

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY ROUND TABLE 2011



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Report by M. Paul Lewis

GURT 2011 focused on the theme: Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media. Sponsored by the School of Languages and Linguistics, and organized by Deborah Tannen and Anna Marie Tester, it was held on the campus of the university from March 10-13. Plenary talks were given by Susan Herring, Crispin Thurlow, Jannis Androutsopoulos, Naomi Baron, and Deborah Tannen.

Georgetown University Round Table 2011 Conference Report

DISCOURSE 2:0 LANGUAGE AND NEW MEDIA

BACKGROUND

The Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics has a long history and longstanding reputation as an important venue for discussion on all topics related to language and linguistics but particularly in the areas of strength of the linguistics department at the university: applied linguistics, language education, macrosociolinguistics (sociolinguistics of society/linguistic anthropology/sociology of language), interactional sociolinguistics (including discourse and conversational analysis) and translation and interpretation. While the Round Table has declined somewhat in the last decade or so as university funding has diminished, it continues to be an active venue for lively discussion on a variety of topics which change with the theme of the conference each year.

Deborah Tannen has emerged as the “champion” of the Round Table keeping it alive and active. As a result, the themes tend to focus on areas of research that she is more familiar with and that her students and colleagues are active in (primarily interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis). This year’s Round Table focused on the use of language in the so-called New Media (internet, e-mail, chat, lists, text messaging, etc.). There were a variety of papers on electronic contexts and how they either serve communication or are affecting language and its use.

I am grateful to SIL Asia Area for making my attendance at the conference possible. Several other SIL members or former SIL members also attended and it was good to renew contacts with them. In addition, several non-SIL participants commented on their contacts in the field or friendships with SIL members and spoke favorably of those interactions with the organization.

Though focused on the general theme of the use of language in new media, the paper presentations were further sub-divided into the following parallel sessions:

- Mixing Media in Private and Public
- Health
- Desire and Dating
- Discourse Markers and Deixis
- Panel: Epic fail: Errors, mis-takes and meaning-making in human-computer interactions
- Panel: Performing politics: Media and the new face of politics
- Gender
- Multi-modality

- Panel: SK to TTYL: Sign languages and the new media
- Identity
- New Media and teaching
- Politics
- Humor
- Politeness
- Meta-talk
- Work
- Corpus Linguistics
- Endangered Languages
- Variability
- Twitter
- Panel: Diasporic publics and circulating emblems of identity
- Panel: Stancetaking and sexuality on the internet
- Panel: New media as a virtual linguistic landscape for language learning and teaching
- Multimodality and visual analysis
- Facebook
- Orthography
- Family
- Panel: The discourse of technopanic
- Panel: Conducting research on new media in and out of classrooms
- Language Structure
- Language Contact
- Translation and Code Choice
- Bakhtin / Intertextuality

In addition there was a small book exhibit (a few sample copies of about 20 – 30 publications from various publishers) and about a dozen poster papers presented during the lunch hour. A boxed lunch was provided as part of the conference registration and fostered a great deal more interaction between the participants.

The Sociolinguistics “Reunion” also took place one evening during the Round Table which allowed alumni and current students in the sociolinguistics concentration at Georgetown to have dinner together and get to know each other.

DISCOURSE 2.0

As with any emerging field, the first task for a newcomer is to learn the jargon. The study of language use in new media has plenty of its own terminology. The most striking of these was the seemingly infinitely expandable acronyms for “computer mediated communication” (CMC) and “computer mediated discourse” (CMD) with multiple expansions on those as various modifiers are added. In addition, a new term for me was “shovelware” which refers to content that is prepared offline (using a word processor or other editing tools) and then “shoveled” online. Shovelware is contrasted with more interactive online and extemporaneous uses of language such as take place in chatrooms or on listserves.

The second observation about this area of study is that it is still finding itself as the media and forms of electronic communication are rapidly developing and taking on new forms. I can’t think of a more dynamic

area of sociolinguistic research than the study of the ways in which language users adapt their language use patterns to fit the media options they have available to them.

PAPERS

I focused my attention on papers dealing identity, language endangerment, and standard and non-standard uses of language in new media.

An interesting paper presented by Carolina Bates (Wichita State University) dealt with “The construction of identities through online narratives of eating disorders.” She pointed out how individuals with eating disorders represent their “self” as being their body and are focused on the concept of space and how much of the available space they occupy. She demonstrated through various example text taken from online eating disorder chat sessions how these metaphorical uses of language constructed particular identities for those who participated in the discussion.

