

REVIEW OF *LANGUAGE ONLINE: INVESTIGATING DIGITAL TEXTS AND PRACTICES*

Language online: Investigating digital texts and practices

David Barton and Carmen Lee

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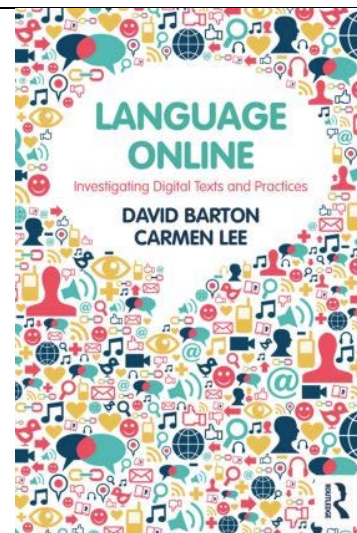
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Review by [Melanie M. Wong](#), [University of British Columbia, Canada](#)

Recent societal discourse stresses how technology is a central part of contemporary life. This discourse asserts that the ways in which we use language and communicate have evolved as new technologies have emerged. With this changing global landscape, new technologies have afforded new virtual learning spaces. These technology-mediated spaces have provided individuals with opportunities to connect with transnational peers, code-switch between various languages (e.g., Lam, 2004), and engage in unique literacy practices (e.g., Black, 2008; Gee, 2007; Rama et al, 2012). As these technologies continue to transform how individuals communicate and use language, there is a pressing need for scholars to gain a better understanding of the literacy practices within these digital learning spaces and the potential impact they have on language and learning. *Language Online: Investigating Digital Text and Practices* by David Barton and Carmen Lee provides individuals with insights into this growing phenomenon of online learning spaces and contributes to a field that is still in its infancy.

In the preface of the book, Barton and Lee (2013) indicate that they have aimed at two distinct audiences: “...for linguists it argues that understanding the online world is essential for the study of language...to social scientists studying and researching the internet, it argues that an understanding of the role of language is essential” (p. IIX). This book is also an ideal resource for novice researchers with limited understanding of the online environment. The book focuses on both the practices and texts in the context of internet writing spaces, but it also provides an extensive overview of theories present in this field of study. Throughout the book, the authors have presented examples from their own research and related literature to illustrate how language online has become an integral part of “everydayness” and how language travels across various domains of life both offline and online (p.178). The concept of travelling between the online and offline social contexts presented in this book echoes what other scholars such as Erstad (2012) have previously contended: that people are moving between different contexts of learning, both online and offline, in a constant flow of activities. The boundaries between these learning contexts are never clearly defined. The authors elaborate throughout their book that the concept of individuals’ moving literacy practices between the various learning spaces is what is fascinating about this particular phenomenon.

The introductory chapters of the book provide the reader with a comprehensive explanation of the

literature and the theoretical underpinnings that guide the empirical work that is presented in the remainder of the book. As Barton and Lee (2013) discuss in their first chapter, there are three key directions that have been taken with regards to language online research by linguists: structural features of computer-mediated communication, social variation of computer-mediated discourse, and language ideologies and metalanguage. These key directions are viewed as stages of development, with each previous stage building on the earlier stages. The authors suggest there is a fourth emerging stage. This stage favours concepts such as Blommaert and Rampton's concepts of supermobility and superdiversity (as cited in Barton & Lee, 2013), and provides insights into global changes and language online. It is this stage that is explored in the remaining chapters of the book. In the final section of the chapter, the authors address some of the misconceptions and issues that are present within the language online discourse. Notable is their discussion with regards to the problems in the terminology that is being utilized (e.g., online vs. offline, Web 1.0 vs. Web 2.0, etc.). Barton and Lee clarify that although they refer to online and offline, this book does not assume a strict dichotomy between the two social contexts, but rather is focused on the overarching online social context.

In Chapter 2, the authors provide ten reasons why studying the online world is critical to understanding language. Several arguments are presented to illustrate how language has changed as a result of the introduction of digital technologies (e.g., texts are no longer stable and fixed, multilingual individuals negotiate and strategically use language, there are new identities and representations of self online, the internet provides space for reflection on communication and language, etc.). Following this discussion in Chapter 3, the authors introduce seven key concepts (literacy practices, texts, affordances, multimodality, stance, affinity groups, globalization, writing spaces online) that are relevant when considering how language is used online. These seven concepts are of importance to the research findings that are discussed in the remainder of the book. There is a comprehensive explanation for each key concept, which is ideal for an individual with a limited understanding of the field but redundant for others. Barton and Lee also provide the readers with a brief introduction to the writing spaces online that are of significance to their work (Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, and Instant Messaging).

Starting in Chapter 4, the authors begin a comprehensive discussion of their own research findings and other relevant studies. The main focus of Chapter 4 is to introduce readers to how individuals utilize their multilingual resources to communicate within online writing spaces. Multilingual practices are discussed and illustrated from a variety of different examples. For individuals not familiar with various online platforms, this chapter illustrates some of the affordances that online writing spaces have using examples and data. Expanding on the discussion that occurred in the previous chapter, Chapter 5 continues to explore the affordances of using multiple languages within online writing spaces. However, the primary focus turns to a discussion on online translanguaging practices and how new media has provided new possibilities for interaction in various languages.

