Section 4

Contemporary contexts, functions and variables

28

Online Englishes

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Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed some of the most rapid changes in human communication in world history. There are on average more than one million new users of the Internet each day. Today, over half of the world's population (4.39 billion) read, write, and communicate online (Kemp, 2019). An estimated 269 billion emails are sent every day (Campaign Monitor, 2019) and the Internet search engine Global Digital 2019 Reports is tracking some 5.1 billion unique mobile users and 3.484 billion active social media users around the world (Kemp, 2019). From knowledge workers to office staff to teenage youth, large numbers of people around the world rely extensively on computer-mediated communication.

In 2010, a disproportionate amount of this global communication was conducted in English. This trend continues today despite the uptick in global internet usage. Today, China has the most internet users, accounting for 20% of the worlds' internet usage (Hosting Facts Team, 2018), yet English remains the most widely used language on the Internet (Sitsanis, 2018). An estimated 25% of world Internet users are native speakers of English (Internet World Stats, 2019), and English has become the dominant lingua franca for cross-language communication online (Bokor, 2018).

Online communication is different than previous forms of interaction in many important ways. Online, large numbers of people from around the world can interact at the same time in a single forum. While interacting at a fast pace, they can still maintain a written archive of their communication. People can quickly encounter and get to know large numbers of strangers, and they can stay in constant close communication with friends at almost all hours of the day. They can publish their reports or multimedia documents for virtually free, and they can hyperlink parts of their texts to link to the words of others.

While online spaces allow large numbers of people to interact around the world in a single forum, social media can be seen as a natural evolution of the Internet, even recipatulating its roots as a platform for users to generate and exchange information. Social media can be broadly defined as a natural offshoot of Web 2.0, where users collaboratively modify and exchange user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Within this definition, there are different types of social media, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and avatar

games such as Second Life. Perhaps the type that is getting the most attention from the media are social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These sites foster personal connection through the sharing of profiles, posting of content, and exchanging of messages among friends and colleagues. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are known for their multilingual interactions in multiple spaces that traverse linguistic and cultural norms (Canagarajah, 2013).

For all of these reasons, online communication and social media are engendering their own styles, genres, and forms of English. Some people contend that it is resulting in the bastardization of English, the ruining of standards, and the misinformation of the public, while others contend that it is democratizing English by extending new forms of low-cost interaction, collaboration, and publishing to native and non-native English speakers around the world. While there are certainly elements of truth in both arguments, there is no doubt that online Englishes are challenging prior notions of whom the language belongs to, whose voices are heard, and who contributes to knowledge formation and dissemination.

Whose language?

Since the mid-90s, concerns about the dominance of English on the web have subsided as the Internet has become much more multilingual. The percentage of English online has fallen by about half, with the amount of online content growing rapidly in both major and minor languages (Pimienta, 2005). For example, Wikipedia alone has versions in 304 languages, 293 of which include 1000 or more articles, a number of which are endangered (Wikipedia, 2019).

The growth of multiple languages online undermines neither the Internet's use as a medium for communication *across* language groups nor the role of English as dominant lingua franca in such cross-linguistic contact. This lingua franca role both corresponds to, and has accelerated, the already prominent role of English in international media, political, and business communication at the advent of the Internet (Crystal, 2003). At first glance, the preeminence of English as the de facto global lingua franca would seem to privilege native English speakers, who can participate effortlessly in international online fora. However, by simultaneously facilitating daily communication in English by hundreds of millions of non-native speakers around the world, this trend also calls into question who controls English and sets its standards. In fact, there are over 700 million competent speakers of English across the globe, and less than half are native speakers (Jenkins, 2006). There is thus a growing movement around the world to teach a denationalized version of English based on local and regional standards of pronunciation, syntax, and usage rather than US or British English (Warschauer, 2000) and to use a simplified global English rather than US or British English in international business correspondence (McAlpine, 2006).

Stultified norms of what constitutes English are also being challenged by the widespread use of highly colloquial, informal, and hybrid forms of interaction referred to as *netspeak* (Crystal, 2004). These new forms are especially prominent in highly interactive forms of computer communication, such as electronic mailing (e-mailing), social media, instant messaging (IMing), Internet-Relay Chat (IRC or chatting), and short-messaging service (SMS, also known as texting). A great deal of public rhetoric is grounded in what Crystal (2001) calls a 'genre of worry' that focuses on the potentially corruptive nature of online registers and the idea that non-standard linguistic conventions associated with electronic media are spilling over into offline writing and conversation. Scholarly research surrounding these forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has tended to fall into two distinct

camps: studies celebrating the unique nature of online registers and studies disavowing any significant difference between on- and offline communication save for medium. Of late, such scholarship has turned toward a more holistic approach to understanding online discourse, emphasizing the interplay of technical and contextual factors.

Electronic mail

E-mail, which predates the Internet, is an asynchronous form of online communication that allows users to write, send, save, and sort electronic messages. When it came into common use in the 1990s, e-mail was heralded as a revolutionary medium that would change the face of communication. Early examinations of the linguistic features of e-mail suggested that users' language tended to be less formal, less lexically sophisticated, and less grammatically and orthographically correct than paper-based prose (Crystal, 2001). Scholarly analysis of e-mail and similar forms of CMC also gave rise to preliminary discussions about electronic text as a new hybrid communicative mode that blurred the distinction between spoken and written language (Yates, 1996).

In spite of this auspicious beginning, in terms of transformative linguistic and generic potential, e-mail has continued, in Herring's (2004: 27) words, 'slouching toward the ordinary.' No longer on the cutting edge of information and communication technologies (ICTs), e-mail is viewed as passé by youth and is often used by adults in lieu of paper letters, announcements, and memos. The English language forms and grammatical conventions for personal and business interactions conducted via e-mail have come to mimic their print-based counterparts to a great degree (Crystal, 2001). Some exceptions include the aforementioned informality that often manifests in a lack of salutations, an extended range of punctuation (e.g. '!!!!!!'), and a reduced use of capitalization (Crystal, 2001).

Social media

Social media sites host users from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in sharing content. Over the past few decades, critical social forces, from individual citizens to mainstream media, have formed complex networks of digital interaction (Castells, 2007; Lotan et al., 2011). Twitter represents a central microblogging site due to its potential for capturing events in a manner that transcends temporal and geographic boundaries (Lotan et al., 2011). Findings from a large-scale study found that 49% of posts are written in a language that is not English (Hong et al., 2011). To better understand this content, Eleta and Golbeck (2014) investigated how information travels across linguistic borders, classifying a series of network types that characterize how language is distributed within social network sites. Findings indicated that users choose their language based on the linguistic features of their network. The upshot of this possibility is that social media can facilitate linguistic diversity by shaping the experience of users. Examples could include enabling language selection and translation features and recommending linguistic resources for multilingual users.

Instant messaging and chatting

IMing and chatting are real-time or synchronous forms of online communication that came into popular use in the 90s. The primary difference between IMing and chatting is that IMing only allows dyadic communication, while chatting allows multiple users to exchange messages at the same time in what is known as a *chat room*. According to Pew Internet &

American Life surveys, around 53 million online adults (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004) and around 13 million online teens (Lenhart et al., 2001) use IM on a daily basis, with around 41% of working internet users using IM in the workplace (Madden & Jones, 2008). Messaging apps have been particularly popular among young people, with almost half (49%) of those ages 18–29 using messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Kik, or iMessage, and 41% using apps that automatically delete sent messages, such as Snapchat or Wickr (Duggan, 2015). Recent studies have shown that IM is more than just a communicative medium; it also serves as a way for youth to strengthen and expand social networks (Lewis & Fabos, 2005) and as a means of self-expression via customized user profiles, buddy icons, and away messages (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004).

Due to their synchronous nature, IM and chat interactions, more so than e-mail, tend to take on a highly informal, conversational format and have been catalysts for a great deal of public concern surrounding the possible deleterious effects of online communication on the English language. For example, in a *New York Times* article, a teacher expressed concern over abbreviations such as 'u, r, ur, b4, wuz, cuz, 2' appearing of late in student writing. According to the article, such abbreviations are part of an 'online lingua franca: English adapted for the spitfire conversational style of Internet instant messaging' (Lee, 2002: eighth paragraph). However, the media also has described this 'online lingua franca' as 'the bastardization of language' (O'Connor, 2005, cited in Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008: 4) and 'the linguistic ruin' (Axtman, 2002, cited in Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008: 4) of modern times.

Public concern about language change seems to stem from several discourse features that are commonly used in IM and other forms of online communication. One such feature is the tendency toward the aforementioned abbreviations. Other common features include acronyms and initialisms, which are abbreviations formed using the initial letters or syllables of a phrase. Abbreviations typically associated with IM and chat are *lol* (laugh out loud), *brb* (be right back), *afk* (away from keyboard), *asl* (age, sex, location). America Online, provider of AIM, the first widely used IM program, hosts a website with a list of AIM acronyms (America Online, 2008). Another discourse feature commonly associated with online communication is the emoticon. The word emoticon comes from a portmanteau of the words *emote* (or *emotion*) and *icon*, and it describes graphic or keyboard representations of facial and bodily expressions or emotional content. Common emoticons include :) (smiling face), ^_^ (Asian smiling face), ;_; (face with tears), @_@ (surprised face), and XD (mischievous face). Rebus forms of writing are also commonly associated with IM and, as will be discussed in the next section, SMS. Common rebuses include aar8 (at any rate), b4n (by for now), and cul8r (see you later).

Linguists, on the other hand, have proposed that IM language use is much less radical than the press suggests. For example, Baron's (2004) study based on a corpus of US college students' instant messages found that only 0.3% of words were common IM abbreviations, less than 0.8% were common IM acronyms, only 0.4% were emoticons, and that only 65.3% of contracted word forms were used. A study based on a corpus of Canadian teens' IM use findings yielded similar statistical results (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). This latter study also examined the extent to which IM language mirrors everyday language by comparing the use of discourse features such as personal pronouns, quotatives, and intensifiers in written text, IM, and spoken youth language. According to the authors, the analysis revealed that 'IM language is characterized by a robust mix of features from both informal spoken registers and more formal written registers – in essence it is a hybrid register' (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008: 5).

In a qualitative study of CMC, Lam (2004) investigated youths' use of language in a Chinese–English bilingual chatroom. According to Lam, youth in this chat room

code-switched between English and Chinese in order to express modality, convey humor and emotion, and mark social roles and relationships in their conversations. Much like the previous study, Lam's findings suggest that IM language is a hybrid register in several respects. First, the IM language of youth in the bilingual chatroom incorporated features of spoken Chinese as well as written English text. Moreover, Lam points out that use of Chinese discourse markers 'could be a simple yet pervasive way in which a Cantonese conversational tone is introduced into an otherwise English dialogue' (2004: 54), thus representing the global forms of English being used by adolescents in online spaces that attract interlocutors from around the world. She concludes that the use of such hybrid forms serves to help create a 'collective ethnic identity' (2004: 45) for Chinese immigrants.

Finally, though research in this area has just begun, initial studies indicate that messaging on youth-oriented social network sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, features the same kinds of informal elements found in instant messaging and chatrooms, such as written description of non-linguistic cues (e.g., 'hug,' 'wink'), use of non-linguistic symbols to display emotions (e.g., ♥), shortened forms (e.g., bday, pic, luv), and extensive code-switching between multiple dialects and languages (Chou, 2008).

Short-messaging service

Another electronic form of communication that is rapidly growing in popularity among youth and adults alike is short-messaging service (SMS), otherwise known as *texting*. Text messages are asynchronous and are constrained by a protocol that allows a maximum of 160 characters per message. This constraint on the number of characters has prompted widespread use of abbreviated forms of language often referred to as 'textese.' Much like the language associated with IM and chat, textese consists of abbreviation, logographic spelling, and rebus forms of writing. In recent years, there have been linguistic analyses of texting in several languages, including Swedish (Hard af Segerstad, 2002), Norwegian (Ling, 2005), and German (Döring, 2002, cited in Ling & Baron 2007). Save for one study on British English (Thurlow, 2003), there have been relatively few studies of the language forms associated with English-based texting. This can in part be attributed to the ubiquity of mobile phones and thus texting in Europe and Asia versus the high percentage of personal computers and thus IM and chat in the United States (see Ling & Baron, 2007).

As one exception, Thurlow (2003) examined the linguistic forms and communicative functions of youth's text message use. Findings revealed that the primary linguistic changes that youth made (abbreviations, contractions, acronyms, misspellings, and non-conventional spellings) were 'serving the sociolinguistic "maxims" of (a) brevity and speed, (b) paralinguistic restitution and (c) phonological approximation' (Thurlow, 2003: section 4). According to the authors, these changes were linguistically 'unremarkable' and 'would not be out of place on a scribbled note left on the fridge door' (2003: section 4). Thurlow's discussion highlights a theme that runs through much of the academic research and commentary on the potential linguistic changes associated with new ICTs – that technologies such as e-mail, IM, chat, and SMS do not, for the most part, bring about changes in language forms but rather amplify trends already underway. Studies consistently show that levels of informality and use of non-standard linguistic forms vary according to context and purpose. As Crystal (2008) points out in the following passage, rebuses and other abbreviated forms of writing have been around for centuries:

> Similarly, the use of initial letters for whole words (n for "no", gf for "girlfriend", cmb "call me back") is not at all new. People have been initialising common phrases for ages.

> IOU is known from 1618. There is no difference, apart from the medium of communication, between a modern kid's "lol" ("laughing out loud") and an earlier generation's "Swalk" ("sealed with a loving kiss").
>
> *(14th paragraph)*

In summary, electronic interaction today features many of the same types of abbreviations and colloquialisms similar to those that occurred previously when conversational English was put into writing. However, due to the sheer size and volume of the Internet and the amount of time many people spend chatting or texting online, such forms have become more widespread and controversial. Overall, they represent an expansion of the written use of colloquial English vs. formal or academic English. As such, they enable many people on the margins of power, including youth and immigrants, to communicate in a form that better expresses their sense of identity and community.

Whose voice?

The principal inventor of the Web, Timothy Berners-Lee, intended it to be a read-write medium in which it was as easy to create and publish material as it was to read and browse (Berners-Lee, 1999). However, the Web that emerged frustrated that vision, as online publishing in the Web's early days necessitated mastery of complex coding processes. The development of specialized Web design software partially solved this problem, but it was the development and diffusion of free blogging software and host sites that truly allowed Web-based publishing to become a mass phenomenon. The free hosting, the user-friendly interface that allows posts to be simply typed in, and the easy-to-publish solution that the blogging systems such as Blogger and Wordpress afforded opened up publishing to anyone who has access to the Internet.

Chesher (2005) analyzed authorship on blogs, comparing the conventions of authorship in the blogosphere to those in other electronic or print genres. Authorship in blogs tends to be strongly identified to a real or pseudonymous person through a username or display name for each blog and blog entry or through profile section that gives more information about the writer. The visual consistency of a blog, compared to a typical HTML Web page, also highlights personal ownership and authorship, and the reverse chronological order and specific time stamp on postings create a temporal link between author and reader. Blogs that are most successful, whether in reaching out to a few readers or hundreds of thousands, tend to have a strong authorial voice. In most cases, this personal voice is more easily achieved in blogs than in print journalism, such as newspapers, since blogging encourages an informal, idiosyncratic style and content. In addition, the sheer ease of publishing a blog, as compared, for example, to either setting up and maintaining a frequently revised standard website or becoming a writer for a print newspaper or magazine, makes authorship accessible to a greatly expanded number of people. Chesher (2005) concludes that the 'death of the author,' which was originally predicted by post-structuralists (Barthes, 1977), and which was supposedly going to be hastened by the decentred and collaborative nature of hypertext (Poster, 1990), is greatly exaggerated. As he states, 'the author is alive and well, and has a blog' (Chesher, 2005: para. 1).

In a study published by Herring and colleagues (2004), content and genre analysis were conducted on several hundred randomly selected blogs. They found that personal journals constituted 70.4%, filter blogs 12.6%, and the third k-log types 4.5% of their sample (Herring et al., 2004). Though Herring and her colleagues did not match blog purpose with blog

topic in their analyses, the sample blogs they chose as illustrations for each of the three main purpose categories match exactly with the topical categorization suggested by Stone (2004), with personal journal blogs typified by personal experience topics, filter blogs typified by political topics, and knowledge blogs typified by technology topics. The majority of blogs analyzed by Herring's group fell on the simple side. A total of 90.8% of the randomly selected blogs they analyzed were single authored, and blogs in their sample were updated on an average of every 2.2 days. The typical blog entry contained 0.65 links to other material, and only 43% of blogs allowed comments by others. A total of 9.2% of blog entries contained images (Herring et al., 2004).

What is typical in a random sample blogs, however, is quite different than what is typical in people's experiences with blogs. That is because the majority of blogs are rarely visited, while a small number of *a-list* blogs dominate the traffic on the blogosphere (Shirky, 2003). Many of these high-traffic blogs feature complex networking features that enable highly innovative forms of communication and advocacy. For example, liberal blog Daily Kos, which remains one of the popular political blogs today, has evolved into a complex network of community that consists of their own editorial staff; a broad network of contributors who write front-page postings, known as stories; hundreds of people who write additional postings linked from the front page, known as diaries; and thousands of people who write threaded comments on stories and diaries. This popular group blog features extensive linking to other blogs and websites from within comments, stories, diaries, and user signature lines; tagging of all diaries and stories to create a folksomony (i.e., user-generated taxonomy) of blog topics; a search mechanism to find stories, diaries, or comments by tag, content, or author; an elaborate user recommendation system so that the most highly recommended diaries rise to the top of the list, while the most negatively rated comments disappear; a hierarchical system of participants so that those who receive the most positive comments achieve greater privileges to negatively rate others; and a main blogroll linking to other link-minded blogs on the front page and distinct blogrolls on other pages created by users (Kos Media, 2009). Launched by Markos Moulitsas (2019) in 2002, Daily Kos has an estimated total visits of 18.2 million as of August 2019 (SimilarWeb, 2019) and has established itself as a major force in US politics (Chait, 2007).

Today the state and the architecture of blogospheres have dramatically shifted, changing the conception of blogging as blogs take the shape of multiple kindred forms such as moblog, microblog, photoblog, and videoblog. What was typical in traditional blogging then is quite different now in an era of an ever-evolving social media ecosystem. With the advent of Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and other similar social media platforms that brought ascendancy to microblogging, everyone who is active in one or more of these social media networks has become a content creator. The networking and sharing features of these social media not only added value to popular blogging platforms but blurred the conventional notion of blogging. Many of the social media platforms are designed for 'progressive convergence of content creation, consumption, interpersonal and public communication' (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 19). Further, based on the findings of mixed-methods study investigating the changing landscape of blogging in Scandinavia, Pinjamaa and Cheshire (2016) conclude that 'the future of blogging will be fragmented across various social media, with the blog remaining the core of self-expression' (p. 13). Despite the drastic changes taking place in the landscape of the blogosphere and social media, personal publication in an online arena will likely remain a prominent feature of Web-based publishing.

An important shift in the landscape of the blogosphere and Web-based publishing in general is tied to the prominence of YouTube and its influence in online communication, social

media, and ordinary people's entries into participatory culture. YouTube's simple and 'integrated interface that enabled people to upload, publish, and view streaming videos without much technical knowledge, using standard web browsers and modest Internet speeds' and its feature to easily embed videos into different websites (Burgess & Green, 2018: 14) gave prominence to video blogging, or vlogs for short.

YouTube's exponential growth in content generation and user base, since its launching in 2005, elevated it to be a dominant digital media platform where user-created content is freely and easily embedded, shared, and circulated. With over '1.9 billion logged-in users' visiting the site every month (YouTube Press, 2019), YouTube features a wide variety of user-generated content, including video blogs, short original videos, and instructional and educational videos. Statista's 2018 report on the most popular YouTube content categories by uploads shows that 'people and blogs' accounted for 32%, making it the most popular content after gaming, which constituted 31% of the content. YouTube's ascendancy in online social media environment, without a doubt, shaped not only the landscape blogosphere but the Web-based publishing phenomenon in general. As Burgess and Green (2018) argue, 'YouTube has provided a platform for participation in digital media culture for a much broader range of participants than before, and indeed its brand trades on the social and cultural diversity of the voices it supports' (p. 96). With this and in increasingly wired online platforms, the new generations of digital era are becoming active participants in digital discourses, changing the notion of authorship and authority (Clark, 2010).

Beyond giving tens of millions of people new opportunities for authorship, the social media and blogosphere also offer a political voice to those on the margins of power. This is due in part to structural features of the social media platforms to occupy an intermediary format between the highly interactive form of computer-mediated communication and the more permanent forms of traditional online publishing; participation in digital media culture can simultaneously replace both institutions pointed to by political theorist de Tocqueville as vital for citizen participation: the meeting hall and the newspaper (de Tocqueville, 1937). Thus, in authoritarian countries such as Iran, blogging and social media have emerged as an important, if risky, form of citizen advocacy to challenge both the censored media and the restricted space for traditional organizing (see, e.g., Hendelman-Baavur, 2007). In the United States, the grassroots left, which was relatively dormant from the 1970s to 1990s, has found the blogosphere and social media a particularly potent organizing tool, using it more successfully than the right to mobilize funds and support for its favored candidates and causes and thus counterbalancing the right's dominance over talk radio (Chait, 2007). In 2008, online fundraising campaigns played a critical role in the election of the first African-American president, helping Obama first overcome a heavily favored Democratic competitor for the nomination and then defeat a popular Republican war hero (Lister, 2008). During the 2016 presidential election, 'nearly 110 million Americans participat[ed] in the online debate' and 'over 5.3 billion posts, likes, comments, and shares' were generated on Facebook alone (Blackmer, 2016). In addition, several studies that examine videoblogging (Lange, 2007; Gibson, 2015; Raun, 2016) support that participation in YouTube and videoblogging 'works both to build community and to enhance community-led forms of media representation and activism' (Burgess & Green, 2018: 99).

Of course blogging and social media are not a silver bullet for achieving social change. Burgess and Green (2018) argue,

> While the affordances of the technologies and media forms associated with the participatory turn have increased the number and diversity of producers, and undoubtedly

> moved a significant number of people toward cultural production, the question of audience engagement for diversity – and what platforms can or should be doing to encourage and shape that engagement is urgent.
>
> *(p. 100)*

Also, authoritarian regimes have the power to censor or block social media participation and arrest those who voice their opinions in social media platforms (see, e.g., Gray, 2008) or publish their own misinformation. The digital media and blogosphere are a complex and competitive social and political environment, with those seeking to spark, resist, or co-opt social reform movements all fighting for influence, together with millions of others without political agendas.

Whose knowledge?

If blogs and social media create new opportunities for expressing voice, then wikis create new opportunities for sharing and producing knowledge. Wikis are simply websites that any visitor can contribute to or edit (Richardson, 2006). Though there is no authoritative listing or account of the number of wikis, they are surely far fewer than blogs. They have been principally established so that groups of people can contribute their knowledge and writing skills to collaboratively create informational documents. For example, some of the largest wikis (based on statistics from S23 2007) include Richdex (an open source directory on a wide range of topics), WowWiki (an information source about the World of Warcraft online game), and wikiHow (a collaborative how-to manual).

By far the largest wiki, and one of the 15 most visited websites in the world (for listing, see Alexa Internet, 2020), is Wikipedia. Its English version alone includes more than 2,600,000 articles totaling some one billion words, more than 25 times as many as are in the next largest English language encyclopedia, the Encyclopaedia Brittanica (Wikipedia, 2009). Most remarkably, there have been some 236 million edits to Wikipedia since its inception in 2001 made by 5.77 million contributors (Wilkinson & Huberman, 2007).

Most of the textual analysis of wikis has been directed at Wikipedia, with much of the research focusing on its accuracy. Its breadth of content, ease of access, free cost, and links to external material make Wikipedia potentially highly useful to a vast online audience. The foremost question for casual users and researchers alike has been whether a collaborative process that welcomes the participation of novices as well as experts can produce satisfactorily accurate results. In a widely cited study on this topic, *Nature* (Giles, 2005) had a panel of experts compare content from 42 entries of approximately the same length on scientific topics from Wikipedia and the Encyclopaedia Brittanica. The experts identified 162 errors in the Wikipedia content (four of which were serious) and 123 in the Encyclopaedia Brittanica content (four of which were serious), thus suggesting that neither encyclopedia is infallible and that the 6-year-old open source Wikipedia is only slightly less accurate than the 238-year-old professionally edited Brittanica. In a related study, Chesney (2006) had 258 research staff judge the credibility of two Wikipedia articles, one in their area of expertise and one chosen randomly. In general, the researchers found the articles credible, even more so in their own area of expertise.

Focusing on linguistic features rather than accuracy, Bell (2007) compared articles in Wikipedia and the online version of Encyclopaedia Britannica on three measures: readability, syntax (specifically nominal vs. verbal nature), and use of fact statements vs. value statements. He found the two encyclopedias roughly comparable on all three measures. A similar

study by Elia, focusing on lexical density, use of formal nouns and impersonal pronouns, and average word length, concurred that the language in Wikipedia 'shows a formal and standardized style similar to that found in Britannica' (2007: 18), even though its articles were twice as long on average and had far more hypertextual links.

If blogs served to suggest that the author is well and alive, wikis fulfill the prophecy of authorship fading away. In essence, the distance between the author and audience is eliminated when the audience can directly edit the author's work. In many Wikipedia articles, it is difficult to discern a principal author. For example, a review of the history (posted with each article) for the Wikipedia entry on the innocuous topic of *asparagus* indicates it has been edited hundreds of times by dozens of people over the last five years.

Wikipedia provides a fruitful source for researching the nature of collaborative authorship and editing. A study by Wilkinson and Huberman (2007) analyzed the impact of cooperation among editors on Wikipedia on article quality. Specifically, when controlling for age and visibility of articles, they found that both the numbers of edits and numbers of editors were strongly correlated with article quality. On the one hand, this seems intuitive, in that more attention should result in higher quality. However, the authors point out that in other areas, such as software development, industrial design, and cooperative problem solving, large collaborative efforts are known to produce ambiguous results.

In a study on the Hebrew version of Wikipedia, Ravid (2007, cited in Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) analyzed how this collaboration worked and how it differed between featured articles (which are generally recognized as being higher quality) and non-featured articles. Using a variety of social network analyses, he compared structures of dominance and heterogeneity among contributors in 432 featured articles and 410 non-featured articles. In general, he found a greater degree of inequality of participation in the featured articles. In other words, both featured and non-featured articles had large numbers of contributors, but a smaller circle of presumably more expert authors contributed a larger portion of the articles selected for their high quality.

One controversy surrounding Wikipedia has focused on it as a source for student research. The founder of Wikipedia, Jim Wales, provides the most commonsense answer to this, suggesting that although Wikipedia can help provide an overview of issues and a starting point for identifying primary sources, students are better off using primary sources as definitive sources in their research. 'For God's sake, you're in college; don't cite the encyclopedia,' Wales told one college student (Young, 2006: second paragraph.)

A more interesting question is how writing for wikis can affect the learning process. The potential of wikis for teaching and learning is hinted at by Ward Cunningham, inventor of the wiki, who commented that 'The blogosphere is a community that might produce a work, whereas a wiki is a work that might produce a community' (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007: 12). Cunningham's statement illuminates a central contradiction of CMC since its inception: it has served as a powerful medium for exploring identity, expressing one's voice, airing diverse views, and developing community, yet has proven a very unsuitable medium for accomplishing many kinds of collaborative work due to the inherent difficulty of arriving at decisions in groups dispersed by space and time (see meta-analysis comparing face-to-face and computer-mediated decision-making by Baltes et al., 2002).

Wikis turn traditional CMC activity around in several respects. Whereas e-mail and chat, the most traditional CMC genres, facilitate informal, author-centric, personal exchange, writing on a wiki facilitates more formal, topic-centric, depersonalized exchange. Each edit makes a concrete contribution to a collaborative written product, with authorships relegated to a separate page that only the most serious of readers are likely to notice. Wikis are thus

an especially powerful digital tool for knowledge development and thus for education (for examples, see Mader, 2007; Wikipedia, 2009).

Finally, the existence of a 'simple English Wikipedia' – with more basic vocabulary and grammatical structures, fewer idioms and jargon, and shorter articles – further democratizes this knowledge tool, as it makes the process of accessing and disseminating information more accessible to learners of English, people with learning difficulties, and children (Simple English Wikipedia, 2009).

Wikis, and Wikipedia are just one way that control of the knowledge production process is being challenged. For example, in the area of scholarly and scientific research, online research databases and journals are also threatening academic publishers' control of knowledge dissemination (Willinsky, 2006).

Conclusion

When the Internet first emerged, there were simplistic notions of a single online English, which contrasted with both spoken and written English. In fact, there are many varieties and genres of online English, just as such diversity exists in the spoken and written realms. However, there are some commonalities across this diversity, and one important common trend involves the challenge to traditional gatekeepers of English language use, as exemplified by Wikipedia challenging the Encyclopedia Brittanica, the blogosphere challenging the mainstream media, or tens of millions of youth challenging notions of correct English.

None of these challenges are, in and of themselves, revolutionary. Non-standard varieties and usages of English have existed for centuries, and new media have continually emerged to either complement or replace the old. The significance of these changes in language and communication will in the future, as in the past, depend on the broader social circumstances in which they unfold. Kaplan's comments on the matter, first made in the early days of the World Wide Web and published in a then-new online magazine, still ring true today:

> The proclivities of electronic texts – at least to the extent that we can determine what they are – manifest themselves only as fully as human beings and their institutions allow, that they are in fact sites of struggle among competing interests and ideological forces. (Kaplan, 1995: 28).

Youth, immigrants, and others may seize on new hybrid forms of online Englishes to express their identity, but they will require mastery of sanctioned varieties of English for social or economic advancement. Bloggers and social media users can challenge state authority and can be thrown in jail for doing so. And the viability of new sources of online knowledge, whether in Wikipedia or non-commercial journals, will be called into question by traditional gatekeepers.

Finally, we have only scratched the surface in this chapter of the ways that Englishes are evolving online. Multiplayer games, podcasting, and video publishing will all have their own impact on the evolution and use of English. And, in these audiovisual domains, as in the textual domains discussed in this chapter, the proclivities of new Englishes will manifest themselves as human beings and their institutions allow. However, that discussion will have to await another chapter, perhaps to be published on YouTube.

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This paper draws in part on the first author's previous discussion of blogs and wikis in 'Audience, Authorship, and Artifact: The Emergent Semiotics of Web 2.0' (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007).

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