ONLINE DOMAINS OF LANGUAGE USE: SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND FOREIGNNESS

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This paper examines the use of CMC in both Japanese and English dominated *domains* by Australian learners of Japanese. The natural, social online communication of 12 Australian university students with 18 of their Japanese contacts was collected for a period of up to four years, resulting in a corpus of approximately 2,000 instances of blogs, e-mails, SNS interactions, chat conversations, game profiles, and mobile phone communications. To supplement this data, interviews were conducted to further explore participants' Internet communication and L2 use. These interviews, paired with evidence from the corpus of collected data, are analysed using Sealey and Carter's (2004) social realism framework in order to explore questions of language selection, identity construction and nationality, as well as what it means to be a *foreigner* online.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early years of the Internet, discussion of *virtual communities* has been at the forefront of much research (Crook & Light, 2002; Johnston & Johal, 1999; Matei, 2005; Rheingold, 1993; Zorn, 2004). Clodius (1997, January) points out that online, shared interests and self-identification of belonging are viable alternatives to simply defining *community* on the basis of geography or patterns of residence. This of course has important implications for second language (L2) uses of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which may serve as opportunities for *immersion* in a virtual, target-language-speaking community.

It has often been claimed that online, particularly in text-based communication, it is largely optional to signal one's ethnicity, gender, age, or mother tongue. One early Internet adopter quoted in Turkle's pioneer research stated:

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see are your words. (Turkle, 1995, p. 184)

Similarly, Sundén (2003) argues that online, we write ourselves into being. This has important implications for the L2 user. Do L2 users approach online communication as an opportunity to hide their body and accent and appear less *foreign*? Are all linguistic domains equally accessible to native (NS) and non-native (NNS) speakers alike? Given the prevalent view of CMC as a useful tool for language practise outside the classroom, these questions appear worthy of further exploration. This paper presents some evidence emerging from interviews with L2 learners, and the analysis of their online communication in NS communities, which suggest that although some virtual communities provide a sense of *immersion* in a certain culture, they may also foster feelings of *foreignness*. As one participant in the present study commented, a specific *domain* may be simultaneously "a place where you can be surrounded by the language" and a place where "you're always gonna be a JSL (Japanese as a Second Language) student." As such, participants' sense of identity was found to be affected in the present study on the basis of the linguistic domain they inhabited at the time.

In the introduction to her influential book, *Life on the Screen,* Turkle (1995) defined identity in a computer-mediated environment as multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction via technology. Yet a decade later, Hewling (2005) argued that CMC research has often taken a narrow, nationality-based view

of culture, and suggests instead that identity or identities be viewed as a site of ongoing negotiation. Such negotiation, Hewling states, is visible online in the form of CMC discourse. Thus, analysis of L2 learners' online language use across a variety of domains may provide greater insight into the nature of constructing identity via an L2 online, in particular, in terms of ethnicity, nationality, and nativeness/foreignness, and the effects of communicating in certain domains on opportunities for language learning and use.

Past Research on CMC

Miller and Slater (2000) criticize the first generation of Internet literature for viewing the Internet as a gigantic, placeless *cyberspace*. Much of this early research on CMC tended to view the Internet as a monolithic space that was somehow "more egalitarian, democratic, and liberating than face-to-face interactions" (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; McGuire, Kiesler, & Siegel, 1987; Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; cited in Watt, Lea, & Spears, 2002, p. 63). Simon even described the Internet as having an "inherent support of democracy" (2002, p. 101). Hanna and de Nooy categorize such views as subscribing to the *borderless world* (2004, p. 259) perception of Internet communication, in which the Internet is deemed to remove cultural difference. Of course, these perspectives have had an important impact on research in the areas of L2 use and acquisition also.

