings and emotions of the characters, but also transferring semantic nuances in order to convey the same meaning and effect in Russian. In many instances, Bolk admitted that he ended up learning the meaning of many unusual English lexical items like *bustles and bows*.

### **Collaborative Inverse Translation Practice**

Bolk and Nork were also heavily involved in translating a work of brony fanfiction entitled *The B.T.* from Russian to English. They were assisted by two other members, V and D, who were living in other countries of the former Soviet Union. Each of the four had a specific role and function in this digital process, with Nork serving as the main translator and leader of the group; Bolk acting as the self-styled “grammar Nazi” responsible for checking the work of the others; D working as editor of the original Russian text, monitoring plot and character development in the English version; and V translating and providing technical support, explaining to the other members how to use the Etherpad editing platform and customizing it for the group’s purposes. Their objectives were not only to translate the text, but also to adapt it for an English-speaking readership. The process consisted of five steps, which Nork and Bolk described as “the five stages of hell”:

- Step 1. Preparing the Russian Text

First, the translators read the original Russian text and discussed what parts would have to be changed or adapted for English readers. Special attention was paid to parts that might be culturally

misunderstood, involved stylistic problems, or might not properly capture the development of a particular character. Collaboration was carried out by working simultaneously on a document uploaded in Google Docs (see Figure 2), and final changes were decided by majority vote.

- Step 2. Draft Translation

Each participant chose some parts of the text in order to translate it. This stage took place on the free online editing platform Etherpad, which is similar to Google Docs. The main difference between them was that instead of leaving comments, the users had an additional window on the right of the screen (see Figure 3), in which participants would discuss difficult fragments of the translation or engage in short conversations. A different color was assigned to each user so their contributions to the translation could be tracked. The Etherpad could be easily personalized as users could program different extensions into it. For instance, V developed an automated translation engine similar to Google Translate, with punctuation corrections incorporated, and then added it to the script of the translation plugin. These corrections were based on previous editing of their work by English native speakers.

- Step 3. Draft Editing

The participants read and edited the translation, introducing their versions of translation. To facilitate this process, they sometimes used Skype calls to read excerpts from the text aloud and comment on them. In this stage, one participant was responsible for introducing all changes into the draft document. Particularly difficult parts might be marked as *interesting* for further editing by native speakers.

- Step 4. Native Speakers' Editing

In this stage, native speakers checked the text for grammar, punctuation, and *language flow*, the last item being the area causing most difficulties for the Russian translators. The English-speaking editors also dealt with the items marked *interesting* in the preceding stage.

- Step 5. Final Revision

Once all corrections to the text were complete and all difficulties resolved, the final draft was formatted and published on the Fimfiction website. Also at this stage, Nork would receive comments from other members of the group about an audiobook he was producing, with a special focus on improving his pronunciation in English.

