


BOOK REVIEW

Language in Society (2024)
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CECELIA CUTLER, MAY AHMAR, & SOUBEIKA BAHRI (eds.), *Digital orality: Vernacular writing in online spaces*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Pp. xix, 302. Hb. €130.

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While this book does not specifically feature a chapter on the Philippines, many of the themes, theoretical premises, and ideological positionings resonate with me (especially in Part 1) due in no small part to the highly contentious linguistic scenario in my country. The colonization of the Philippines by Spain for three centuries and the deeply rooted Western-oriented mentality formed via cultural and educational inculcation during the period of American rule resulted in, inter alia, linguistic politics that do not only reflect but advance inequitable relations of power and opportunities in the society. My review of the book is premised on this kind of historical juncture since imperial conquests have undoubtedly made an indelible mark on the lives, practices, and psyche of many nations around the globe. My discussion begins with the overall thesis the volume aims to advance as regards the forms of orality that are evident in online writing and the social meanings that undergird this practice. This is followed by my comments on the conceptual anchors that the editors use as thematic markers of the chapters and their limits as structuring principle of the entire collection. Lastly, I focus on the choice of cases, which also acts as a wish for future iterations of the project and for scholars who are willing to take on the task.

The Philippines is home to more than 180 languages with Filipino as the constitutionally enacted national language and, along with English, official language. Overall, this situation never fails to spark a heated exchange that highlights the diglossic relationship not only of Filipino and English but also of the formal and informal varieties of these languages as used by Filipinos in different contexts, and their more difficult relationship with other languages of the archipelago. Language, of course, played a key role in the world's historical twists and turns. The widespread availability of the printed word ushered in by a more efficient printing technology, as propounded by many scholars and as rightfully cited by Cutler, Ahmar, & Bahri in the book, was, in fact, that which propelled the modern project of the nation.



The backdrop of the Philippines as a vestige of Western imperial conquests fits in well with the overall objectives and tenor of *Digital orality*, particularly in its argument that the notion of orality as an antithesis of literacy proves questionable. While the book is conceptualized around the idea that the form of orality, following Walter Ong's foundational thoughts on the subject, is occasioned by significant developments in literacy alongside changes in technologies of expression and communication, it also advances the more critical argument that these linguistic shifts are premised on and actuate changes in social relations.

The book clarifies that its scope covers the writing practices in the digital context, which sees orality realized in its inscription in online digital spaces through verbal and multimodal means. Still, there are cases in the book that feature different forms of online media (e.g. YouTube videos) with a verbal component via the comments section, for instance. Hence, while the focus is on the orthographic representation of orality in online mediated written communication, the book implies that the online domain is multimodal in character. In addition, a focus on 'writing on the internet' makes more pronounced the untenability of the contradiction between orality and literacy as seen in the printed word, whether on the internet or elsewhere. As argued in the general introduction and as prefaced by many of the content chapters, the continued practice of orality in the 'literate' context is not only witnessed in the digital online arena. Once again, I cite the Philippine case in its time under the Spanish rule as an example. Mojares argues, for instance, that indigenous oral elements found their way into the interstices of regulated recitations of religious texts imposed by the foreign invader, such as when 'natives zealously took to singing the Christian doctrine in the manner of their own chants' (1983/1998:25–26), demonstrating tradition's resilience despite attempts at its erasure.

In line with the book's main thesis, my small recollection above shows the defiance against formality and standardized linguistic forms in specific communities of linguistic practice. This imperative of historical and ethnographic contextualization is evident in the cases that make up the volume, allowing readers to make a sensible assessment of the discussion offered by the individual authors as regards the formalistic enactments of orality in online spaces whether the subject matter has to do with global politics and post-colonial ethnic identity (see the chapters of Soubeka Bahri and Sarah Hillewaert) or interpersonal engagements, such as bodybuilding (Eric Chambers) or online dating (Michelle McSweeney). Locating the specific cases in specific contexts makes the reading of social meanings out of seemingly mundane linguistic practices well-grounded, facilitating a discussion of ideology and politics in, for example, dialectal choice in online posts or misspellings in dating app messages.

However, I would like to note that while the notion of politics is only explicitly articulated as a thematic marker of Part 1, 'Political and identity stances', it is a fundamental theoretical frame of the entire volume. In the same way, identity as a conceptual anchor is relevant in the content chapters of Part 2, 'Performances of accents and styles', while the notion of 'performance' and 'performativity' as the supposed

conceptual anchors of this second set of cases could very well have figured prominently in those belonging to the first part. In fact, all of the cases are ultimately responding to the performativities of linguistic practices and choices that are necessarily embedded in interlocking ideologies and political relations. Perhaps, what is needed is a clearer presentation of the organizing principle of the book and the rationale for its divisions since politics, identity, and performativity are encompassing perspectives. This could have been addressed in extended introductions to the two major parts of the book to theoretically, not just thematically, tie together their content chapters. Even though a brief description of the rationale behind the structure of the book is provided in the overall introduction, a dedicated theoretically framed opening for each major part is a useful aid to the reader in recognizing the theoretical and methodological correspondence of the individual chapters as the reason for grouping them together. I believe that engaging with the ideas of intersectionality and genre would make for useful introductions to each set of the chapters since they show how linguistic practices traverse the different positionalities that one belongs to and are enacted in specific genres of online media. Nevertheless, the chapters are theoretically satisfying since there is a deliberate effort at micro-analysis of textual visualizations of orality from a linguistic perspective (e.g. respelling and phonetic writing of the New York accent in YouTube comments in Cecelia Cutler's chapter or the Welsh accent on Twitter as shown by Durham; May Ahmar's examination of the difference in translanguaging practices and code mixing in tweets of Lebanese politicians, celebrities, and activists) and a more global discussion of the sociocultural implications of these linguistic enactments from the many areas of the sociolinguistic field (e.g. the celebration of 'wrongness' against linguistic homogenization in the phonetic borrowing of Shanghai youth online speak in Jin Liu's paper; intimacy in online dating via linguistic politeness marked by typo repair and emojis as demonstrated by McSweeney). Methodologically, the cases also demonstrate the creative ways by which online data can be insightful not just for their content but also their form, necessitating semiotic, aside from linguistic, analytic approaches.

Finally, I wish that there was a more deliberate effort at including cases and experiences from a wider variety of cultural, geographic, and sectoral origins. This goes back to my reason for using the Philippines as reference for this review. Cases from Southeast Asia could have provided a valuable contribution to the project of tracing orality in digital online space given the region's multilingual character and significant internet user growth in recent years (Cheung 2022). In addition, since much of Asia has been culturally and linguistically shaped by various forms of contact with 'exploitative colonialism' (Ng & Cavallaro 2019:27), SEA nations continue to be sites of struggle against linguistic homogenization in policies and daily practice in conjunction with larger structural disparities whose effects cascade from institutions to individuals. It is not hard to imagine how much richer the conversation would be if insights from these (and other) cases are to be gathered, bringing with them their historical, cultural, and ideological specificities.

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