Another very entertaining paper, “Anything can happen on YouTube (or can it?): Endangered Language and new media” by Jillian R. Cavanaugh (Brooklyn College and CUNY) looked at YouTube clips of Sylvester Stallone movies (Rambo) which had been overdubbed in Bergamesco, a non-prestigious Italian variety. The dubbed in scripts cast Stallone as the speaker of Bergamesco, and through his character voiced the social and political perspectives of the one-down social identity of the speakers of that variety (largely blue-collar, low-income, minimally educated factory workers). A similarly overdubbed clip showed John McCain and Barack Obama in a pre-election debate with McCain cast as the Bergamesco speaker. While these demonstrations of language varieties being used to make a sociopolitical point were interesting and funny, I also appreciated learning of “campinismo” in Italy which is the folk explanation of dialect variation wherein everyone who lives within sight of the same bell tower (“campina”) is believed to speak the same language and belong to the same ethnic group.

Perhaps the most directly applicable paper for SIL’s work was “The Matukar-Panau Talking Dictionary: A Case Study in Language Revitalization Using New Media” by Theresa Sepulveda (Swarthmore College). Sepulveda described how an online dictionary had been set up for a community in PNG by the National Geographic Society’s Enduring Voices Project and the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. These are the projects spearheaded by Harrison and Anderson (the recently publicized “discoverers” of the Koro language in India). Sepulveda had worked in the U.S. on the technological aspects of setting up the online talking dictionary. (See <http://www.livingtongues.org/talkingdictionaries.html>). Panau (Matukar, [mjk] in Ethnologue) is an endangered language – only 26 remaining speakers, all over 50 years of age and is no longer being effectively transmitted to the younger generation. Linguists sponsored by the EVP and LTI collected data among the Panau in 2009. That data supplemented by data from a local language “enthusiast” form the basis for the online dictionary.

There are many aspects of this project that seemed less-than-ideal, in my view, and other members of the audience also had questions about many of the same issues. The Matukar-Panau dictionary is hosted in the U.S. (at Swarthmore) and so is not readily accessible for editing or adding new materials to the members of the community. In addition there is no one within the language community who has the knowledge or training to actually make any changes or additions to the dictionary if that access were to become available (“full backup and RAID array redundancy, programmed in the MySQL database management system: support multi-user access”). Furthermore, the project is based almost entirely on data from one speaker, a fairly exceptional “language and identity champion”. Although Sepulveda quotes the field researchers as saying that “Panau is a prime candidate for linguistic revitalization because there is strong community support for

revitalization but little linguistic documentation", there was little evidence that anyone other than the single mother-tongue speaker was actively involved in the project. The developers of the dictionary seemed to be aware of these issues but also didn't seem to have any plans to remediate them. The data collection phase seemed to be pretty much completed (by outside linguists) and the development of this online resource was underway with seemingly little or no ongoing participation by the community at large. The major benefit of this project according to Sepulveda is that it gives the language "a greater presence" online. While making endangered language resources available on the web and giving minoritized languages a presence is valuable, I'm not sure that this approach is the best way to go about it, although the technology and presentation is impressive.

Interestingly, Theresa Sepulveda is interested in joining Wycliffe as a result of contacts with Chuck and Janice Walton who live in the Philadelphia area. Her participation in this dictionary project was as a paid research assistant under the Enduring Voices grant obtained by Harrison (who teaches at Swarthmore). We were able to have lunch together and I answered some of her questions about SIL.

Other papers I heard dealt with specific examples of non-standard orthography (how sports coverage tweets were taken by mainstream media and reported – legitimizing the non-standard usages prevalent in the tweets); the case of the Peruvian Quechua congresswoman who was subjected to ridicule because of her use of non-standard Spanish orthography (i.e. "bad spelling") in her notes and the subsequent online comments and responses (with their own forms of non-standard usage) to the online news story; with identity negotiation (how Arabic speakers negotiate their identity in online comments on Al Jazeera in Arabic in the face of increasingly negative attitudes towards them), with attempts at preservation of Ladino (a Jewish Spanish variety) through new media tools such as websites, discussion forums, chatrooms etc. Of particular interest in this last paper was the way in which the Hebrew characters were represented using Roman script characters and symbols (for example, x substituted for aleph, the number "5" substituted for the Hebrew lamed. ה)

CONCLUSIONS

While many of the papers were not directly germane to the interests and concerns of SIL, I came away from this conference grateful for the opportunity to learn about how the new media are being used by many different language communities in a wide variety of ways. Clearly the media options for minoritized language communities are broad and varied. What's more, I was impressed with the ways in which speakers themselves were adapting the media for their own uses. These more authentic and spontaneous uses of the media seemed to have far more promise than the more engineered and outsider-managed attempts to "prop up" a language. I think these are lessons we already have learned but it was good to be reminded and to see examples of both the good and the less-than-good.