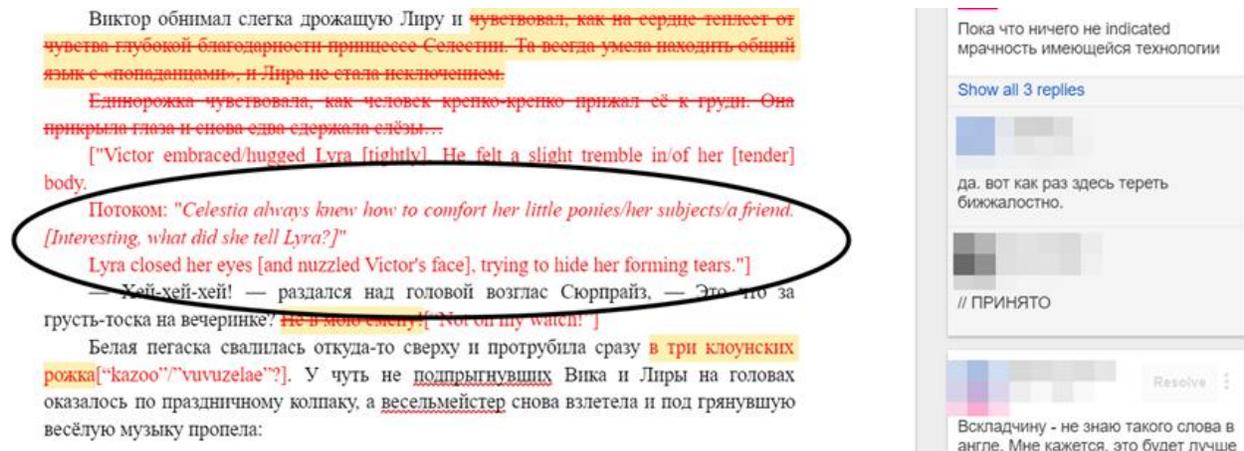


Figure 2. Fanfiction adaptation

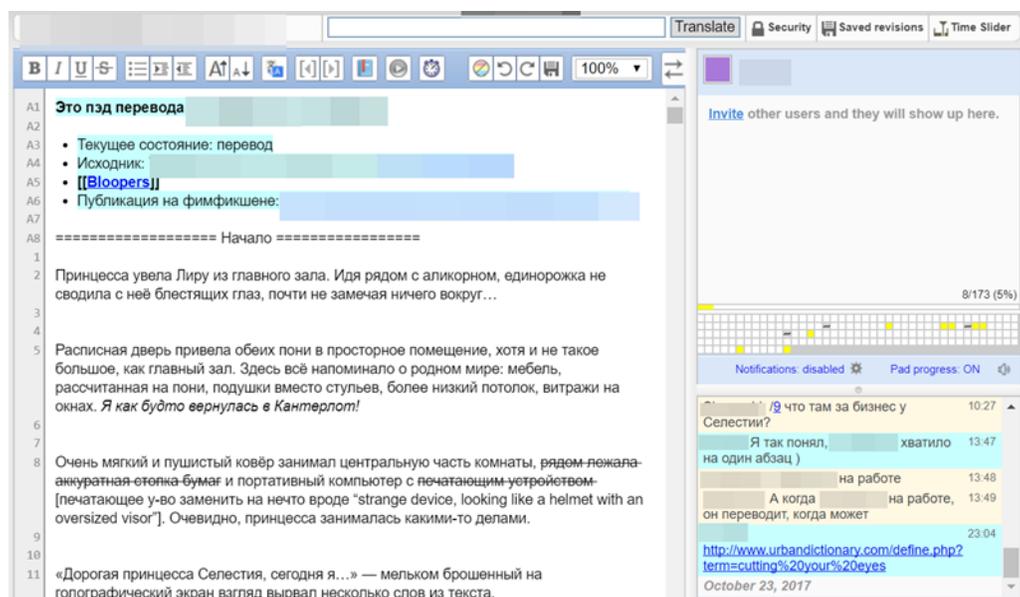


Figure 3. Fanfiction translation in Etherpad

### English Use in Written Discourse

Some of the participants posted on a discussion website, Reddit, or created fanfiction in English based on MLP. However, all of these practices had taken place between three and five years prior to our research, and participants did not seem to regard them as crucial to their language learning process.

The exception was Shor, who claimed that he had obtained 70% of his mastery of English by means of writing. He had been crafting pony figurines for over a year and quickly realized that in order to sell them online, he would have to be able to communicate with his customers in English. He also promoted his work on DeviantArt by writing descriptions of the figurines in English and responding to the comments he received. Initially, he would have the messages translated automatically from Russian using Google Translate. However, he admitted that this application made “a myriad of mistakes,” so he had to thoroughly check its output and make corrections before using it if necessary.

We observed two tendencies in his public messages and comments on DeviantArt from March of 2016 to May of 2017. The first was related to the content of his posts, which started out as simple descriptive labels for images of his figurines and evolved into much more fully-structured and emotionally engaging texts. The second tendency was connected to the increased grammatical competence exhibited in his texts. Two instances of the latter—one regarding his use of articles, the other his use of connectors—are described below.

In the beginning of 2016, Shor used almost no articles in English, reflecting the lack of articles in his native Russian. However, by December 2016, he had already started to use them occasionally. Figure 4 illustrates several grammar mistakes. Though he does use a definite article correctly (*the modeling sculpture*), Shor fails to use the indefinite article *a* in the sentence *I’m newbie*. However, in reply to a comment expressing surprise at Shor’s self-description a year later (*You say “I’m still a newbie”?*), Shor uses the article correctly (see Figure 5).



