Commentary: Contextualizing Digital Discourse

Susan C. Herring

More than 15 years ago, I invented an approach to the study of computer-mediated language that I called Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA).[1] It was an ambitious act on the part of a junior scholar frustrated by the indifference with which the discipline of linguistics, at the time, seemed to regard the new kinds of communication taking place on the Internet. Having staked a claim to the territory in the name of discourse studies early on, I am immensely gratified to see how the study of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), in the broadest sense, has grown in the intervening years. This volume is a testament, in more ways than one, to just how far it has come.

I should note first that I read the entire volume practically in one sitting, and I enjoyed it immensely. It is a veritable feast for the intellect, on a range of topics that I consider important and interesting. While the volume's contributions are numerous, and different readers will take away from it different ideas, I see it as making especially important (and in some cases, ground-breaking) contributions in five areas: structural features of computer-mediated language; Internet multilingualism and language choice; Web 2.0 (especially user-generated content and collaborative authorship); media convergence in relation to CMC; and methodology. I elaborate on each briefly below, following which I advance some criticisms in light of where I think future CMD research should be headed.

At first blush, structural features of computer-mediated language might not seem like a ground-breaking topic, especially since casual observers and the popular media for years have fretted over the characteristics of "Netspeak". Indeed, throughout the present volume one finds recommendations to move "beyond" a focus on lower-level grammatical features of CMC such as typography and orthography. Ironically, however, one of the most consistent contributions of the chapters in this volume is to knowledge about structural features of computer-mediated language, or what, for the sake of convenience and as an alternative to the problematic term "Netspeak", I call "e-grammar" (Herring, in press, 2011). For example, at the level of typography, Vaisman's comparison of Israeli girl bloggers' *Fakatsa* style to that of Leetspeak in western hacker culture is a fascinating analysis, all the more so in that the symbols substituted for (Hebrew) letters are characters from another language (English). Chun and Walters provide evidence that nonstandard spoken language varieties--Arabic dialects and comedic representations of Filipino English—are typed in YouTube comments, and Androutsopoulos identifies English nonstandard orthography as one of the style varieties strategically manipulated in the 'heteroglossic' discourse of a German musician's MySpace profile. I also noted with interest Jones et al.'s rare attestation of the use of 'lolspeak', and their description of the use of a new lexical item, *meh*, in teens' IM gossisp about Facebook.

E-grammar is not limited to typography and orthography, however. Peuronen's data show Finnish morphology on English loanwords, indicating the extent to which English and

Finnish are mixed in the online communication of the Christian extreme sports enthusiasts she studied, while Dürscheid and Stark note the presence of French deverbal nouns in their corpus of Swiss text message—a morphological innovation not found in either written or spoken French! At the level of syntax, Lee's chapter reports the effects on her Hong Kong subjects of Facebook removing the [username] 'is' prompt: The incidence of utterances in Cantonese increased, as did interactive utterances. This suggests, intriguingly, that online discourse behavior can be "engineered" to some extent through the choice of linguistic features of the interface. Newon's chapter about MMORPG discourse includes a substantial, contextualized analysis of a syntactic phenomenon that is particular to e-grammar but has received little attention from language scholars: 3rd-person emotes (another technologically-facilitated behavior), and Nishimura analyzes sentence fragments in Japanese *keitai* novels. The latter analysis is reminiscent of Baron's (in press, 2010) analysis of structural fragmentation in American students' IM—both are attributable to properties of the CMC medium. Thus, although "technological determinism" in the strong sense is out of fashion in CMC research, there is evidence in these chapters that the properties of new media do influence some aspects of language use. The challenge is to identify the what, where, when, and how of such influence (Herring, 2007); the situated analyses in this volume help address these questions. Finally, Squires reports on how journalists selectively edited the text messages of Detroit politicians caught in a recent scandal, thereby reflecting the attitudes of mass media towards e-grammar and its users. Far from showing the need to move beyond structural features, these chapters demonstrate the need to examine them seriously (rather than anecdotally) in their socio-cultural contexts. This is a major contribution, in my view.

It is also gratifying to see that the rapid growth of multilingualism on the Internet since the mid-1990s (see Danet & Herring, 2007) is well reflected in the contexts of CMD analyzed in this volume; in this respect, its coverage is quite contemporary. Beyond presenting data from other languages and analyzing them in their cultural contexts, several chapters—e.g., Peuronen for Finnish and English; Androutsopoulos for German and English—shed welcome empirical light on the forms and functions of online language alternation and mixing. Also of great interest is the multilingual nature of the SMS corpus compiled by Dürscheid and Stark, reflecting the linguistic diversity of Switzerland (cf. Durham's 2003 analysis of a pan-Swiss discussion forum, in which speakers of different languages chose English as their lingua franca), and Lenihan's report on how Facebook is having its services translated into all the languages of the world (as of May 2010, 180 language versions were available). Lenihan characterizes Facebook's vision as one of "parallel monolingualism"; in that regard, it resembles Wikipedia with its different language "editions", but differs from LiveJournal, where bloggers in different languages share a single hosting site and can 'friend' one another easily (see Herring et al., 2007). It will be interesting to observe the long-term consequences of these organizational decisions, especially in light of contradictory evidence of interlanguage contact and integration taking place in many online contexts, as described in other chapters in this volume. Finally, the chapter by Chun and Walters illustrates yet another aspect of Internet multilingualism: a multilingual (Korean-Arabic-English) performance by a comedian broadcast on YouTube. These studies are valuable

