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LINGUISTIC NORMS AND L2 PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE STUDY

Abstract:

Although social media appear to be welcoming spaces that enable easy access to target-language communities, second language (L2) participation is not necessarily full and equitable. Drawing on computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2007) and critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), this analysis of a discussion forum on the social media platform Reddit uses social positioning theory (Harré, 2012; see also Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019) to show how L2 errors are construed as obstacles to full participation. I argue that linguistic gatekeeping is linked to community norms that reproduce language ideologies, affirm the authority of the idealized native speaker, and position L2 participants as L2 *learners* rather than L2 *users*. When L2 users cannot participate fully in what seem to be welcoming spaces they may exclude themselves. At the same time, the data also provide compelling evidence that Reddit offers a new mode of inclusion for L2 users.

Keywords: CMC ♦ linguistic norms ♦ participation ♦ language ideologies

Introduction

In recent years, research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has highlighted the benefits of extracurricular and extramural language learning (e.g., Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2017). Though access to a wide range of online spaces for second language (L2) interaction is readily available, access does not guarantee full and equitable participation. Adopting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, I analyze participant stances on linguistic norm enforcement in a forum discussion on Reddit, a social media platform that centers around communities called “subreddits”. The data show how L2 errors are construed as obstacles to full L2 participation in the digital wilds (Sauro & Zourou, 2019). More generally, these stances illuminate the links between practices, attitudes, and ideologies and illustrate how relations of power are negotiated in online spaces. Based on my analysis, I show how linguistic gatekeeping on Reddit is linked to community norms that reproduce purist language ideologies, affirm the authority of the imagined native speaker, and, in orienting toward linguistic deficiency, position L2 participants as L2 *learners* rather than L2 *users*.

Other-positioning, I argue, affects language learning outcomes. From a pedagogical perspective it matters not only *that* learners engage with others in L2 interaction but also *how* they do so. Learning transforms identity and language learners develop their L2 identity when they become “legitimate speakers” in a community of practice (Block, 2007; Norton, 2001). Yet, a person’s identity is based only in part on how they see themselves; it is also based on how they think others see them (van Lier, 2008). In other words, identity is very much a social phenomenon and emerges out of the interaction between the individual and the community (van Lier, 2008). L2 *learners* can only become legitimate L2 *users* when the community acknowledges them as such.

Existing Research

L2 use in the digital wilds

Two recent special issues in leading CALL journals (e.g., Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2017; Sauro & Zourou, 2019) signal that research interest in language learning outside the classroom is on the rise. Although the importance of self-directed and naturalistic use of the L2 in spaces that are independent of a formal program has long been recognized, the affordances of emerging technologies have provided new impulses. In recent years, research on independent learning and related concepts such as extramural language learning (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2017), informal language learning (Benson, 2011), implicit language learning (Ellis, 2009), and

incidental language learning (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) has experienced a shift to online contexts and into the digital wilds (Sauro & Zourou, 2019).

In both offline and online contexts, exposure to and engagement in meaningful verbal interaction promotes language development. Kasper (2004), for example, highlights that “ordinary conversation can be a particularly productive environment for L2 learning” (p. 553). In online settings, L2 use has been associated with greater quantity and quality of L2 input and interaction as well as specific learning outcomes (e.g., Jensen, 2017; Sundqvist, 2019; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). The focus of much of the research in this area has been on different types of networked activities and learner populations (for an overview see Sauro & Zourou, 2019). For example, L2 fanfiction has been found to promote identity building and empowerment (Sauro, 2017). Extramural social media use has, by contrast, received little attention thus far.

L2 identity

Research on second language acquisition (SLA) and identity has long recognized that L2 learners are not “idealized, abstract learners” (Ehrlich, 1997, p. 440) solely focused on increasing accuracy but socially motivated agents (Drummond & Schlee, 2016) who use their linguistic resources for their own social positioning. L2 identity does not develop in isolation but is shaped instead by the social context, including the structures, resources, and practices in which the L2 is used (Norton, 2013). How a language user perceives their relationship to this context impacts their investment (Norton, 2013), i.e., their level of commitment to developing a L2 self. The construct of investment allows for theorizing how L2 identity is negotiated with others in L2 practices and how relations of power shape language learning. It can also explain how it is possible that learners disinvest in L2 practices they do not like.

Native speaker hegemony

In SLA in general and in the L2 identity literature specifically, computer-mediated communicative contexts where learners interact with L1 speakers have, by and large, been found to be welcoming spaces for language learners (e.g., Lam, 2004). This is true for the online spaces most institutional learners experience and—to the extent that it has been researched—also for the digital wilds (e.g., Hanna & de Nooy, 2003).

