12

RESEARCHING LANGUAGE ONLINE

- Texts and practices: The question of starting point
- A mixed-method approach
- Online methods and being responsive to participants' lives
- The researcher's stance

This chapter has a focus on methodology. As well as providing an overview of major methods of researching online texts in existing studies, it includes approaches adopted in our own research projects on new media language and literacies. We first raise the issues of the starting point of studies researching language online. We then discuss both traditional methods (including observation and interview) and newer methods (such as auto-ethnography and techno-biography) adopted in the research on IM, Flickr, and Facebook, which have been covered in the previous chapters. Other topics discussed include: the importance of combining both texts and practices; developing a responsive methodology; the researcher's stance; and challenges of carrying out research on the internet.

TEXTS AND PRACTICES: THE QUESTION OF STARTING POINT

There are many possible starting points for examining language online and a recurring issue for researchers who are interested in both language as text

and language as practice is where to begin. If we have decided to research a particular website or platform, should we start by observing the written word shown on the screen? Or should we start by understanding practices, through, for example, interviewing text producers or users?

The answer to these questions is closely tied to the aims of the research. Several key methodological approaches have been identified within linguistic studies of computer-mediated communication, which were overviewed in Chapter 1. Much early research on language online took a variationist approach, i.e. aiming to describe what was seen as a new variety of language that is used exclusively for online communication. Such studies tended to focus on characteristics of potentially 'new' structural features that were considered to be specific to the internet. Under this approach, online language data were collected without considering specific social contexts of use. Generalizations about linguistic features of the internet were then made through observations of such decontextualized data. Some examples of this trend include Ferrara *et al.*'s (1991) 'Interactive written discourse', Shortis' (2001) *The Language of ICT*, and Crystal's (2006) notion of 'Netspeak'. With a similar starting point, other studies were carried out by drawing on methods from discourse analysis and sociolinguistics.

A large body of work adopts quantitative methods. Much of this work involves collecting a large corpus of texts in order to make generalizations based on statistical results, such as Herring and Paolillo (2006) on blog genres and Baron (2010) on IM. Such linguistic descriptions are important in understanding the extent to which the web has introduced new varieties of language that are specific to different types of CMC. However, feature counting does not address the situated nature of language in use. That is why other studies began to complement text analysis with user surveys and interviews (e.g. Cherny 1999; Nardi *et al.* 2000). As an example of this trend, one of us carried out a study that looked into linguistic practices of email and IM among young people in Hong Kong (Lee 2002). In this study, two sets of texts were collected, from email and from ICQ (an IM program), with the aim of generating descriptive statistics of the frequency of occurrences of features such as emoticons and abbreviations in each set of data. These findings were complemented by a questionnaire survey and interviews. The primary focus of the above studies is CMC as *text* and as *language*.

Understanding language online within a social practice theory of language and literacy makes it possible to rethink the meanings of text in our data, and to also consider how texts are produced in authentic contexts of use, and most importantly, why people employ different linguistic strategies in different contexts of use. Certainly, linguistic descriptions alone cannot deal with these issues. It also follows that starting the research with just observing the words in texts on particular platforms is not enough to inform an understanding of what writing online means in people's lives. In view of this, research on digital literacies emerged to look into details of everyday digital practices (e.g. Ito *et al.* 2010). This work has *practices* as a basic unit of analysis. The researchers also consider how pedagogy can take into account

students' everyday digital practices. Following a social practice theory of literacies, digital literacies scholars also adopt more ethnographic-style methods in researching details of people's everyday digital practices. Davies and Merchant (2007), for example, analyse academic blogging as a social practice. They adopt an *auto-ethnographic* approach in their research on the literacy practices of their own blogging activities. (See Anderson 2006 for an explanation of this approach in social science research, and it was also used in Barton 2011b.) Such an approach also allows them to highlight the advantages of conducting insider research. In particular, their first-hand knowledge of blogging not only allowed them to collect rich data about what actually happens in blogging; it also raised issues about ethnography as a method for online research, such as the benefits of carrying out auto-ethnographic research online and the researchers' relationship to the digital culture being researched.

As described in Chapter 1, our research on language online focuses on text-making practices, 'the ways in which people choose and transform resources for representing meanings in the form of texts for different purposes' (Lee 2007c: 289). Understanding online text-making practices involves not just analysing structural features of language, but also observing particular ways of creating and using texts, moving towards investigating the how and the why of text-making through observing details of participants' lives. People's perceptions, feelings, and values are also taken into consideration within this theoretical construct. In short, the essence of text-making practices is to study texts in terms of what people do with their texts. As a different starting point, a practice-based approach can also begin with people's everyday lives outside the screen. This serves as a way of looking at how technologies have transformed these already existing practices.