because they attest to the spread and diversity of multilingualism in CMD, while at the same time pointing to tensions within it. One tension in a number of studies is the use of English as a lingua franca, second language, or marker of (elite) social identities. One might say that this is the "elephant in the room", however, in that while its influence is pervasive, none of the chapters addresses its broader implications (cf. Danet & Herring, 2007).

Another important set of contributions center around the collaborative and/or co-constructed nature of discourse in Web 2.0 contexts. The creation and editing of Wikipedia articles is perhaps the paradigm case of this phenomenon, and indeed, the user-generated content and the process through which it is vetted in creating Facebook translations, as described by Lenihan, raise similar issues of "zero cost" labor and peer editing. Co-construction in other chapters is more asymmetrical: *keitai* novels, for example, are authored by single individuals, whose names are attached to the final products, yet feedback provided by readers and fans through comments and email shapes the novels' contents (Nishimura). And in Walton and Jaffe's analysis of the satirical blog *Things White People Like*, it is stances towards race and class that are co-constructed through the blogger's posts and reader comments on them. In contrast, Rodney Jones characterizes skateboarding videos produced by teens in Hong Kong as individual, highly edited products, albeit shared in a community of skateboarders through posting on YouTube. This may be a limitation of current technology, however—no easily accessible tools yet exist for collaborative online video editing—more than a counterexample to the trend towards collaborative co-construction.

Related to Web 2.0 are the contributions that a number of chapters in this volume make to the study of discourse in convergent media platforms, or what I call convergent media computer-mediated communication (CMCMC) (e.g., Zelenkauskaite & Herring, 2008). This is of utmost importance, because CMC increasingly co-exists on a single platform with other activities and applications, including other CMC applications. Facebook is a prime example of the latter, in that it offers private Inbox messages, private chat, semi-public 'notes' that resemble blog entries, and several types of semi-public 'wall' communication: status updates, posting of links, videos, and images, posts on others' walls, and comments on all of the above. Newon's WoW research site is also especially rich, but in communicative media of different types (voice+text+emotes+avatar actions), all of which, as she shows, may be used simultaneously. Moreover, the combination of media sharing and text comments—on Flickr, as analyzed in the case of "Pisa pose" photographs by Thurlow and Jaworski; on YouTube, as analyzed for reactions to a multilingual comic video by Chun and Walters; and on the MySpace page of a young German musician as analyzed by Androutsopoulos—is by now a widespread multimedia phenomenon, yet it has been little studied; these chapters are welcome empirical contributions. New to me was the situation of *keitai* novels, yet it clearly represents another CMCMC phenomenon. All of these contexts raise interesting issues: of polyvocality, multiple layers of addressees, conversational (in)coherence, and allotment of attentional resources, to mention but a few.

Methodological contributions are perhaps the least glamorous, but important nonetheless, especially to those of us who train others to analyze CMD. One hoary problem in CMD studies has been how to collect a large corpus of authentic (not transcribed by users) SMS text messages. Both Spilioti, in making use of infrared technology to transfer Greek SMS directly from mobile phones to a laptop computer, and Dürscheid and Stark, who collected a large corpus of Swiss SMS by asking participants to forward their text messages directly to a designated, free mobile number, innovate in this regard. Useful, too, is the coding scheme for Facebook message content presented by Lee (adapted from an earlier scheme of Baron's for coding IM 'away' messages) and Newon's transcription technique, which represents multiple channels of communication in a single transcript. I also read with interest Lee's methods for obtaining informed consent from her subjects in a context (Facebook) that has been up to now difficult to study for privacy reasons. These innovations might well serve as models for future researchers to adopt. Moreover, media convergence, multimodality, and linguistic heteroglossia all raise major methodological challenges, which the chapters in this volume grapple with in various ways, mostly through qualitative (descriptive) and ethnographic analysis. While I appreciate the necessity of such approaches to gain an overall initial sense of what is going on in a complex environment, I admit feeling a need for more rigorous empirical approaches, as well—methods that direct the researcher's attention to phenomena in systematic and principled ways, and that are informed by theory and research about the interactions of multiple semiotic systems (cf., e.g., Norris, 2004), whether the methods allow for ready quantification or not. As a field we are not there yet, I believe, but the approaches adopted in the chapters in this volume nonetheless constitute important advances.