Past research on L2 use and acquisition points to a variety of benefits of the online environment. A reduction in anxiety in comparison to face-to-face speech and greater opportunities for language production have been claimed as some of the most important implications of CMC for L2 learners. Itakura and Nakajima (2001) found that the use of CMC assisted language learners in gaining an authentic audience, provided them with the flexibility to compose e-mails at their leisure, gave them a record of communication, fostered independent learning and provided opportunities for the negotiation of meaning, which can lead to language learning. Yoshimura and Miyazoe-Wong (2005) also found that communication with NSs via CMC could help students to amend stereotypes, and Kano (2004) claims that such interactions can expose learners to language variation in the form of popular grammar, slang, and regional dialects.

A body of work on young people's use of CMC for social purposes in a first language setting has been carried out by boyd[1] and others (boyd, 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd & Heer, 2006, January), who found that participation online is increasingly seen as an essential part of teenage social lives. However, online participation is influenced by physical location and (offline) social relationships, with students who live with roommates or alone more likely to engage in Social Networking Site (SNS) use than those who live with their parents (Hargittai, 2007). The current study shows that in addition to one's immediate environment (e.g., being physically located at home, school, or in a net café or library), one's broader socio-political geographical environment at the national level, and the similar borders manifested online, also influence online participation, especially intercultural communication.

Recent studies are beginning to challenge assumptions of the Internet as a monolithic, *placeless space*, pointing out, for example, the dominance of English, but domains in which languages other than English preside appear neglected. Hanna and de Nooy (2004) also argue that little systematic attention has been paid to intercultural online communication. So far, the question of how participation in online communication affects opportunities for language acquisition, particularly of an Asian language, in a naturalistic setting has not yet been adequately explored, despite the widely accepted benefits of CMC use for language practise outside of the classroom.

The present study utilises a social realist frame to investigate the informal use of CMC by NSs of English and Japanese in terms of language choice, identity display, conceptions of nationality and the perceived ownership of online spaces. Importantly, it describes some CMC users who identify themselves online as *foreigners*, in stark contrast with the idea of the Internet as a placeless space.

METHOD

In the present study, 12 Australian university students of Japanese were recruited, who in turn invited their Japanese contacts to participate. In total, data was collected from 30 participants, and some Japanese participants were contacts of more than one Australian participant.

Table 1. *Australian and Japanese Participants*

Australian Participant	Japanese Contact(s)
Cindy	Mei
Genna	Tokio
Scott	Kieko
Lucas	Hisayo
Zac	Fumie
Oscar	Yoshio
Kaylene	Chikae, Daishi, Ikuko, Junko, Ruriko, Ukiko, Watako
Kaylene & Jacob	Kō
Ellise	Atsuko, Sae
Ellise & Alisha	Eri
Alisha	Noriko
Hyacinth	No current Japanese contacts at time of study
Noah	No current Japanese contacts at time of study

In contrast to many previous studies, volunteers were not paired with NSs in order to complete tasks, but instead data was collected from participants in existing relationships. The collection resulted in over 2,000 instances of naturally occurring language use via blogs (including Ameba and Mixi), e-mails (via both PC and mobile phone), SNSs (including Facebook, Mixi, and MySpace), online videos, chat messages, video game interactions, and Website or forum posts. Data from the social networking sites Mixi and Facebook, as will be further elaborated in the findings section, are focused on in particular as case studies in the current paper.

Background interviews were also completed (face-to-face and audio-recorded with the Australian participants, and via e-mail with the Japanese participants) to gain insight into participants' language and computing histories. Participants were also invited to take part in a follow-up interview, focusing on their most recent interaction, in order to obtain more detailed information about their language use in context. As three of the Australian participants moved to Japan part-way through the data collection period, a small number of fieldwork focus group sessions were also conducted, which gave the researcher the opportunity to interview both the Japanese and Australian participant in a pair simultaneously. The use of Sealey and Carter's (2004) social realism framework allowed for a holistic approach to the analysis of the interviews and CMC data.

