The where and when of online language learning: Socialization as categorization in virtual spaces

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This paper aims to throw light on the intersection of contexts where participants are currently engaging in communicating across different language varieties including attempting at learning a ”second/foreign/additional language” online. Furthermore, this paper focuses some of the challenges that constructs like multilingualism, (inter)culturality and online learning represent when dealing with complex identity positionings and representations across time and space in the endeavor to recognize ”transnational, diverse, plural identities” (Byrd Clark, 2012: 149) when researching language learning online and across contexts.

The empirical data is drawn from two netnographic projects at the Communication, Culture and Diversity, CCD research group in Sweden (www.oru.se/humus/ccd/): (i) project CINLE consists of screen recordings of synchronous online meetings of an ”Italian for Beginners” course offered by a Swedish university during 2010-11 (see Messina Dahlberg 2015, Messina Dahlberg & Bagga-Gupta 2013, 2014, 2015) and national policy documents related to ”distance education” (2000-present) and (ii) project Atoz where status updates and other artifacts uploaded on social media (Facebook, Blogs, Youtube etc.) are focused (2010-present), (Bagga-Gupta 2013, 2016).

Taking sociocultural and decolonial framings and going beyond essentialistic theories of language learning, communication and identity-positions, the results highlight that virtual spaces are surrounded by a permeable membrane which allows stuff (information, tools, practices) to get in and out. The analysis of juxtaposing such data illustrates how this seeping in and out of information, people, tools and ideas across virtual and ’real’ spaces affects the communication in situ in relation to processes of language learning and categorization in the virtual space. This fluidity of positions and languaging (Garcia, 2009) we argue, offers alternative ways of considering language learning, including how people categorize the world in terms of identity, language and culture (Bagga-Gupta, Hasnain & Mohan, 2013) as they endeavor to belong to (and analyze) a group, a community, a tradition.

Keywords: sociocultural/decolonial, language learning, social media, online education.