Identity and Language Use Online: Stories from Syria

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ABSTRACT

Given the deeply rooted relationship between identity and language use, this article reports on a study that explores the issue of identity as a main player in Syrian university students’ language use online. In specific, it investigates how Syrian university students perform their identities through their use of language online and the types of identity transformation they experience in their online communication. To address the research questions, the study employs the case study approach in order to explore the research phenomenon very closely. The findings show that identity plays a major role in the way Syrian university students access the internet and also in the choice of language they make online.

KEYWORDS

Identity, Language Use, Online, Syria

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has changed not only the way people communicate, but also different concepts and practices related to communication. Identity is one of these concepts and the issues of identity online and the influence of ICT on identity and belonging have been a fertile ground for inquiry and research. Many studies have been conducted in the field and researchers have revealed interesting findings. Nevertheless, many of these studies focused on the developed West and there is still a lot to discover in this field in other parts of the world. Koutsogiannis (2007, p.221) argues that there is still a gap in understanding the influence of ICT on notions of identity. This gap is mainly represented by “the rarity of studies from non-English-speaking countries in the affluent West”. Sharing the same argument, Warschauer et al (2002) argue that very little research has been done on the topic of language use online. One aim of this article, therefore, is to try to bridge this existing gap and provide some insights on identity and language use online from a non-English-speaking context.

This article reports on a research study that was conducted at the University of Aleppo in Syria which is one part of the world only a little is known about (at least until the Syrian Crisis). Although a geographically small country, Syria is rich and diverse in its social, cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, historical, and political connections and it has played an influential role in human history and civilization. Damascus and Aleppo in Syria are among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world (Houghton, 2014). Besides, Syria contains a plethora of sites which tell the story of human history. Syria is also a melting pot of many ethnic and religious groups: Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, and more and it is fascinating how these groups managed to coexist and survive despite the differences that may endanger their existence. In addition to its glorious past, Syria prepares well for the future. In recent years, Syria has witnessed huge leaps in development and capacity building with a specific focus on education and more recently on ICT. At university

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level, the number of universities jumped from 4 in the 1980s to 27 in recent years. As a result, the number of people studying at university level has also increased dramatically as university education became more affordable and accessible. Therefore, every university student is a mixture of influences where connections to history, culture and religion melt with modern technology, ethnic feelings melt with national feelings and language becomes the medium which highlights all these connections. This diversity plays a distinctive influence on the way Syrians speak, communicate, affiliate to others, identify themselves and also access the internet and use language online. Hence, studying the relationship between identity and language use online in such a context is an interesting as well as challenging task at the same time.

The concepts of identity and belonging take new meanings in the digital world (Baker, 2006; Lam, 2006; Simpson & Hepworth, 2010). In this world without borders, it is easier to get in touch and communicate with people from different parts of the world. Baker (2006, p. 429) argues that “the internet provides new possibilities for bilinguals: conversations across countries and continents, playing out multiple identities, a vicarious sense of belonging to other speakers of the heritage language and a private space to be different, distinct and linguistically diverse”. Similarly, Lam (2006, p. 171) argues that “networked electronic communications have given rise to new social spaces, linguistic and semiotic practices, and ways of fashioning the self”. Following the same argument, Simpson and Hepworth (2010, p. 7) argue that “communication using new literacy technologies has profound implications for the notion of authorship and the construction of identity”. At the same time, the spread of English as the primary language of the internet has lead to a widespread use of it in electronic contexts (Graddol, 2006). Hence, English is considered by many as the gatekeeper of the world of information and technology in addition to being the language of international correspondences. Consequently, different individuals, groups and countries started a process of immersion and integration with the global adoption of English, while others started a process of revival and support of their native languages in order to preserve their identity. In such a situation, language and identity become more connected and the search for identity becomes a major task to preserve the linguistic continuity of groups and even nations and vice versa. Castells (2000b, p.3) argues that “in a world of global flows of wealth, power and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning”.

In electronic contexts, we find new and different ways to perform our identities and, similar to offline communication, the practices we perform online tell about who we are. In their study of children’s use of the internet, Attewell and Winston found that Kadesha, a 13-year-old schoolgirl who lived in a deprived area of town, spent the biggest part of her online time on checking “rappers and wrestlers’ news and updates “downloading their pictures as screensavers, pasting images into reports, constructing fan pages in homage to their man of the moment” (Attewell and Winston, 2003, p. 117). Kadesha even called one of these rappers her husband and she felt angry when she saw a picture of him with other girls. Unlike Kadesha, Zeke who came from a wealthy background and studied at a private school was “a politics junky at ten years old” (Attewell and Winston, 2003, p.124). He followed the presidential inauguration and downloaded clips of the speech of presidency candidates. Besides, “he subscribes to Time magazine, reads newspapers, and always has at least one book at hand that he is reading for school or for pleasure” (Attewell & Winston, 2003, p. 124). It is obvious that the practices these two children perform online are different and reflect the differences in their backgrounds and identities.

In addition to performing identity, identity transformation is another experience that takes place in online contexts. Warschauer (2009, p. 133) argues that people go through different types of identity transformation as they share their voices and explore new forms of themselves online. Hence, the types of electronic literacy practices people do online enhance their process of identity transformation. In his study of a group of Hawaiian students, Warschauer (1999, 2000a, 2000b) found that one group of students he observed were more motivated to use Hawaiian than English in their electronic communication although they were more fluent in English simply because “interacting in the Hawaiian language provided students an opportunity to explore and strengthen their sense of
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