Sealey and Carter's approach combines elements of applied linguistics and sociology to facilitate the investigation of issues which incorporate both social and language acquisition factors. It places emphasis on situated activity (e.g., the act of engaging in CMC), social structure (e.g., the social and other networks present, and the differential distribution of life chances within these groups), participant psychobiographies (i.e., participants' histories with computer use and language learning), and contextual resources (i.e., the physical, conceptual and linguistic tools made use of). The social realism framework has been successfully applied to a range of applied linguistic and sociolinguistic research, as well as its

more specific use in the analysis of CMC by Belz and others (Belz, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, July, 2005; Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004). While Belz's research concentrates on CMC use in a formal educational setting, the framework is equally applicable to students' use of CMC outside of teacher directed activity.

In an investigation of the social dimensions of telecollaborative foreign language study involving e-mail, synchronous chat, and the construction of Websites, Belz (2002) provides a useful summary of the realist position from both a theoretical and methodological perspective. *Theoretically*, the social realist position views social action as shaped by the interplay of social and systemic phenomena (Archer, 1995, p. 11). Social action is seen as embedded within history (Belz, 2002, p. 61). *Methodologically*, the social realist approach reflects the complex and layered nature of the empirical world, relying on an exploratory, multi-strategy approach. Layder summarises the central aim of realism as "an attempt to preserve a 'scientific' attitude towards social analysis at the same time as recognising the importance of actors' meanings" (1993, p. 16).

While social realism is not tied to a proscriptive methodological program, in order to analyse participants' meanings, both the background and follow-up interviews were coded using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo, in a comparative analysis, according to the methods outlined in Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This entailed a massive amount of detailed, layered coding, where individual nodes were organised under larger concepts. Three levels of coding, as suggested by Richards (2005) were employed, namely descriptive, topic, and analytical:

1. **Descriptive Coding** – The identification of attributes such as a participants' age, average hours of computer use daily, and so on which describe a case.

2. **Topic Coding** – The organization of passages of text by topic, for example, allocating a section of an interview that describes chat usage to a node named *chat*.

    Auto Coding – The use of software (such as NVivo) to identify key concepts via a crude analysis of specific words in a text, or by grouping the answers to the same question across a variety of participants to the same node. Only the latter has been employed in the present research.

3. **Analytical Coding** – Coding that results from interpretation and reflection on meaning—such as, what is this particular passage about? What categorie(s) properly represent that passage? What context should be coded?

    In Vivo **Coding** – a term from Grounded Theory which refers to categories named by words the participants themselves use.

                                                                        (Richards, 2005, pp. 90–95)

In vivo coding, as described above, preserves the importance of actors' meanings, as described by Layder (1993), and one particular *in vivo* coding, that of domains, will be the main focus of the current paper.

Participants' CMC data was analysed at the level of the *e-turn*, a unit of analysis proposed by Thorne (1999). The e-turn, while based on the *turn*, does not include the notions of linear sequencing and juxtaposition, but instead may be defined as a freestanding communicative unit, taking its form from the way the program receives and orders input, and the form and content of the message, as typed by the user. In the analysis of participants' interaction data, Nishimura's (1992, 1997) identification of *Basically English* and *Basically Japanese* varieties also proved useful. Each e-turn was categorized as either *English* (containing no code switching to Japanese), *Mostly English*: (where borrowings or code switches occurred within an English environment, that is, following English grammatical rules), *Japanese* (containing no switches to English), *Mostly Japanese* (where borrowings or switches to English occurred within a Japanese environment), or *Other* (including *No language* where, for example, participants posted a blog containing a photo and no linguistic content, or where languages other than Japanese and English

were used). Overall, the Australian participants' use of Japanese and English with their Japanese interlocutors online was fairly balanced. *English* or *Mostly English* e-turns accounted for 47% of the e-turns sent by Australian participants, while 48% were composed in *Japanese* or *Mostly Japanese* (the remaining 5% were categorized as *Other*).

FINDINGS

Second Language Use According to Linguistic Domain

As mentioned above, participants in the present study made use of a broad range of CMC mediums with their contacts. Yet despite often communicating with the same Japanese contacts via a number of different mediums, participants' language selection and identity performance differed across mediums. Nowhere was this difference more pronounced than on Mixi and Facebook, two SNSs. Table 2 demonstrates the large difference in language choice on these two sites, as well as the proportions of language use on other mediums used by more than one participant.

