MULTILINGUALISM ONLINE

Carmen Lee

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By the co-author of *Language Online*, this book builds on the earlier work while focusing on multilingualism in the digital world. Drawing on a range of digital media – from email to chatrooms and social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube – Lee demonstrates how online multilingualism is closely linked to people's offline literacy practices and identities and examines the ways in which people draw on multilingual resources in their internet participation. Bringing together central concepts in sociolinguistics and internet linguistics, the eight chapters cover key issues such as:

- language choice
- code-switching
- identities
- language ideologies
- minority languages
- online translation.

Examples in the book are drawn from all the major languages, as well as many lesser-written ones such as Chinese dialects, Egyptian Arabic, Irish, and Welsh. A chapter on methodology provides practical information for students and researchers interested in exploring online multilingualism from a mixed-methods and practice-based approach.

Multilingualism Online is key reading for all students and researchers in the area of multilingualism and new media, as well as those who want to know more about languages in the digital world. Additional resources for Language and Communication Studies are available on the Routledge Language and Communication Portal: http://www.routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/languageandcommunication.

Carmen Lee is Associate Professor, Department of English, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is the co-author of *Language Online: Investigating Digital Texts and Practices* (Routledge, 2013).

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FOREWORD

In the early days of the internet, it was often observed that electronic communication (which in those days really meant email, or e-mail as we used to write it) had many resemblances to speech which made it contrast with traditional styles of written communication. In particular, freedoms of expression, such as informal styles of address and abbreviation and that which were characteristic of spoken, face-to-face conversation, seemed to be allowed in computer-mediated writing in a way not tolerated in old-fashioned writing on paper.

Despite that, it seemed, there was one respect in which language on the internet might not resemble spoken language. While there were thousands of spoken languages, it looked as though the internet would be home to only a few of these, with English being overwhelmingly dominant. Furthermore, while bilinguals and multilinguals could mix languages and engage in other kinds of multilingual practice in speech, it was not clear that the internet was going to make this easy, or even possible. The internet seemed, for a time, to bear the promise of a future where communication would be very easy, fast, cheap, and relaxed, but at the same time it appeared to threaten a monolingual apocalypse where the languages of a few technologically advanced and economically important countries would prevail, to the exclusion of others.

It didn't quite happen like that. As Carmen Lee's book shows, a decade or two later, "multilingualism" is thriving on the internet. Improvements in language-related technology (for example, the provision of fonts in non-Western scripts and the availability of moderately good machine translation), a new wave of internet affordances (Web 2.0 with a huge range of synchronous and asynchronous interactions on offer), and the creativity of millions of users have turned the internet into a very multilingual place. This multilingualism is, however, not multilingualism exactly as we used to understand it. Slowly, and only recently, through the

work of the late Jens Normann Jørgensen and many others, it has become clear that most if not all of us humans can be a little bit multilingual, engaging in the practices which are now known as *polylanguaging* and *translanguaging*, even when we don't feel we know any languages apart from one first language. An open space like the internet is an ideal place for such practices to go on, although they almost certainly did not start there. As offline research has expanded our understanding of these practices, the internet provides a rich site for studying the development of their online forms.

As Carmen demonstrates in this book, multilingualism on the internet is much more than just the use of two or more languages. It encompasses both the kind of multilingual practices familiar from the predigital age and new practices in which even monolinguals can engage with people whose languages they barely know or don't know at all (for example, through the use of online machine translation). Furthermore, the internet provides informal spaces where such tentative bilinguals, as well as more fluent ones, can reflect on and be supported in their language learning and language use. Carmen also shows how multilingualism, whether as a fluent speaker/writer of languages, as a language learner, or as a monolingual participant in other people's multilingual practices, can be a powerful component of online identities.

Carmen has been comprehensive in her approach. *Multilingualism online* could be taken to mean a variety of things, such as the use of different languages on the web in general, websites which contain pages in more than one language, code-switching, translanguaging, and translation. This book covers not only all of these, but also how multilingualism is *talked about* on the internet ("thematization") and how it is researched. The discussion of methodology is particularly useful, because despite the internet having been with us for some decades, the most fruitful ways to research it are still matters of discussion – and all the more so when multilingualism is the focus.

Carmen's book is a scholarly and timely contribution to the study of multilingualism in the world online. Its overview of research in all the areas mentioned is thorough. But because of the way she focuses on *practices*, the online world and the offline world are never that far apart. As Carmen says:

> What I do online is tied closely to my offline lived experiences. . . . This also means that research into language on the internet must take into account not only texts on the screen but also what people do with these texts in other areas of their lives.