*Figure 4.* Message published by Shor on DeviantArt, March 9, 2016 (reproduced here with the author's permission)



*Figure 5.* Message published by Shor on DeviantArt, August 26, 2016 (reproduced with the author's permission)

We suggest that there is a connection between the correction offered by the commenter and then Shor's subsequent self-correction. This type of interaction could have played an important role in Shor's language development. Over the same period of time, Shor began to create more complex sentences in English using connectors like *so* and *as a result*. This can be seen in the publication from May 2017 in [Figure 6](#). We see that compared with the earlier post from March of the previous year ([Figure 4](#)), Shor's use of English became more sophisticated. Note also the use of discourse markers like *Oh* and *P.S.*

Moreover, the text was longer than before, explaining the work process and the difficulties involved. Also, articles were used. He made some mistakes but, nevertheless, the message became much more engaging.



*Figure 6.* Message published by Shor on DeviantArt, May 2017 (reprinted with the author's permission)

## RQ2. How Do Bronies Articulate Their English Use?

### *Technology Use*

Our research showed that digital technology was related to improved English language skills in comprehension and writing or translation and also facilitated collaborative undertakings. The participants relied on various elements or tool features to increase their reading and listening comprehension, particularly when they were just beginning to learn English:

- Reading  
During the viewing routines, almost every participant described the use of subtitles in order to understand the audio as a “phase” when improving their audiovisual comprehension.
- Video Control  
The participants used features of the video control such as pausing and re-watching fragments or episodes in order to improve their comprehension.
- Dictionaries  
Some of the participants used dictionaries such as WordReference or [Dictionary.com](http://Dictionary.com) during viewing and reading routines.

All participants depended on both dictionaries and machine translators to facilitate their production of written English:

- Machine Translators  
Google Translate was used by the English beginner, Shor, and also the translator, Nork. In both cases, the participants addressed the use critically, assuming that the machine translator offered only a draft that needed to be revised.
- Diverse Dictionaries  
During the reverse translation or fandubbing routine, participants would keep more than one

dictionary on hand. Bolk mentioned that he mostly used definition and synonyms dictionaries such as Dictionary.com, [The Macmillan Dictionary](#), or the [Oxford Dictionary](#). Also, [translation](#) (Russian–English), [collocation](#), and [slang](#) dictionaries were used.

Other software facilitated collaboration among the participants and was also used to disseminate or promote the fan products. Platforms such as Google Docs or Etherpad were used to work together on texts and share opinions about translations. We saw that Etherpad was particularly useful because of its customizability. As also noted with regard to the inverse translation process, a group chat was created using Skype in order to communicate about the work in progress. In the case of fandubbing, Mumble software was used to ensure high quality audio recordings. And finally, web pages and social media groups were key to publicizing and promoting the English translation of *The B.T.*

### **English Language Learning**

All of the participants admitted that MLP helped them to improve their English skills or at least to maintain their level. The reasons for this progress fall under three topics: motivation, collaboration, and sociocultural knowledge.

The majority of the participants affirmed that MLP was a motivational factor in their developing new language skills. For some of them, the most motivational breakthrough practice was the viewing routine. For others, it was reading or interacting with other users. For instance, Derpy claimed that MLP motivated him to start to use English more frequently, helping him to improve his language skills dramatically. When asked how this progress had become apparent to him, he said that when a native speaker was invited to participate in an English class he was taking, he found himself able to speak “freely” with him. This progress was manifested in his online practices too, as he started to perform a lot of them in English.

*When I want to search for something in Google, I do it in English. If I read manga, the same, in English. I follow a lot of channels on YouTube which are in English. I have plenty of examples XD. This is almost a second language for me, and everything thanks to this show about ponies xD.* (Translated from Spanish)

In fandubbing and inverse translation, the participants were motivated to use English not solely for the fan practice, but also with the clear aim of developing new language skills. For instance, Nork wanted to improve his intonation and writing through his participation in the *B.T.* project. Moreover, in the course of doing inverse translations, the participants noticed that they improved their English skills when collaborating. They corrected each other and members with higher levels of English proficiency helped those with lower levels. Nork claimed, for example, that his intonation in English had greatly improved thanks to Bolk’s help and corrections. Also, native English speakers were involved at a late stage in the editing process.