Table 2. *Language Choice According to Domain*

Domain	Type of domain according to participants' interview comments	Language choice		
		(Mostly) English	(Mostly) Japanese	Other
Facebook	English	84%	16%	0%
E-mails	Neither	62%	25%	13%
MSN Chats	Neither	62%	36%	2%
Ameba Blogs	Japanese	35%	62%	3%
Mixi	Japanese	25%	63%	12%

English, or a *Mostly English* variety was used on Facebook between the Australian and Japanese participants in 84% of instances of their communication (including both private Facebook messages, and public wall comments), while *Japanese* or a *Mostly Japanese* variety was used only 16% of the time. Conversely, *English* or *Mostly English* was used only 25% of the time on Mixi, while *Japanese* or a *Mostly Japanese* variety was used in 63% of interactions. A further 12% of interactions on Mixi blogs, messages and comments were categorised as *Other*.

When only messages sent by the Australian participants are considered, the contrast appears even starker. The Australian learners of Japanese used *Japanese* or *Mostly Japanese* in only 6% of their private messages to Japanese contacts, and in 15% of their wall postings to Japanese contacts on Facebook. On Mixi, however, *Japanese* or *Mostly Japanese* was used in 63% of Australian participants' messages to Japanese contacts and in 82% of their blogs. This clear difference in language choice appears to be a result of participants viewing these SNSs as discrete linguistic domains[2], as will be elaborated in the section that follows.

The two examples of Mixi and Facebook described above will be utilised in the present paper as a case study of the ways the linguistic domain in which communication is located was found to affect participants' language use, and identity construction. Mixi was used by half of the Australian participants in the current study (6/12 participants), while Facebook was used by three-quarters (8/12 participants). Ameba blogs, while also viewed as a *Japanese domain* and while exhibiting similar patterns of language choice, was only used by three participants, and will be addressed later.

Language Choice According to Domain

When participants were asked to reflect upon their language selections, the concept of language-specific domains quickly emerged. Kaylene explained her choice to use a mostly Japanese variety in her communication on Mixi, commenting, "I think I always use Japanese on the actual blogs, because it feels like a Japanese domain, and so I feel like I should." Ellise said, "I tend to view Mixi as a Japanese forum … most of the people on there, in fact, 99% of people on there can't actually read English." Even Sae, one of Ellise's Japanese contacts, said that she used Japanese with Ellise on Mixi precisely "because it's Mixi."

While Mixi was identified as a Japanese domain, Facebook was conversely viewed as an *English domain*, in which English language use was the norm for participants. This is evidenced in Zac's comment that Mixi was the "Japanese version of a Facebook" (Zac Interview 1, 29/07/08), clearly locating Facebook as the English language equivalent.

Interlocutors According to Domain

Participants' disparate language selections on Mixi and Facebook may in part be explained by Ellise's comment above, that "most of the people on there, in fact, 99% of people on there can't actually read English," (Ellise Interview 2, 10/03/08). Although most of Ellise's contacts, and the contacts of other participants, had some understanding of English, Japanese was certainly the primary language for the vast majority of the Australian participants' Mixi contacts. All 42 of Ellise's contacts on Mixi were Japanese, as were all 12 of Zac's contacts. Only Alisha had more non-Japanese than Japanese contacts on Mixi, with the non-Japanese outweighing the Japanese by just one person (3 Japanese, 4 non-Japanese). Overall, 88% (84/95 contacts) of the Australian participants' contacts on Mixi were Japanese, as Table 3 demonstrates.