That connectedness, in my mind, is the great strength of this book, and it is one of things that makes it a rewarding read. Even those of us who live our lives rather monolingually are linked, through the internet, to a polyglot world. Next time I go to Facebook, I may be confronted with a post in a language I know slightly or not at all. I can then choose to ignore it, to use the automated translate function, or to go to a website like Google Translate for a rough translation. I could also ask someone in the next office or turn to a dictionary on my shelf or in the library. If I decide to respond, I could use a similar strategy or (still fairly safely) add a

comment in English, knowing that it is likely to be understood and, even if it isn't, it will be translated by some means, online or off. Thus, online practices link to offline practices, though not always in predictable ways. This book will enrich our understanding of the multilingual online world, but equally, it will add to how we understand the multilingual world offline.

<div align="right">Mark Sebba</div>

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BACKGROUND AND APPROACH TO MULTILINGUALISM ONLINE

Overview

- Multilingualism online: An auto-technobiography
- Why multilingualism online?
- Beyond multilingualism
- A practice-based approach to multilingualism online
- Overview of chapters

MULTILINGUALISM ONLINE: AN AUTO-TECHNOBIOGRAPHY

My very first experience of personal computing dates back to the early 1990s at home in Hong Kong, when I was still a high school student. I remember the first thing I did on the computer was play a card game called Solitaire. At that time, I had to share a desktop computer at home with my two younger brothers. After a few years, we also had an internet connection, but I did not take much notice of it. I remember it was my brothers who were always typing something on a black screen, but I had no idea what exactly they were doing. I was, however, sure that they were typing something in English, which was quite strange to me as they rarely used English (except for school work). They later told me that they had been communicating and exchanging files with people from other parts of the

world through a bulletin board system (BBS). I was very impressed with what they could do, but I had no intention of learning more about it because I only used the computer occasionally to format my assignments. (Typing up homework was still optional then, but I thought a word-processed piece would make a better impression!)

One day a high school friend who had moved to Australia asked me if I had an "email address" as she would like to write me an "email" – a completely new idea to me. With some help from my brothers, I finally managed to write and send my very first email. It took me a whole afternoon to compose it. I typed it in English because Chinese was almost impossible for me (processing nonalpha-numeric characters was not easy then). That very long email, as I recall, closely resembled a formal business letter that I would have written for an English composition class!

Sometime in my last year in high school, I first came across ICQ, an instant messaging program. I was extremely excited about being able to communicate with people in real time by simply typing on the computer, even though we could not hear or see one another. My very first ICQ message sent was a simple "Hi" to my cousin. Because dial-up internet service was quite costly, I only went online to chat with friends for a very short time each day. I still preferred to type most of my messages in English only (rather standard or formal English, and sometimes with a few emoticons here and there). I had learned some Chinese typing, but I was never good at memorizing the codes. When it came to surfing the web, the only things I did were read the news and look up materials for my assignments. While most websites I came across had only English content, I began to notice that more and more webpages were available in multiple languages. Tools such as free online dictionaries and translators also emerged, and I still remember my teachers always warning us about how unreliable some of these tools were.

The internet gradually gained its popularity in Hong Kong in the late 1990s, when I was an undergraduate student. At university, all students were given free dial-up access to the university internet servers, with limited monthly connection time. Surfing the web, emailing, and chatting on instant messenger (IM) at the same time gradually became a habit. This was also the time when my parents gave me my first mobile phone, though I used it for calls only, as texting was quite costly then. And when I did text, English was still my preferred language.

Later, my IM activity switched from ICQ to MSN messenger (later called Windows Live Messenger). I noticed that on MSN, I no longer wrote my messages in English only; with improved technologies, I felt quite at ease playing with the different languages and scripts available to me. Cantonese is the major everyday spoken language I use with my family and friends. I learnt English in kindergarten, in primary school, and through my high school years. In high school, English was the medium of instruction for non-Chinese subjects. At university, I studied English and linguistics. These subjects also provided me with many opportunities to read and write in English. Outside the university, I communicated with others mostly in Cantonese. I had learnt some Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) in primary

school, and I took French as one of my undergraduate courses. Because Cantonese does not have a standardized writing system, in Hong Kong, standard written Chinese, represented by traditional characters, is adopted as the common written language in Chinese.