Furthermore, in every fan routine, the participants were aware of the implicit sociocultural context of the North American cartoon and, on several occasions, articulated what they had learned from this context. Most of them connected language learning with obtaining new lexis, which was generally situated in a specific context within the cartoon narrative. For example, Zlos reported that it was thanks to the story line of the MLP episode “Rarity Investigates,” he was able to learn the word *filly* and the idiom *ducks in a row*. He claimed that the practice of reading fanfiction also helped him acquire vocabulary through context:

*And yes, reading fanfic (of MLP and other things) helped me with my English. I have learned words, expressions, gags, and situations on the basis of reading, which probably would have been more difficult if I had consulted more conventional material.* (Translated from Spanish)

According to the participants, another advantage of watching MLP was that it allowed them to get accustomed a U.S. English accent. This was especially the case of the Spanish-speaking participants as many of them were used to British English. Also, all of the participants learned to distinguish the Southern U.S. accent of some of the characters in MLP, which was initially difficult for even the more advanced learners to comprehend.

This sort of sociocultural awareness was particularly important when it came to fandubbing and inverse translation, because both processes involved situating the translated output within a different sociocultural context. Bolk claimed that one of the most important tasks in translation for him was adapting jokes and idiomatic expressions appropriately so that a Russian audience could understand and enjoy them in their local context.

By the same token, participants reported that cultural adaptation was one of their main goals in the fan language practices. They changed some parts of the fanfic in order to adapt the local rhetorical Russian traditions to a more global audience. For instance, when describing a character's thought process, they replaced the third-person point of view with a first-person narration, because, according to them, the use of first-person inner dialogs was the appropriate rhetorical practice for presenting the thoughts of a character in English fiction. This can be seen in [Figure 2](#) above, where the main character, Victor, is thinking about how the pony Celestia knew how to comfort the other ponies. In Russian, these thoughts are written in third person, but in the adaptation, they take an inner-dialog, first-person form.

## Discussion

With regard to RQ1, we have seen that the way bronies use English in their daily online routines is characterized by several features that concur with those described in previous fandom studies. Among the most noteworthy of these features are a dedicated consumption of the cartoon in English, the creation of personal fan products, and extensive collaboration among the members during these practices (Jenkins, 2006; Sauro, 2017; Williams, 2006). We saw these uses of English illustrated in the case of a Russian brony figurine-maker, Shor, who improved his English use in specific discourse coordinates, making progressively more structured and emotionally engaging descriptions of his products. This process could be viewed as an example of how an individual in a specific context, with a specific role in the community can start to dominate one of the multiple literacies of his second language (Knobel & Lankshear, 2015).

Writing comments, fandubbing, and inverse translation can be characterized as new literacy practices in the terms defined by Lankshear and Knobel (2006, p. 27): they are situated; dispersed among different platforms and software, from collaborative writing platforms to individual social media accounts; intensely collaborative, as during inverse translation and fandubbing; and participative, as when other fans discuss the products and comment on them. In addition, they involve distributed expertise, exemplified by the correction of English in Shor's comments or the participation of native-speaker correctors in the inverse translation process.

The language practices of a particular fandom can have different levels of participation and collaboration. We observed individual-driven practices, where the writing or translating process is mainly carried out by one person, such as fandubbing and descriptive writing. We also saw more team-driven practices, such as inverse translation. The team-driven practice in this study was similar to the fansubber activity described by Zhang and Cassany (2016), as in both cases the aim was to create a more professional product. The process of translation was not only participative and collaborative but also carefully organized and hierarchical, with clearly distributed roles. Therefore, we suggest that collaborative and participative notions can be pursued by fans in multiple ways, which may be linked to whether they are individual- or team-driven.

With regard to RQ2, the bronies in our study attested to the frequent use of sophisticated technologies when using English—many of them greatly facilitating collaboration, such as Mumble, Etherpad, Google Drive, or Skype, through which they chatted, edited texts, made comments, and discussed their projects. This use of technology could also provide opportunities for all participants to mediate their English use at different stages. A more sophisticated use of digital technology to improve English language output was seen in the creation of an Etherpad extension to correct punctuation by the *B.T.* team (with the help of input from a native speaker). We considered this important not only because it was an instance of technology enhancing collaboration among team members (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), but also because this collaboration led

to the creation of a new tool designed to improve their written English output.

Furthermore, our research showed that the bronies were keenly aware of the sociocultural value of their language practices. Many of them connected the learning of new vocabulary within a specific context, during reading or watching MLP, with a successful learning strategy. This is reminiscent of the “anime students” described in Fukunaga (2006, p. 206), who admitted that seeing new words in context helped in acquiring vocabulary. The participants in our research were also fully conscious that during the translation process, they were playing the role of *cultural mediators* by adapting their products to the sociocultural realities of their target audience. This cultural mediation was, in fact, bidirectional, with inverse translation implying movement from local community to global and fandubbing involving flow from global community to local.

In the case of fandubbing, for example, Bolk, a Russian-speaking brony, took a US pop cultural product (MLP) and appropriated it in order to adapt it for a Russian-speaking audience. He treated it as a personal project where he could perform his skills in a creative way. Bolk was performing the role of a translator in the community, appropriating culturally bounded expressions and then localizing them for a new audience in a way that was meaningful for the fandom. His creative performance was therefore shaped by rules connected with his identity as both a brony and a translator.

In the case of inverse translation, one of the main objectives was mediation between audiences. The Russian-speaking bronies were working to present a Russian product to a broader audience. They had to imagine how a Russian fanfic text might be perceived by an English-speaking readership and adjust it accordingly. Thus, while enacting their digital identities as both Russian-speaking bronies and translators, they had to be socioculturally aware of a global readership’s response to their adaptation of the novel.

Drawing on Pennycook (2007), transcultural flows are moving in digital communities, and we suggest that bronies construct their digital identities on the basis of this transcultural mediation. However, they not only appropriate and localize products made in English, but also, with the development of the Russian brony community, seek to present the local product to a global audience. Therefore, brony identity seems to unite local brony communities on a global scale, which in turn provides motivation for many bronies to use English.

We suggest that bronies reflect and learn about cultural differences during these transcultural mediations. It is thus appropriate to associate them with the term *transculturation*, which includes not only new ways of constructing meaning, but also socialization to different cultures (Black, 2008; Lam, 2006). This transcultural skill offers bronies “the sort of learning and participation valued in contemporary workplaces as well as social spaces” (Black, 2008, p. 602), which can be extremely useful in a globalized society.

Moreover, members of the inverse translation team articulated two main goals for the translation process: to improve their English and to create a high-quality product. This contrasted with previous fandom studies, where informal language learning was observed to be more incidental, and the main goal of productive effort was generally described as being made by fans for fans (Black, 2006; Gee, 2004; Lam, 2006; Valero-Porrás & Cassany, 2016). Also, the fact that fans could see their improvements while using the language was a motivational factor to continue learning (Fukunaga, 2006; Williams, 2006). In our case, the participants were motivated not only by their English improvement (particularly in intonation and writing), but also by the fact that they were producing fan products for a brony audience, thereby allowing them to identify themselves as brony-translators or crafters.

We suggest that in specific language-based fan practices such as inverse translation, there is a chance that the participants are actively aiming for language learning and can therefore be reflective and critical about their learning. This, according to Barton and Lee (2013), is central in adult learning processes and leads to autonomous learning.

## Conclusion

Our study presents an initial exploration of informal learning of English in Russian- and Spanish-speaking communities of bronzies. Observing and analyzing a wide variety of practices within an individual fandom enabled us to document practices with different levels of collaboration and participation, the personalization and creation of new technologies, the value of sociocultural knowledge and transculturation, and the variety of motivations that drive fans.

As for limitations of the study, we depended on the availability of the participants and their levels of participation. Moreover, as this was an exploratory study, our focus was wide in scope, and some of the practices we describe, such as inverse translation, deserve a more detailed analysis. The last limitation was the small number of participants from whom our data was gathered. This made it difficult to draw broad, generalizable conclusions about this particular community—especially since there are currently no other studies devoted to it. However, we believe that further research on brony fandom communities will be richly rewarded, given their productivity and collaborative nature. To this end, our own research goals include observing the brony community and their language practices over a much longer period in order to gain a larger and more detailed body of data, allowing us to analyze collaborative practices and language behaviors more precisely.

## Acknowledgements

We want to especially thank all the participants of the study, for their time and willingness to help. This research was partly funded by the doctoral scholarship (2017FI\_B\_00181, Government of Catalonia) and by the research projects ICUDEL (EDU2014-57677-C2-1-R, Ministry of Economy, Spain) and Fandom in Spain (third call, Queen Sophia Center for Youth and Adolescence, Spain).

## Notes

1. Fanfiction is a writing practice “in which fans use media narratives and pop cultural icons as inspiration for creating their own texts” (Black, 2006, p. 172).
2. Fandubbing is dubbing by fans not based on strict translation, often intended for comic effect (Nord, Khoshsaligheh, & Ameri, 2015).

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