With these conceptual framings in mind, we argue that texts and practices are inseparable in researching language online. However, as we have stressed throughout the book, we do not see language as simply a set of structural features, nor is it just a mode alongside other modes of representing digital discourse. Language online is also situated social practice. Different ways of using language serve a range of discourse functions in different social contexts, leading to different intended illocutionary meanings of what is said. Ways of deploying linguistic resources are shaped by various factors situated in people's everyday lived experiences of language use and beyond. In this regard, neither language nor practice should be seen as the sole point of departure. Instead, these methods go back and forth between data of language and data of people's practices. When observing the words on a website, we frequently get to learn something about the life of the text producers such as where they are from, what they do for a living, their interests and hobbies, their linguistic repertoire in online and offline situations, and so on. With Flickr, for instance, looking at people's profiles, and their language used in various writing spaces, can reveal a great deal about the user's linguistic and cultural identities they are presenting. This combination of

analysing online discourse as well as people's practices is also captured in Androutsopoulos' (2008) discourse-centred online ethnography.

A MIXED-METHOD APPROACH

Throughout the book, various studies conducted by us have been cited as examples to illustrate issues related to language online. In this section, we provide detailed descriptions of the methods of data collection adopted in three of the research projects involving different forms of new media online. The three studies in question are the study of IM text-making practices, the research on multilingual practices on Flickr, and the study of Web 2.0 writing activities.

The overall methodological assumption in our research is that understanding writing in web-based environments involves connecting texts and practices, both of which are crucial in understanding the production and use of language online. Without looking closely at the texts, we would not be able to understand the actual linguistic products of activities online; and without observing users' lives and beliefs about what they do with their online writing, we would not be able to see the dynamics of language online. Through the lens of text-making practices, we are also able to understand language online from the user's perspective. Connecting traditions of linguistic analysis with practice-based research requires new methodological design and the reshaping of traditional methods in response to the changing affordances of new media. A mixed-method approach is preferred, as no one single method can be employed to address all research questions pertaining to both the texts and the practices surrounding them. Sometimes we need to combine quantitative and qualitative methods; at other times, we move back and forth between face-to-face methods and online methods. It is important to be explicit about research methods and instruments so as to present and discuss issues and challenges involved in doing online research more generally.

The IM study

The overall aim of the IM project was to understand how young people in Hong Kong deployed their multilingual, multiscriptual, and multimodal resources when participating in IM. Because the overall objective of the study was to understand the situated nature of language deployment on IM, it generally took a qualitative and multiple case study approach. Data were collected from a group of 19 young people in Hong Kong, aged between 20 and 28. It should be noted that the data were collected between 2006 and 2007 and the methods adopted drew upon what was available at that point in time. Looking for informants for this study was not an easy task, given the amount of personal and private communication involved in IM. New informants emerged at different points in time. Some started participating at a very early stage while some were identified later by way of existing informants, an approach referred to as 'snowballing'.

Two points are worth noting regarding the research design of the IM study. First, not all participants were researched with the same research procedure. Rather, it was a 'responsive' methodology, as discussed below. Second, the same participant might have been involved in the study through different pathways of data collection. Some participants were studied through the first pathway below, which involved a mixture of traditional ethnography and online methods, including the following stages:

(i) *Initial observation*: This involved the researcher going to the participants' home or student residence and sitting behind them to take field notes as they were sitting at their computer and chatting with their friends online. This way, the researcher had access to the participants' private spaces of communication. This close observation of messaging also revealed other online practices such as multi-tasking – some participants often switched to other applications such as using MS Word for homework, with IM in the background at the same time. (See Appendix 3 for a list of what was covered in this observation session.)

(ii) *Collection of chat logs*: The participant was asked to print out the chat history from phase (i). This ensured the authenticity of the textual data.

(iii) *Face-to-face interview*: Based on the researcher's field notes, a face-to-face interview was then conducted with the participant on the spot.

(iv) *Initial analysis*: Then the researcher went away and analysed all the data collected from (i)–(iii). This phase started with a discourse analysis of the chat texts. Linguistic features identified in texts then became themes for follow-up interviews.

(v) *Follow-up*: Based on the themes emerging from (iv), follow-up interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on how accessible the participants were. Keeping in touch with the informants helped track changes in their IM usage. For example, towards the end of a semester, some participants began to use IM for project discussion with classmates instead of just for social and interpersonal chat.

As the research progressed, an alternative procedure was developed in response to the participants' everyday digital lives. In this second pathway, the participants were studied primarily through online methods.

(i) *Electronic logbook*: Each participant was asked to keep a seven-day word-processed diary or logbook, in which the participant described their daily IM and online activities. They were also asked to copy and paste their chat logs onto this logbook, which was then emailed to the researcher. (See Appendix 4 for guidance notes for the logbook writers.)

(ii) *Initial analysis*: The logbooks were analysed and coded for content. Interview topics were identified from this analysis.

(iii) *Online interview*: Follow-up interviews were mostly done through IM. This interview method was particularly suitable for researching students