Table 3. *The Australian Participants' Mixi Friends (MyMiku)*

Participant	Total number of contacts on Mixi	Number of Japanese contacts on Mixi	% of Japanese Contacts on Mixi
Noah	11	8	72.7
Ellise	42	42	100.0
Zac	11	11	100.0
Alisha	7	3	42.9
Oscar	13	10	76.9
Kaylene	11	10	90.9
Total	95	84	88.0

The demographic makeup of participants' Facebook networks was almost a mirror image, as shown in Table 4. One participant, Hyacinth, had no Japanese contacts on her Facebook friend list, despite having a total of 108 contacts. The participant with the highest proportion of Japanese contacts was Kaylene, who notably worked in Japan during the time of data collection. Even so, Kaylene's proportion of Japanese contacts on Facebook (24.2%) is still considerably lower than her total on Mixi (90.9%), and even lower than Alisha's Mixi total (42.9%), which was the lowest proportion of Japanese contacts on Mixi overall.

Table 4. *The Australian Participants' Facebook Friends*

Participant	Total number of contacts on Facebook	Number of Japanese contacts on Facebook	% of Japanese Contacts on Facebook
Lucas	1	3	2.1
Ellise	311	41	13.2
Hyacinth	108	0	0.0
Zac	254	12	4.7
Jacob	136	28	20.6
Alisha	38	3	7.9
Oscar	131	3	2.3
Kaylene	33	8	24.2
Total	1152	98	8.5

Participants' perceptions of Mixi and Facebook as Japanese and English domains respectively appears to have been influenced by the demographic makeup of their social networks on these sites. These perceptions, in turn, informed language selection. Kaylene termed Mixi a *Japanese forum* and stated that this influenced her language choice: "I tend to view Mixi as a Japanese forum. I've only used English here in the couple of phrases that I wasn't sure about, and when I was talking about the English language." Indeed, 16 of Kaylene's total of 17 Mixi blogs were written entirely in Japanese.

Importantly, it appears that it was not simply the increased presence of NSs of Japanese on Mixi, but also the fact that Mixi was an area of the Internet dominated by and moderated in Japanese that influenced participants' perceptions of Mixi as a virtual L2 community, and their language choice. Taking Alisha's communication with her Japanese friend Eri as an example, it is clear that the environment in which a message was produced had an important impact on the language selected. On Mixi, Alisha composed a total of five blogs that were collected for the present study, two of which were commented on by Eri. Eri too wrote a blog which was commented on by Alisha, to which she replied. Finally, Eri also sent Alisha a private message, giving a total of 10 instances of data.

All five of Alisha's blogs were in *Japanese* (4/5 blogs) or *Mostly Japanese* (1/5 blogs) varieties. Eri's blog, too, was written in the *Mostly Japanese* variety, with some Mandarin use. Likewise, all three of Eri's comments were written in *Japanese* (2/3 comments) or *Mostly Japanese* (1/3 comments), and Alisha's only comment was also in *Japanese*. Overall, all of Alisha and Eri's communication on Mixi was carried out in *Japanese* or *Mostly Japanese*.

On Facebook, however, although the interlocutors (Alisha and Eri) and topics of discussion (daily life and university) remained the same, their language choice was reversed. Alisha and Eri each commented on each other's walls using the *Mostly English* varieties. Other participants followed a similar pattern of language selection. Ellise, who also communicated with Eri, used *Mostly English* (3/4 wall posts) on Facebook, but almost exclusively *Japanese* (9/10 blogs) on Mixi.

With the exception of Lucas, whose use of *Japanese* with his friend Hisayo increased over time, as part of a determined effort to practise his L2, Japanese proficiency did not appear to be linked to language choice. Medium choice, or more importantly, the linguistic domain in which that medium is seen as located, the nature of communication, and interpersonal factors, such as relationship and interlocutor's language choice, were found to have a far greater influence.

The Benefits of Virtual Community and Language Immersion

Given the popularity of the term *virtual community*, it was unsurprising that several participants made reference to this concept in the interviews, in relation to linguistic domains. However, not all of their comments were positive. This section concentrates on Mixi, the medium participants most frequently used in Japanese, with some additional illustrations from other data.