One of the strategies learners use in their online interactions with L1 speakers is to take on a novice identity, other-positioning the L1 speaker as the expert, even when their own proficiency is adequate to meet the communicative needs of the interaction (e.g., Vandergriff, 2016;

Vickers, 2010). Such strategies have generally been viewed to position L2 users for inclusion rather than marginalization (e.g., Barton & Lee, 2013; Hanna & de Nooy, 2003; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011; Vandergriff, 2013). Along the same lines, Barton and Lee (2013, p. 121) argue that such remarks facilitate the path to community membership:

By repositioning themselves as not-so-competent English users through self-deprecating comments such as ‘My English is so poor’, people are at the same time negotiating their identity such that they will be accepted by others as legitimate participants on *Flickr*. And these negative self-evaluations are a central discourse type for negotiating such membership.

If such gambits position L2 users for inclusion they also pay homage to the idealized native speaker (Firth & Wagner, 1997) and enact a nonnative-native speaker hierarchy. Overall, the SLA research record suggests that more often than not, discourse participants move to maintain this hegemony. By contrast, challenges to native speaker dominance are rare (see Vandergriff, 2016).

Data Description

Social practices enact tacit norms and ideologies. It is often only in moments of friction, when one person’s attitudes, norms, and/or ideologies conflict with another person’s that they are expressed. This case study captures such a moment of friction. The corpus consists of a public forum discussion about error correction and language norms in the Reddit community. It includes 4,091 comments on a 256-word opening post entitled “No, i’m not sorry for my bad english” (published on September 26, 2011 in “old Reddit”¹). Reddit, which describes itself as “home to thousands of communities,” is a social media platform and the world’s most popular online message board. Currently, it has over 100 million users a month in 196 countries. Compared to many other social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), Reddit protects the anonymity of its users to a greater extent. Without user profiles or pictures (in “old Reddit”), users are identified by user ids only. What differentiates the platform from a microblog like Twitter is that the content is moderated, organized, and curated. Items of value are “upvoted,” while others are “downvoted”. The corpus data were published in the subreddit strand “self.reddit”, a “place to put self-posts for discussion, questions, or anything else you like” (reddit.com).

¹ In April 2018 Reddit rolled out a new website design. “Old Reddit” refers to Reddit prior to the redesign.

The data were obtained through online observation. All personal data, including user ids have been anonymized so as to preserve informants' real and virtual identities.

Methods

In this qualitative analysis of asynchronous computer-mediated discourse I start from the assumption that different activities and spaces will impact computer-mediated discourse in a number of ways. In my analysis, I draw on Herring's 2007 faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse to tease apart the interaction of situation and medium factors. Although independent of one another in principle, they often interact in typical ways. My analysis focuses on social factors, in particular participant characteristics like language proficiency, age, national identity, education, attitudes, ideologies, and motivations to explore their role in participation and equity (Herring, 2007). In addition to computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), I draw on CDA to examine how power and ideology operate through language. It is important to note that CDA is not a single method or coherent theory but rather a research orientation that assumes that society and discourse constitute each other, that ideologies are relatively stable sets of beliefs and values and that ideologies affect social practices which create dominant hegemonies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

In trying to understand the relational² obstacles to full and equitable L2 participation, I analyze the data through the lens of social positioning theory (Harré, 2012; see also Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019). Here, position refers to "a cluster of short-term disputable rights, obligations, and duties" (Harré, 2012, p. 194). Operating through top down and bottom up processes, e.g., the use of explicit labels and categories as well as language use and stance, social positioning ascribes relevant traits like competence, which determine participant rights, duties, and obligations (Harré, 2012). In this way, positioning plays a key role in the negotiation of community norms.

Analysis

The opening post—L2 user self-positioning as proficient

In his opening post, Thomas, an L2 user, levels the following complaint against members of the Reddit community.

² The data do not contain any evidence of linguistic obstacles to full participation.

Excerpt 1. No, I am not sorry for my bad English.

Hey. My name is Thomas, I am 16 years old and i live in germany. As you can see, i speak english. I learn it in school as 1st language (after german) since i was 11 years old. English is a cool language but it is also hard to learn. Since there is no german reddit only some small political subreddits, I have to adapt to this english-speaking community. What I noticed is that there are a lot of redditors who just wait for a spelling mistake to bitch about because they earn in karma. I thing this is sad because read it should be a community for everybody, and also for those who aren't so good in english.

Especially to the american grammar nazis: I bet less than 2% of you can speak german as good as a 5 year old kid in germany. The german vocabulary of most americans consists of ~5 words like "Heil hitler, Nein!, Deutsches Reich, Mein führer, blitzkrieg!". Sometimes it sucks to be a german redditor because our country gets insulted and mocked so often, but we can't say anything against this rubbish because of our cruel history.