Having described some of the volume's numerous contributions, I will now add a few cautionary observations. There is a focus in the volume overall on the new and unusual. This is necessary to update the field of CMD studies, and it is one of the strengths—and appeals—of the book. But it could give a distorted impression of CMD as a whole, by "exoticizing" it (some past CMD research did this as well, by focusing on, e.g., typographic creativity). The bulk of CMD is rather less creative, as the chapter by Thurlow and Jaworski on "Pisa pose" photos on Flickr illustrates. Related to this is the fact that phenomena that fascinate CMD scholars may be banal to younger users, who have known CMD all their lives. Yet the theoretical and interpretive lenses through which their online discourses are analyzed in those chapters that deal with youth contexts are *adult* lenses, rather than representing the perspectives of the youth themselves (Jones' inclusion of quotes from interviews with Hong Kong skateboarders helps to offset this). For a critique of this tendency as a broader problem in CMC studies, see Herring (2008).

My last two critiques are aimed not so much at the chapters in this volume as at the field of CMD studies as a whole. The incorporation of theory is an important advance over earlier studies that were mostly descriptive; it represents an evolution of the research domain. However, there is a tendency in scholarship in the discourse-critical tradition for the theoretical framing to serve as a foregone conclusion, rather than the conclusion being an original discovery made by the researcher. Conclusions such as 'language use is socially situated'; 'social identities are constructed through discourse'; and 'different language varieties intermingle (when multiple languages come in contact)' are not new

ideas. Although such tenets serve to frame some of the studies in this volume in useful ways, my recommendation is that CMD researchers in general strive to develop original interpretations and conclusions, as a way to move thinking about CMD forward.

Finally, there is a tendency in Western academic scholarship as a whole, reflected in a few of the chapters in this collection, to be dismissive of past research in an effort to motivate one's own approach. Critique is valuable, but in a young field such as CMD, which has yet to achieve a widely-recognized critical mass, it should build upon, rather than seek to replace, what has already been done. By all means let us adapt and create new methodologies and new analytical lenses, as new phenomena require. But let us also recall that the early work is our foundation; it, too, was ground-breaking in its time, as the present volume breaks further new ground.

The seeds of the future can generally be discerned in the present, if one knows where to look. The combination of new data, new methods, and new analytical lenses applied to CMD situates this volume on the cutting edge of this historical moment, and I anticipate that its contributions will remain relevant for some time to come. Still, modes and media of CMC arise, combine, and fall in and out of favor with various cultures, and new generations of users access mediated communication technologies with potentially radically different expectations every few years. What kinds of approaches—in addition to conducting further studies—might CMD researchers adopt in order to produce scholarship that has lasting relevance? At the conclusion of a 2004 article, I wrote: "CMC researchers would do well to take a step back from the parade of passing technologies and consider more deeply the question of what determines people's use of mediated communication. In addition to technological determinism, the effects of time, familiarity, and mass popularization […] need to be theorized and investigated."[2] To this list I would add the desideratum of learning from the past, now that the field has reached a level of maturity at which this can meaningfully be done: synthesizing, distilling, and extracting core insights from the available corpus of empirical CMD studies. The studies published in this volume enhance the size and quality of that corpus considerably and, as such, stand to shape the future of digital discourse research.

Notes

[1] For the genesis and development of CMDA, see Herring (2004a).

[2] Herring (2004b: 34).

References

Baron, N. S. (2010). Discourse structures in instant messaging: The case of utterance breaks. *Language@Internet*, *7,* article 4. http://www.languageatinternet.de/articles/2010/2651/index_html/

Danet, B., & Herring, S. C., Eds. (2007). *The Multilingual Internet: Language, Culture, and Communication Online.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Durham, M. (2003). Language choice on a Swiss mailing list. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 9*(1). http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol9/issue1/durham.html

Herring, S. C. (2004a). Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, and J. H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning* (pp. 338-376). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Herring, S. C. (2004b). Slouching toward the ordinary: Current trends in computer-mediated communication. *New Media & Society, 6*(1), 26-36.

Herring, S. C. (2008). Questioning the generational divide: Technological exoticism and adult construction of online youth identity. In D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media* (pp. 71-94). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Herring, S. C. (In press, 2011). Grammar and electronic communication. In C. Chapelle (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.

Herring, S. C., Paolillo, J. C., Ramos Vielba, I., Kouper, I., Wright, E., Stoerger, S., Scheidt, L. A., and Clark, B. (2007). Language networks on LiveJournal. *Proceedings of the Fortieth Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.* Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Press.

Norris, S. (2004). *Analyzing Multimodal Interaction: A Methodological Framework*. London: Routledge.

Zelenkauskaite, A., and Herring, S. C. (2008). Television-mediated conversation: Coherence in Italian iTV SMS chat. *Proceedings of the Forty-First Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-41)*. Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Press.