Chapter 9

Self and Identity in Personal Blogs: A Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Perspective

Wengao Gong
National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how American bloggers and Chinese bloggers from similar age and gender groups represent themselves and their identities linguistically in their blogs and explores whether and to what extent the differences in terms of the blogging language and culture affect these representations. The author adopts a corpus-based approach and focuses on the description and the comparison of the orthographic features and semantic domain preference as revealed in the blog entries. By conducting a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison between American bloggers and Chinese bloggers, the author finds that bloggers’ linguistic practice is closely related to their developmental stage of life, their gender, and the cultural environment they are immersed in. Meanwhile, bloggers’ linguistic practice is also constrained by the internal system of the language they use for blogging.

INTRODUCTION

Blogs are often defined as “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005, p. 142). Being a publishing and social communication platform simultaneously, blogging has rapidly gained great popularity among young people worldwide over the past few years.

Herring and colleagues (2005) classify blogs into three types: personal journals, filters, and k-logs (i.e., knowledge logs). Among them, personal journals are the most common. In fact, many bloggers take blogging as “a form of social communication in which blogger and audience are intimately related through the writing and reading of blogs” (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, p. 224). Blogs have distinctive technological features that set them apart from other forms of internet-based communication.
According to Karlsson (2006, p. 6), blogs are “a loose baggy monster, content-wise, tool-wise, feature-wise, author-wise, reader-wise,” though their basic format is rather stable. Kendall (2007) offers a good summary of the hybrid nature of personal blogs as represented by LiveJournal, a well-known blogging website. As a diary, the blog provides a place for bloggers to record their feelings, opinions, daily events, and reflections. As a communication tool, it provides a forum for connection with others and public expression. As a performance venue, it provides a stage for self-presentation and artistic production. Theoretically speaking, anyone with internet access can publish blogs, and blogs are written about anything bloggers like and in whatever style they wish, typically with no editorial control (Argamon, Koppel, Pennebaker, & Schler, 2007). In other words, bloggers enjoy next-to-absolute autonomy in their writing. The hybrid nature and the high-level autonomy have made personal blogs a good medium for self-expression and identity representation. As personal blogs are mainly textual stories and reflections about the bloggers themselves, they have also provided a special window for researchers to observe how self and identity are linguistically represented.

This chapter describes how American bloggers and Chinese bloggers from similar age and gender groups represent themselves and their identities linguistically in their blogs and explores whether and to what extent the differences in terms of the blogging language and culture affect these representations. The author adopts a corpus-based approach and focuses on the description and the comparison of the orthographic features and semantic domain preference as revealed in the blog entries. By conducting a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison between American bloggers and Chinese bloggers, the author hopes to obtain some insights about the representation of self and identity in internet-based communication.

BACKGROUND

Defining Identity

Identity has never been an easy term to define ever since its very first appearance in academic works. As Lawler (2008, p. 1) rightly points out, “identity is a difficult term: more or less everyone knows more or less what it means, and yet its precise definition proves slippery.” It is simply not possible to give a single, overarching definition which can fit in all the contexts where the notion of identity is being used, because the same term is used to mean quite different things in different disciplines.

Identity is, first and foremost, a psychological concept. According to Erikson (1969), a person’s ego identity is shaped by that person’s physiological characteristics, psychological needs, and the social and cultural milieus. Identity development is actually a person’s pursuit of proper social roles and niches within a society which can accommodate his or her biological and psychological capacities and interests. This pursuit is normally believed to start during the mid- to late adolescence and will continue and reformulate throughout the life span as one’s biological, psychological, and societal circumstances change (Kroger, 2007). Following Erikson, Kroger and Adair (2008, p. 8) define identity as “a configuration, an integration of biological givens, psychological needs, interests and wishes, significant identifications, and meaningful and consistent social roles.” Identity in its psychological sense bears the following features: First, it is a multi-faceted concept which covers biological, psychological, and social aspects. Second, it develops with age and is subject to change. Third, it is a hybrid of intrapersonal sameness (i.e., self-sameness) and partial interpersonal sameness (i.e., partial identification with others in the society).

Aside from being a key concept in developmental psychology, identity has also made its way into the field of sociology. As Cerulo (1997)