Please be a little bit more kind with us (not only with germans, i mean all non-english-speaking redditors) and don't bitch about some few grammar mistakes. It's ok to complain when somebody has grammar skills like yoda, but please stop beefing about some minor grammar or spelling issues. You have to except that the english language is a world language. Thank you :)

Deploying his L2 resources skillfully in the representation of self he introduces himself by name³ and age, a striking departure from community norms. Specifically, he uses indexical linkages to macro-level categories such as nation state affiliation as well as cultural and linguistic affiliations, and to subject positions (e.g., youth) (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005⁴). Moreover, he indexes his identity through his semiotic choices, e.g., "Hey", "bitch about" and the smiley emoticon. And, finally, his stances on a range of objects, especially English as a *lingua franca* index his L2 identity. The post makes clear that he has developed a significant subject position in English.

In his post, Thomas also responds to other-positioning. He describes the assumptions and prejudices associated with his ascribed identity as a threat to his inhabited identity (Blommaert,

³ In his opening post, the user introduces himself by name. His name has been changed to protect privacy.

⁴ According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005) Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interaction footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups (p. 594).

2006). Specifically, he feels marginalized in the community in two ways: as an L2 user and as a German (“I thing this is sad..”). Whereas he feels powerless to contest being positioned as a German (“we can’t say anything”), he vigorously contests being positioned as a deficient L2 learner (i.e., as an English-as-a-foreign-language [EFL] user). Instead, he positions himself a proficient L2 *user*, the L2 identity he claims for himself (“As you can see, i speak englisch”). Conceptualizing language as practice rather than language as code, he describes English as a “world language” that belongs to all English-as-a-*lingua-franca* (ELF⁵) users, a move that allows him to claim ownership of the language. Because one’s social position shapes one’s rights, privileges, and obligations in the community, negotiating for one’s rights involves contesting other-positioning through re-positioning the self.

A second strategy Thomas uses to contest how others have positioned him is to turn the tables on L1 users, positioning *them* as deficient. He implies that he, as a multilingual, is more qualified than they are (“I bet less than 2% of you can speak German...”). He also claims that L2 corrections are often self-serving. Specifically, he asserts that some participants correct errors for the sole purpose of gaining prestige in the Reddit community. (“What I noticed is that there are a lot of redditors who just wait for a spelling mistake to bitch about because they earn in karma⁶.”) At the same time, he is careful not to position himself in opposition to linguistic community norms (“It’s okay to complain when someone has grammar skills like Yoda...”).

Reddit comments—Other-positioning the L2 user as deficient

Next, I explore what comment posts reveal about linguistic norms, presuppositions, and ideologies as well as about community gatekeeping. Based on the analysis, I argue that, in the community, L2 error corrections are treated as violations of linguistic community norms. As such, they curtail full and equitable L2 participation and promote (idealized) native speaker hegemony.

Whereas the opening post argues for a functional perspective on linguistic norms that allows for some level of inaccuracy in the absence of miscommunication, others—including many whose comments can be viewed as supportive of Thomas’ position—argue that *all* errors should be corrected on Reddit, regardless of error type or potential for miscommunication, as illustrated in Excerpt 2.

⁵ ELF is defined here as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer, 2013, p. 7).

⁶ Redditors gain “karma” through posts and comments that are valued (“upvoted”) by members of the community.

Excerpt 2. Really?

6,959 up votes 5,296 down votes... Really? This many people down voted? This kid makes a great point! Thomas, on behalf of the American redditors, I will be the one to say it is a pleasure to have you on here, and it makes me happy to know that Germans learn our language. Although I'm not one of the many lazy Americans, I may be in my English, sure as hell try to learn about other cultures and languages. I speak German, French and Latin :) and my family background is 100% German, Except for myself, I was born in America, sadly :(Anyways, pay no attention to the idiots who may criticize you badly, but criticism is good for learning :)

Excerpt 2, posted by an L1 user, expresses two widely-shared positions, namely that L2 users are welcome in the forum and that L2 error correction is beneficial to the learner.

Community members are also largely in agreement on what counts as a norm violation in the community. In line with discussions on language decline elsewhere, linguistic prescriptions are primarily concerned with morphosyntactic aspects of grammar and with spelling, as illustrated in Excerpt 3. Lexical, textual, or pragmatic aspects rarely come up, by contrast.

Excerpt 3. I made this for you

My grammar and style aren't perfect either, but I made this for you, Thomas:

Hey. My name is Thomas, I am 16 years old and I live in Germany. As you can see, I speak English. I learned it in school as my 1st language (after German) since I was 11 years old. English is a cool language but it is also hard to learn. Since there is no German reddit only some small political subreddits, I have to adapt to this English-speaking community. What I noticed is that there are a lot of redditors who just wait for a spelling mistake to bitch about because they earn in karma. I think this is sad because read it should be a community for everybody, **including*** also for those who aren't so good in English.

Especially to the American Grammar Nazis: I bet less than 2% of you can speak German as well as a 5-year-old kid in Germany. The German vocabulary of most Americans consists of ~5 words like "Heil Hitler, nein!, Deutsches Reich, mein führer, blitzkrieg!"** Sometimes it sucks to be a German redditor because our country gets insulted and mocked so often, but we can't say anything against this rubbish because of our cruel history.

Please be a little bit more kind with us (not only with Germans, I mean all non-English-speaking redditors) and don't bitch about some a few grammar mistakes. It's okay*** to complain when somebody has grammar skills like Yoda, but please stop beefing about some minor grammar or spelling issues. You have to except that the English language is a world language. Thank you :)

*I switched "also" to "including because I believe people who aren't skilled with English are still people ;)

**I totally agree that there should be periods after quotation marks, and I wish that were the usual way.

***Either capitalizing OK or spelling it out would have been good IMO, and you seem to prefer not to capitalize things :P

Please take this comment not as cruel bitching but as friendly ribbing! Let me mention that I really enjoyed learning about some German culture along with some of the language back in high school, and I think it's ubercool. Please be careful about making generalizations about most Americans or what they know -- it's a big country man!

With a focus on morphosyntax, spelling, and especially capitalization, Excerpt 3 orients toward the standard language and ignores the possibility that non-standard spelling may be intended in the opening post. The consistency with which Thomas chooses lower case over upper case, where prescribed, suggests that the use of lower case may not be an error but rather a deliberate stylistic feature. Thomas may have given preference to lower case spelling to evoke the informality of digital communicative practices. Correcting each capitalization error is tedious, appears pedantic, and is likely less useful to the learner than a single "reminder" to capitalize all nouns. Other error corrections may also not help the learner. For example, the correction of the tense error from present tense in the original post ("I *learn* it in school ...since I was 11 years old") to past tense—where present perfect is prescribed—is also problematic.

More generally, the digital practice of enforcing linguistic community norms is not interrogated. Although the opening post implicitly invites discussion on which errors should be corrected and which ones should be ignored, there is no serious uptake on this point anywhere in the corpus.⁷ In presuming the efficacy of correcting every error irrespective of type, frequency, or gravity, the metalinguistic stances reveal notions and beliefs about language learning that harken back to the audiolingual method and are out of touch with today's best practices. Interestingly, even other multilinguals—whose language learning experience must have

⁷ In practice, however, not every is error is corrected.

prompted them to reflect on error correction—disalign with Thomas’ stance on error correction, as illustrated in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4. Get over the jokes

I’m Icelandic. I speak 4 languages, Icelandic, English, Spanish and Danish. I like grammar nazis, and I am one myself. I’ve been corrected on reddit myself. It’s a good thing because if mistakes aren’t corrected you’ll never learn anything. My advice to you is don’t take it personally when someone corrects you. You have to accept that English is a world language and you have to learn it and learn it well. English is more important than most other languages at the moment. Spanish, German and maybe some Asian languages are the closest rivals and they are far behind. Learn it or GTFO ;)

And get over the jokes about Germany. People joke about all nationalities in here. You should really not feed the stereo type about Germans not having a sense of humor.

Whereas the vast majority of L1 and L2 users view the community’s approach to error correction as effective, many orient to the face threat associated with the practice of overt correction. Seeking to mitigate the face threat of this overt correction, Excerpt 3, for example, shows an affiliative tone, e.g., through the introductory “My grammar and style aren’t perfect either, but I made this for you, Thomas” and the use of emoticons. On the other end of the spectrum are overt put downs, i.e., insulting or deliberately hurtful comments on L2 proficiency, as exemplified in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5. Unter aller Sau

Lieber Thomas,

für einen 16-jährigen ist dein Englisch unter aller Sau. Anstatt dich mit deinem Geheule hier lächerlich zu machen, solltest du vllt. die dir gegebenen Hinweise akzeptieren und dein Englisch verbessern....

[‘Dear Thomas,

For a 16-year-old your English is the pits. Instead of making an ass of yourself with this bawling you should perhaps accept the tips people give you and improve your English...’]

While a contentious or even aggressive tone is not unusual in Reddit error corrections the derisive tone in Excerpt 5 is relatively rare in the corpus.⁸ Overall, the data show that

⁸ It is unclear why this post is in German rather than English. Given its aggressive tone, the choice of language may be a strategy to avoid moderator-sanctioning. Or, the choice of German could be

enforcement of linguistic norms ranges from gentle correction to language shaming (described in the data as “bashing of people” or “belittlement”, see also Piller, 2016). Although Reddit users decry the harsh tone of some corrections and express concern with impoliteness in the community, they also seem fairly tolerant of verbal aggression. Grammar nazis and even flaming (i.e., the act of posting insults) are taken as part and parcel of the community’s communicative interaction. In line with their view that face-threatening acts are inevitable, they position Thomas as too sensitive (see Excerpts 4 and 5).

I argue that linguistic error correction as a digital practice sometimes has little to do with language; instead, it provides cover to members with an exclusionary agenda. Linguistic gatekeeping works through two techniques. First, highlighting a linguistic error marks the contribution as low quality. For this reason, the contribution may not receive as much attention or may even be ignored. Secondly, any metalinguistic orientation interrupts the discussion on one level of discourse and shifts participant attention from one discourse level to another, from the propositional to the metalinguistic level, from meaning to form. The interruption potentially derails the discussion because diverted attention blocks uptake on the content of the contribution and can effectively silence the user. Ultimately, such practices may discourage not only the targeted L2 user but also others from active participation on the platform.

As discussed above, users claim that error correction promotes language learning; in fact, some suggest it is the only way learning can happen. By and large, both L1 and L2 users’ stances show that they view L2 use through a deficiency lens whereas idealized L1 competence is invariably seen as the (only) model, as exemplified in Excerpt 6.

Excerpt 6. When in Rome

Your written English does not define who you are, but it is also a skill. There are others who are better at it, the same way that you are better than them at German. However, you are on an English “speaking” website. As the saying goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” As a non-native speaker, get used to the criticism, get over the fact that they get karma points out of it, and get better so they can stop. The only thing they get out of criticizing you is imaginary Internet points. You eventually vastly improve your skills.

Excerpt 6 exemplifies how L2 learning is conceptualized as a process of assimilation into the linguistic conventions of the L1 discourse communities, granting L1 users asymmetrical control over linguistic resources and assigning L2 users the complementary non-dominant role. In line

interpreted as a put-down, implying that Thomas cannot communicate in English, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

with this hierarchical view, Excerpt 7 asserts that a “humble” language learner is a good language learner.

Excerpt 7. Humility

Being sorry is about humility, and I agree with your statement but I think humility is good. You can be sorry about your poor english while being awesome and speaking/writing german very well. Sorry about the hitler stuff, I wish my fellow countrymen were not such assholes. Hope you have a good day friend!

Referring back to the title of the opening post, Excerpt 7 other-positions Thomas as deficient in “humility”. The linking of L2 status with low power explicitly reaffirms the hegemony.

Reddit Comments—Other Positioning the L2 User as Educated

If L2 users are other positioned as *linguistically deficient* in the L2, they are at the same time also positioned as “*educated*”. Without exception, L2 competence is seen as a remarkable personal achievement, with important consequences for linguistic norm enforcement. In line with this view, the data show that L2 errors—once identified as such—signal linguistic deficiency but index the user as a smart and educated person, whereas L1 errors index the user as “dumb”. L1 and L2 errors therefore require different enforcement strategies. For L1 errors, sanctions can be harsh; even language shaming appears to be acceptable for gatekeeping.

If L1 and L2 errors have different consequences, it is important for the community to distinguish between L1 and L2 posts. It turns out that in the pseudonymous text-only environment of Reddit, users find it difficult to do so, a point that gets much uptake in the thread.

Excerpt 8. Don’t know you’re German

Here is the problem– people don’t know you’re German. When I see someone posting on an English speaking forum, I’m going to assume it’s their first language. This also means I’m also going to assume they’re dumb if they speak broken English. All you need to do is mention that it’s your second language and no rational person will mind.

That being said, I’m currently trying (and failing) to learn German right now, so I know what you are going through. It’s a pain in the ass to learn a new language and I have a ton of respect for anyone who even attempts to speak english.

Describing language learning as an elite endeavor, the poster in Excerpt 8 characterizes the process as tedious, commends Thomas for his multilingualism, and suggests that norm

violations that are recognized as L2-based are not sanctioned on Reddit. Like in Excerpt 8, Excerpt 9 deals with distinguishing between L2 and L1 norm violations.

Excerpt 9. I understand

I rarely correct people who are second-language speakers, unless they're specifically asking for help with that language. I suspect that most of the hostility you've experienced probably is directed not at ESL people but our own American yooof who are unable to spell, type, or conjugate properly. Seeing people use U, 2, and so forth in their post just grinds the gears of my mind. I lived seven years in a foreign country where I was the one struggling to communicate in the second language, so believe me, I understand where you are speaking from.

Excerpt 9 shows that “error” is construed broadly in the widest sense to cover all usages that do not conform to prescribed usage. Ostensibly concerned with *errors*, the poster in Excerpt 9 singles out a stylistic feature of digital communicative practice. Specifically, they take aim at the practice of using letter/number homophones (such as “U” for “you”, or “2” for “to”) and claims that the (L1) user is “unable to spell, type, or conjugate properly”. Expressions of purist attitudes that conceptualize language as static code rather than as co-constructed practice and characterize non-prescribed language features as “errors” occur repeatedly in the data and remain largely unchallenged.

Whereas the stigma of L1 errors other-positions users as uneducated, L2 errors are stigmatized as “foreign”, i.e., in need of correction so that language skills improve (as illustrated in Excerpts 7 & 8). In other words, L1 errors and L2 errors both carry stigma but L2 errors are not stigmatized in the same way or to the same extent as L1 errors. Because they do not yet have full control over the shared repertoire or code (Herring, 2007), L2 users can redeem the temporary stigma as they gain more control of the community code. From this perspective, correction supports L2 learners on their path to full participation.

Because L2 and L1 errors call for different sanctions, Reddit users face a dilemma. In the absence of a clear identifier of L2 production, L1 and L2 errors are effectively indistinguishable, prompting community members to propose and support the following solution to Thomas’ complaint: All L2 posts should be flagged to distinguish them from L1 posts.

Excerpt 11. ESL tag

There should be an ESL (English as a Second Language) tag for foreign redditors so the grammar nazis don’t trounce them. Besides that, grammar nazis are generally doing good in correcting pesky habits. U no whut immean?

The enthusiastic support this proposal enjoys is interesting in a number of ways. First, flagging L2 posts and leaving L1 posts unmarked underscores a strong monolingual community culture. Moreover, it presupposes the binary distinction of native and non-native speaker. Given the prominence of immigrant communities in the US and Europe where heritage language competence is widespread it would not be unreasonable to expect a more differentiated view.

Conceptualizing the community

If community norms, including linguistic norms, are set by community members it raises the question who owns the community. Only a handful of comment posts align with Thomas' view of Reddit as a global space, where anyone with sufficient ELF competency has the right to speak and the right to be heard, as illustrated in Excerpt 12.

Excerpt 12. Broken English

Ironically, broken (to various degrees) English is the actual world language. ESL speakers/writers outnumber first language English speakers by at least a factor of two, quite likely more. That isn't about to change any time soon either unless it's by Mandarin or Spanish overtaking. People thinking that speaking English native fee is a huge leg up may want to reconsider that it's a double edged sword - it's really no longer "your" language. You offered, nay, demanded we learn it and learn it we did. Good for you, but you'll have to count on some fast evolution taking place here and I'm not talking the normal generation to generation gap that happens in every language.

The overwhelming majority of comment posts, by contrast, are more in line with the views expressed in Excerpt 13, which describes Reddit as an American community where L2 users are portrayed like "immigrants".

Excerpt 13. Why should it be a community for everybody?

Why should it be a community for everybody? Why is it always when in America contributes something, it should be for everybody, but when other countries contribute something (very rarely) either nobody gives a shit or it is reserved for people of that nation only???

In sum, the discussion of linguistic error correction has put into sharp relief two distinct linguistic norms of L2 English, based on two distinct concepts of the community, rooted in distinct language attitudes and ideologies, which affect whether L2 participants are positioned as *L2 users* or as *L2 learners*. Positioning, in turn, determines the extent to which L2 users are granted participation rights. Figure 1 sums up the analysis.

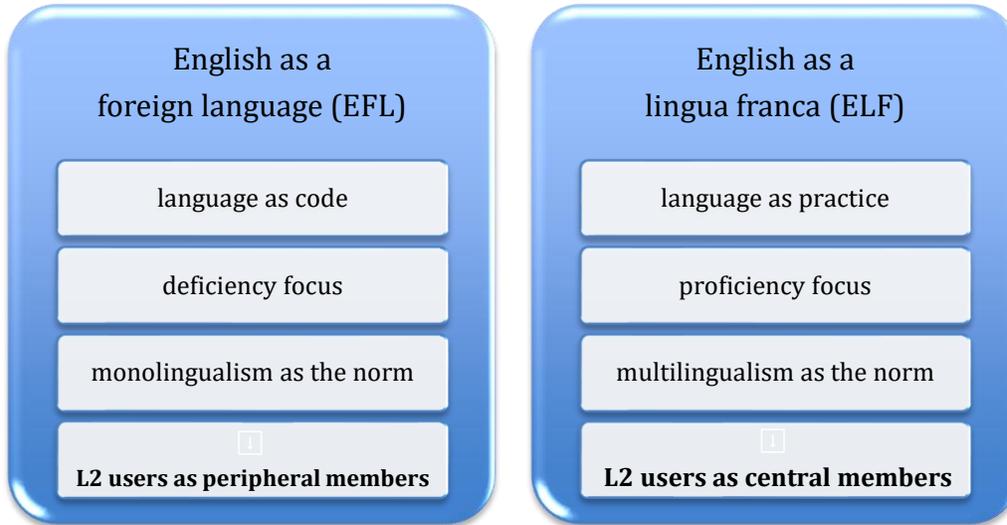


Figure 1. Positioning L2 participants as peripheral versus central members of the Reddit community

The analysis has also shown that the two perspectives on L2 English, presented side by side in Figure 1, do not have equal weight in the data. Rather, the overwhelming majority of discursive stances align with EFL rather than ELF. The dominant hegemonic practices around linguistic norms are not new and not unique to CMC, of course. Instead, they echo and replicate longstanding biases. From that point of view, L2 users—positioned as learners and foreigners—are expected to fulfill pre-existing linguacultural norms as L1 authority is exercised through judgement, praise, criticism, acceptance, or rejection. By contrast, Thomas’ view largely aligns with the extensive and very robust research on ELF that shows that, in practice, L2 English users already have ownership of English (Seidlhofer, 2013, see also Brumfit, 2001). Linguists have argued that it is therefore reasonable that L2 users should also be taken seriously as legitimate users, rather than learners in need of improvement (Brumfit, 2001).

Discussion

Error correction as hegemonic practice

In defending hegemonic practices, the discussion of *L2* errors is entangled with linguistic prescriptivism, i.e., the ideology and practices that impose rules on *L1* use (see e.g., Excerpts 8 and 9). This case study illustrates how users themselves—even as they seek to distinguish *L1* and *L2* code violations—treat both *L2* and *L1* errors as evidence of linguistic deficiency and violations of linguistic community norms. Error correction stances thus provide a window on tacit attitudes and reveal that the two linguistic hegemonies (prestige language variety over

other varieties and L1 over L2 usage) enacted in the discourse are like two sides of the same coin because both privilege the idealized native speaker.

Critical attitudes toward language have a long history, based on the notion that some L1 use is less acceptable, less educated, and/or less desirable than the standard or prestige varieties and that non-standard varieties should be excluded from the community (Lippi-Green, 2012). Authority over linguistic resources is therefore granted only to speakers who have control over codified aspects of language (standardized morphosyntax and orthography). With respect to digital communication, critics typically also draw attention to its most salient characteristic, such as some abbreviations (e.g., “U” for “you”, or “2” for “to”) or emoji use (as evidenced in Excerpt 9). Public attitudes notwithstanding, linguistic research into CMC has not shown that the language used in digital contexts can be viewed as lower quality by any measure (Bahlo, Becker, & Steckbauer, 2016). Nonetheless, the perceived language decline in online spaces has given rise to the digital practices of users who deride or demean non-standard language use in an effort to enforce prescriptive norms.

The negotiation of linguistic norms reveals that, for many of the users, code (see Herring, 2007) is narrowly conceptualized as an idealized L1 English and even small errors in sufficiently proficient L2 English are construed as a violation of linguacultural norms that requires sanctions. Based on my analysis, I argue that in this community, error correction is hegemonic practice. In fact, for some users, the focus on errors appears to be all but a thinly veiled strategy for marginalizing participants (see e.g., in Excerpt 9). The strongest argument that error correction is more about social exclusion than about language concerns is based on the labeling of ESL status. After all, why not just treat all errors in the same neutral manner whether or not they are produced by an L2 user? The answer is that language concerns are not of primary importance and that errors, like other features of language, serve to index social identity. ESL labels disambiguate the social meaning of errors: they differentiate L2 users from “dumb” L1 users and elevate L2 users since L2 status is associated in the discourse data with greater educational achievement. Yet, as a signal of minority status, L2 labels also promote patronizing error corrections and delegitimize speakers, effectively denying them full and equitable participation rights. I argue that the labels, widely endorsed by users as a way to redress Thomas’ grievances, do not actually support L2 users because they treat L2 participants as EFL rather than EFLusers and thus facilitate hegemonic practices.

The role of medium and situation factors in hegemonic practice

At first glance, the findings suggest that Reddit may not be a particularly welcoming space for L2 users. To be sure, the attitudes expressed in the data give the impression that, as a group,

users in this subreddit tend toward prescriptivism. Reddit’s so-called “reddiquette” with its rules for normative language use points in the same directions: “Use proper grammar and spelling. Intelligent discourse requires a standard system of communication. Be open to gentle corrections.” (<https://old.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette>).⁹ At the same time, it is not clear to what extent such norms are actually reinforced. Subreddits vary widely; a number of large subreddits show evidence of usage that does not conform to the prestige varieties of English.¹⁰

If Reddit is a diverse social media platform the analysis of a single threaded discussion says little about it, let alone about social media more broadly. Rather it highlights the need for and benefits of an analytic framework to study social media discourse in its variation. Although medium and situation factors are independent of one another in principle, they often interact in typical and sometimes predictable ways (Herring, 2007). With respect to the analytic focus of this case study, one might speculate that threaded discussions on surviving cancer will likely be more inclusive than those focused on politics, for example. Conversely, online spaces that foster argumentative discourse likely show more language-based marginalization of participants. This is because perceived code violations can be a source for *ad hominem* attacks, especially in digital spaces where participants rely on text-only posts to form impressions of each other. These examples underscore the impact of situation factors on the discourse and serve to caution against overattributing features of online discourse to medium factors.

Irrespective of the specific forms it takes, error correction as hegemonic practice marginalizes or excludes L2 participation. As attested, correction varies in tone, ranging from contentious or even aggressive to patronizing and subtle. Yet, even polite and respectful error correction may exclude L2 participants. When L2 users cannot participate fully in what seem to be welcoming social spaces open to everyone they may exclude themselves and disinvest from shared practices. On the other hand, digital tools also offer affordances for challenging hegemonies. The data provide compelling evidence that the platform offers a new mode of inclusion (Darvin, 2017). This is because Reddit, like other social media spaces, is a stance-rich environment that promotes sustained discussion and engagement by aggregating information and organizing discussions on themes in subreddits. What is more, Reddit offers affordances for negotiating and renegotiating community norms that allow Thomas to make his case and be heard. Aside from the over 4,000 comments the post received, fellow Reddit users gave it 18,931 upvotes and 17,585 downvotes. It is the medium and situation factors of this subreddit that allow him to challenge long-existing, widely held tacit norms, bring them to the fore in a relevant context

⁹ Reddit peer moderators enforce linguistic and content norms.

¹⁰ I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this important point.

and challenge underlying attitudes, norms and ideologies. In this way, the data attest to the considerable power L2 users can have in the community.

In sum, the picture of L2 participation and equity that emerges is fairly complex. Whereas Thomas' post challenges hegemonic practices as he conceptualizes English as a global language (see Figure 1), participant support for his arguments—in spite of the upvotes which outnumber the downvotes—is actually quite limited. Even ostensibly supportive responses including those that call for greater politeness in error correction amplify bias (see e.g., Excerpt 7). In fact, the overwhelming majority of participant stances do more to maintain than challenge linguistic hegemonies. Ironically, in this corner of the digital wilds efforts to “tame” language use impede L2 participation.

Conclusions and Implications

In their social media interactions, L2 users often position themselves with respect to language competence as deficient and L1 users as exemplary (e.g., Barton & Lee, 2012; Vandergriff, 2013). Such social positioning reaffirms the power of the idealized native speaker and allows participants differential short-term rights in the community (see Harré, 2012). By contrast, Thomas' self-confident “no, I'm not sorry for my bad english” positions himself as (sufficiently) proficient as he demands equitable participation. These two metalinguistic orientations to L2 deficiencies reflect two distinct linguistic norms of English, one that orients to an idealized native speaker and the other to the use of ELF (Seidlhofer, 2013). In the discipline, these two distinct norms of English have resulted in a disconnect between research and practice. Whereas researchers have made major progress in reconsidering the status of ELF in the last 25 years, professional and pedagogical practice is lagging (Seidlhofer, 2013). From this vantage point, the focal Reddit data analyzed here suggest that the debate has moved into public online spaces.

At the same time, not all language learners know what serves them best. In the digital wilds, false beliefs can make language learning less effective. For example, an exaggerated focus on accuracy, based on a common misperception that all language development is predicated on error correction, could prompt L2 users to disinvest in social media spaces where errors are largely ignored.

It is hoped that the present study will inspire research into classroom implications, in particular, how to bridge the gap between extramural practice and formal language learning. The following broad recommendations may be useful as a starting point:

1. To prepare students for self-directed learning in online social spaces, formal language instruction should address select processes, methods, and strategies of effective language learning.
2. Classrooms should promote critical awareness of sociolinguistic issues and find ways of empowering learners to question and challenge prevailing ideologies that do not serve them.
3. To promote the skills and competence necessary for engagement outside formal instruction, instructional practice should provide classroom-based opportunities for learners to interact in a naturalistic setting in the digital wilds (see e.g., Sauro, 2017) rather than in controlled online spaces.¹¹
4. Language classrooms should provide space for reflection on legitimizing L2 speakerhood and L2 identity work. A critical pedagogical approach would promote greater awareness of what it means to be a legitimate speaker.

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¹¹ I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of an anonymous reviewer who suggested that “notions of stance and positioning could be very helpful in orienting L2 learners/users to interactional norms in the digital wilds.”

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