Perhaps one of the more fascinating concepts introduced in chapter 6 is that of techno-biographies. Techno-biographies are technology life stories. The primary focus of these biographies is on an individual's experiences with technology during different times and spaces throughout one's life. Two examples of techno-biographies are presented (Tony and Yan). As expected, each techno-biography was unique and demonstrated that digital technologies play different roles in different people's lives. Home-school experience with technologies played a critical role in how these two individuals were socialized to use technologies. Both participants had access to technology at school and home. The researchers note that these experiences were significant as they changed the participants' attitudes towards the affordances of media and created awareness of genres online. However, the greater questions that readers are left with involve how these techno-biographies differ or how they might be similar to those individuals who did not have the same prior home and school experiences that Tony and Yan had. Although digital technologies are becoming somewhat ubiquitous within the social fabric of society, many individuals may not have techno-biographies similar to those described in this chapter.

It is postulated in Chapter 7 that *stance* is indexed through different forms of language but also through various resources for meaning making. Stance is both an intersubjective and interactive act and is argued to be a key discursive practice within interactions online. Barton and Lee include the stance analysis framework that they utilized in their Flickr research in the appendix of their book, and this is helpful for readers to gain a better understanding of the methodology used. Two multimodal stance-taking case studies (both from Flickr) are shared from Barton and Lee's research. In each example, the researchers share their own personal reading paths and provide a discussion about the interpretation of visual images and how participants engage in stance taking within this online writing space. It may have been helpful if multimodal stance-taking data from other online spaces, such as Facebook, avatar creation, or other multimodal genres, were contrasted with the Flickr data presented in the book.

Chapters 8–10 continue in a similar organization as the previous chapters, with a brief discussion of a phenomenon online and then an incorporation of research data. In Chapter 8, the authors further their discussion of online research by highlighting the types of online metalinguistic discourse, which is argued to be a situated practice. They argue that these examples “[reveal] the ways in which new media sites such as Flickr provide the affordances and writing spaces that enable users to create a collaborative, supportive environment to express their vernacular theories of language through self-generated content” (p.123). The central focus in Chapter 9 is learning. Barton and Lee discuss how people learn language online. Drawing from Lave and Wenger's (1991) work, there is discussion on how learning can occur through participation in online practices. In particular, there is reference to how one of the key features of Web 2.0 activities is that it is user-generated, which results in the process of learning being embedded as part of using the internet. It is also postulated that learning is about taking on new identities. The learning that occurs in networked spaces is not controlled and is often incidental. Chapter 10 expands on the idea of vernacular practices and how individuals draw upon various new media to carry out activities in their lives. Vernacular literacy practices are described to be “rooted in everyday experiences and serve everyday purposes” (p. 138). One of the key features of these literacies is that they are self-generated and voluntary. As elaborated in the text, creating a photo album is a vernacular practice. As technologies have become more readily available, photography has become a digital practice, and social practices have changed to access the affordances available within the online environment. In the data presented, it becomes prevalent that Web 2.0 tools such as Flickr enable individuals to share photos in ways that were not possible in the past. Again, one of the shortfalls of this book is that much of the data presented comes from Flickr research, and readers may be interested in how findings from this environment differ or are similar to other online learning spaces.

In Chapter 11, Barton and Lee comment on how the book does not have an explicit education agenda, but it is a natural progression that the language-focused research discussed in the book would lead to questions surrounding how this research informs practice. The suggestions that are provided are suitable for a university setting, assuming students have the available access to and a preference for these technologies. The authors suggest setting up a Facebook group for a university course. As this is an environment that may be familiar and comfortable for many students, it is suggested that rich discussion maybe facilitated. However, as Facebook was created for informal interaction, it may not necessarily be the right learning space to have school-based discussions (e.g., privacy concerns). Educators should consider their learners prior to implementing these ideas into the classroom, as not all learners prefer learning in online spaces.

Chapter 12, the second to last chapter of the book, addresses researching language online. This chapter is helpful for the novice researcher as an introduction to conducting online research. It provides an overview of the research steps that were undertaken to conduct the online research featured in the book. Issues surrounding ethics and privacy are also briefly addressed. The final section of the chapter expresses the need for researchers to be reflexive, especially when conducting an empirical study.

The final chapter of the book expands on how language has flowed from the online environment to the

offline one. They highlight how Netspeak has become part of the text within public spaces (e.g., 4 UR Convenience, etc.). Their examples illustrate that the emergence of technology has influenced language and how we communicate.

In conclusion, Barton and Lee's (2013) book provides a detailed discussion of the practices and texts in the context of online writing spaces. It is not only a useful resource for the audience of linguists and social scientists targeted by Barton and Lee, but also for novice researchers who are new to this field of study.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Wong is a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada. Her dissertation research investigates elementary English Language Learners within technology-enhanced classrooms. She is an experienced K-12 educator working for the Calgary public school district, and she has taught undergraduate classes at UBC.

E-mail: melanie@melaniewong.ca

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