My linguistic background significantly shapes my deployment of languages on the internet. I am aware that my choice of language online changes from time to time. I used to chat in a relatively standard form of English, although it was not my main language elsewhere. I also started using more Chinese characters in IM when I learnt Chinese inputting methods in school. But at other times, I switched back to English because typing in English was much less time consuming. As part of my master's training, I learned the *Jyutping* system, a Cantonese Romanization scheme developed by a group of Cantonese linguists in Hong Kong. Since then, I have exchanged messages in Jyutping with my fellow linguistics friends who can also understand this system. Within our group, we see Jyutping as a unique system of communication that serves as some sort of "in-group" code among us. Example 1.1 is extracted from a personal MSN exchange about camera lenses between AL and me back in 2005.

Example 1.1 An MSN conversation

1 AL:	buy ng buy 17–85/@2xxx? (*Translation: Do you want to buy the 17–85mm lens for about 2,000 dollars?*)
2 Carmen:	hmm why?
3 Carmen:	whose?
4 Carmen:	我唔買舊野喎 (*Translation: I don't want to buy second-hand lenses.*)
5 AL:	ar Jo buy a 40D body only, but if we want to buy 17–85, then take out
6 AL:	new ar (*ar* is a Cantonese discourse particle)

In this short exchange between AL and me, a range of "codes" can be identified. For example, in lines 2 to 4, I move from using English in my questions "hmm why?" and "whose?" to making my stance in Cantonese represented in traditional Chinese characters. AL's response in lines 5 and 6 looks like English, but his messages also include some Cantonese words being spelt out, such as the particle *ar*. Note that Cantonese would have rarely been written out outside the online world, yet Cantonese web users have identified creative ways of representing their spoken language in digital communication. One of the aims of this book is to offer an understanding and explanation of complex multilingual online interactions such as this one.

When I was studying in England between 2004 and 2007, chatting on MSN was an indispensable tool of communication between me and my friends and family back home. A typical evening in my college room would involve writing my thesis on my computer in formal academic English and logging on to MSN and chatting with friends and family in an entirely different style of language. During that time, various social media platforms emerged. I started a blog to share stories about my life in the UK. Example 1.2 is a blog post about the progress of my thesis writing.

Example 1.2 A blog post with multilingual resources

I love formatting . . . Jun 27

- 42 figures
- 7 tables
- 74 extracts

Many people hate formatting.

But I think formatting is GR8, coz that's possibly the only thing that you can control in your thesis, and the only thing that makes your thesis look 'interesting' right now!

hmmm. . . . yes, I'm dak bit zai! *(Translation: Cantonese Romanization of* 特別仔*, a special person)*

12 days to go! hurray. . . .

Hg (abbreviation of hai6 gam2, "that's all for now")

Only a few of my close friends knew that this blog existed and could completely understand what I was talking about; I often inserted a line or two in our "secret" Jyutping codes. There were certainly issues of inclusion and exclusion of my audience (as discussed in Chapter 2). At the same time, I was aware that friends who could not read Chinese were also following my blog. So I still wrote mostly in English unless the blog post targeted only my Hong Kong friends.

In the past few years, my IM activity has moved entirely to the mobile phone, on which I regularly use WhatsApp, a mobile instant messenger, to stay connected with friends and family. Consistent with what I used to do on MSN, I still combine linguistic codes in my messages and I enjoy playing with *emoji*, a system of graphic symbols and emoticons. I have been a Facebook user since 2007, and now it is one of my most visited social network sites; I regularly read and send Facebook posts from not only my desktop computer but also from my smartphone and tablet devices. I have two Facebook accounts: One for my close friends and family and another for my students and colleagues. In my work Facebook, I post mainly to my course "groups" to interact with my students. I deliberately write in English only when interacting with students (although I sometimes add emoticons), as the medium of instruction of my courses is English; whereas on my personal Facebook wall, I draw on a wider range of languages, scripts, and modes, depending on my audience and the content of the post. I am also a regular user of other digital media such as Flickr, Google Scholar, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and Wikipedia, where I constantly come across texts that are multilingual, multiscriptual, and multimodal. For example, on Flickr, I alternate between Chinese, English, and Chinese-English mixed code when it comes to writing captions, tags, and comments. For information searches on Google and Google Scholar, I use mostly English keywords for my academic work, but at other times I input search queries in Chinese only.

The previous narrative of my technology-related life, or my auto-technobiography (Kennedy, 2003; Barton and Lee, 2013), reveals what is actually happening to language(s) and written texts in the age of the internet and is summarized as follows: