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Dynamics of Multilingualism in the Digital Public Sphere: Introduction

The original idea

With the concepts of *multilingualism* and the *digital public sphere*, there are areas coming together that are dynamically interrelated and interdependent. The public sphere can be described as areas of social life that include dynamic social, political, artistic and media practices. The concept of the public sphere can be used to explain the constitution and dynamics of (multilingual) communication, linguistic and cultural attitudes and practices of lifestyle and coexistence, as well as changes in urban and rural spheres, milieus, (educational) institutions and the relationship to the private sphere or to others.

The transformation of the socio-cultural and political public sphere can currently be observed through new forms of participation and communication in digital spheres. Closely related to this are the concepts of agency and connectivity (cf. Thacker 2004, Yashima 2013), which are to be defined in an interdisciplinary way and also refer to social participation and critical engagement. In the digital public sphere, new forms of dialogicity and specific possibilities of self-manifestation and positioning, as well as the negotiation of identities and relationships, emerge. These new forms and possibilities also stimulate aesthetic processes in literature and other arts, challenging literary and media studies to extend the theories of intertextuality and intermediality developed in the 20th century. In the course of this dynamisation of the traditional literary system, terms such as “digital” or “electronic” literature have become established in current research discourse (cf. Winko 2016). It is precisely the literary adaptation of digital spheres, e.g. through the staging of chat communication in narrative or poetic texts, that allows a new, digitally influenced language of literary communication to emerge, which can be analysed on the basis of discourse-analytical, semiotic and stylistic aspects, among others. If the transformation of traditional genres can be observed on the level of genre-theory, digitally published literary projects invite the study of digital reading communities on the basis of reception theory and literary sociology. In the context of net-published literature, the text type of the literary blog plays a special role with regard to the potential of the subject constitution/auto-representation of authors (cf. Folger 2008; Gatzmeier 2010), whose virtual “posture” (cf. Meizoz 2007) can help to shape public discourse and create identification patterns for their readers.

The question of how to open up teaching to the digital public sphere as a place of learning is highly relevant to the modelling of linguistic-cultural educational provision that aims to take account of learners’ multilingual and multicultural identities and to develop comprehensive linguistic-cultural and digital literacies or multiliteracies. The possibilities of including and designing digital spheres open up new educational scenarios and must be accompanied by media-critical and media-ethical questions in order to enable learners to participate linguistically and culturally. Critically dealing with the formation of public opinion in social networks is part of media education in schools. With Web 2.0 applications, learners can also become actors in the digital public sphere. This can happen through the creative use of digital (literary) texts or

through the use of languages and multilingualism (translanguaging, cf. Canagarajah 2013, García/Li 2014, Pennycook 2007). As this takes place in the public sphere, it can be introduced into the classroom, for example through linguistic landscapes (cf. Melo-Pfeifer 2023), as well as through the individual design of digital multilingual spheres. As linguistic landscape research following Landry/Bourhis (1997) shows, multilingualism is a pervasive feature of urban linguistic landscapes in particular, and is now also present in digital public spheres where linguistic and cultural diversity is semiotically represented and negotiated. This then becomes the subject of classroom reflection on digitally mediated multilingual practices and dynamic identity constructions (cf. Lahire 2011), and is also important for teacher education in terms of attitudes towards multilingual dynamics.

The conference

Analysing the creation, structuring and use of digital public spheres and their impact on or interaction with multilingual dynamics in all its complexity is an interdisciplinary task of linguistics, literature, media, cultural studies and foreign language education. For this purpose, an interdisciplinary conference took place virtually at the University of Siegen (Germany). From 27 to 29 May, researchers from 17 different countries attended the conference to discuss in English, German, Spanish and French multilingualism in the digital public sphere in terms of communicative practices, social implications and didactic potential, as well as methodological issues. In the digital sphere, new formats and medial and semiotic possibilities of communication are emerging that have no equivalent in analogue communication. The interdisciplinary contributions and discussions during the congress showed how important it is for current research to reflect on the paradigm of multilingualism in the context of digital forms of representation and articulation, as well as the conditions of public communication. For example, the presentations from the field of language teaching gave proof of how the modelling of language and culture education programmes, which take into account the plurilingual and pluricultural identities of learners and develop comprehensive pluricultural and digital literacies or multiliteracies, can be highly relevant as an opening of teaching to the digital public learning sphere, especially in times of pandemics. Given its immediacy, the digital public sphere was also explored as a possibility for participation in social discourse. This was demonstrated in a number of talks using the example of linguistic self-manifestations and the use of diverse semiotic repertoires. The study of communication in digital public spheres requires and enables new methodological approaches to the collection and analysis of linguistic and multimodal data, as was the subject of several papers. In addition to contrast and demarcation, the interfaces between analogue and digital communication as well as between public and private spheres were at the centre of attention. All of this raised questions about the construction of identity through the choice of particular narrative formats and languages, but also about attitudes and self-positioning in relation to multilingualism, linguistic varieties and cultural belonging. The papers on literature and cultural studies at the conference were able to tie in with this by illustrating, among other aspects, how literary authorship in the age of digital communication refers back to practices of media self-representation, or how digital methods of analysis can be used specifically to process literary styles of language.

The publication

This volume contains 10 selected papers from the conference, offering insights into different approaches to the topic. The papers shed light on how digital spheres are connected to real places and their local conditions when using digital media, as shown in the first four papers.

Topics include how multilingual people use their languages in digital communication to express their identity and belonging (Pauwels), what plurilingual teaching methods look like in the digital age (Etuş and Lujčić Pikutić / Zovko), and how young women with disadvantaged access to secondary education use digital media for learning and networking (Osorio Vázquez / Bressers). These contributions provide a global perspective on teaching and learning in different countries.

The following articles focus on specific aspects of English, French and Spanish as foreign languages. They explore how multilingual learner identities are formed (Sing), how digital spheres facilitate cross-cultural encounters (Schröder/Mensch), and how pre-service teachers experience inner multilingualism in relation to digital access to varieties of Spanish (Weiland).

The last three articles consider digital media from literary, media and linguistic perspectives. They discuss how multilingualism is used artistically and subversively in digital literature (Gómez), how multilingualism, multiculturalism and social media are aesthetically staged in series as attributes of hip young urbanites (Cedeño), and how the semiotic possibilities of digital media are used for specific communicative purposes, such as the stylisation of reported speech (Grutschus). Each article is accompanied by an abstract in English. In keeping with the multilingual orientation of our conference, the volume also includes texts in German and Spanish, which we expressly welcome as a contribution to a polyphonic academic culture.

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