The Australian learners of Japanese described both positive and negative experiences and perceptions of Japanese domains. One of Alisha's comments in particular illustrates the conflicting views of Japanese domains that she held. Alisha said:

> [I]n my everyday life, I don't use the language a lot unless I do it online. It's a place where you can be surrounded by the language, without being in a place where you're surrounded by the language! It's a virtual community …. but when it comes to it, you're always gonna be a JSL, I guess, a Japanese as a Second Language student, so it's gonna be a struggle.

"A Place Where You Can be Surrounded by the Language"

Like Alisha, many other Australian participants saw CMC as a surrogate for face-to-face interaction in the target language. Zac stated that he supplemented his eight hours of Japanese classes at university each week with participation in a conversation group and online communication, saying "uni doesn't have enough hours to study a language." Kaylene, too, commented that before she moved to Japan, she used Mixi frequently, "as Japanese practise, because I felt like I wasn't getting enough." Later, Kaylene remarked:

> I think I've made one post [on Mixi] since I came to Japan, and since then, I've sort of slacked off … now I'm working at the museum, and get to talk to people every day in Japanese, I guess it's not as necessary.

Even though most participants' main goal in communicating with their Japanese contacts was social rather than educational, use of CMC for Japanese practise among the Australian participants was very common. Participation in Japanese domains such as Mixi, and other, less frequently used domains like Ameba (a blogging site) and *WebKare* (or Web Boyfriend, http://web-kare.jp an online game) provided participants with not only increased opportunities to communicate with NSs of Japanese (due to the higher proportion of Japanese users of these sites), but also the opportunity to be *surrounded by the language*, as Alisha describes. Sites which are moderated in Japanese require the user to actively navigate the site using the language, and those that are sponsored by Japanese companies provide opportunities for exposure to authentic advertising.

The Australian participants were also able to view messages posted to their Japanese contacts by other Japanese users of the sites, and to gain admission to other online spaces via their membership of these communities. Alisha accessed Japanese Websites advertised on Mixi, and Cindy, Genna and Hyacinth obtained information on their favourite Japanese pop stars by reading their blogs on Ameba. As mentioned above, the immersion-like effect of being surrounded by one's target language also motivated the Australian participants to read and write more using their L2. Yet although entering a Japanese domain may have had numerous positive effects, validating Itakura and Nakajima's (2001) claims regarding the importance of an authentic audience for language learning, some participants nonetheless retained a strong sense of being an outsider.

"You're Always Gonna be a JSL"

In one of her interviews, Ameba and *WebKare* user Hyacinth commented that she had heard "a lot of negative feedback from people who weren't Japanese" about certain Japanese domains. Based on feedback from other NNSs of Japanese on the blog site LiveJournal, Hyacinth became wary of attempting a number of online activities, such as a blogging tool that focused on drawing, one of her main interests. In the interview, Hyacinth said that she had wanted to try using this blog until she heard negative feedback from non-Japanese who were *ostracized* from "the Japanese online circles [and] communities."

Hyacinth also heard similar reactions to a video site that she described as being "for Japanese people." She said:

> I remember them [non-Japanese posters on a forum] saying one person posted a video of them self, and they were mocked to the ends of the earth, and felt really ashamed, because they weren't Japanese. I think there's a kind of pride that comes with them [being Japanese], especially online.

Hyacinth was also warned off 2chan, a very popular Japanese Internet forum famous for its distinctive vocabulary and appearance in the film *Densha Otoko*, saying that she thought it was "dangerous to try as a non-Japanese speaker." Again, she had heard that "if you say one word out of line, something wrong, no one will look at you or respect you or anything."

Although it is important not to over-emphasize the benefits of the Internet at the expense of ignoring the less positive aspects, Hyacinth's experiences were by no means representative of the group as a whole, and her reluctance to participate online seems to have at least in part been affected by her own self-consciousness and lack of confidence in her Japanese. Even though communicating with one's university teachers in Japanese was common practice among the Australian participants in general, Hyacinth stated that she never emailed any of her teachers in Japanese, and was frightened of doing so. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that such negative experiences do occur, and while Hyacinth's reports were not representative of the group, this may be because the others have not ventured into the various online spaces she did.

A final example of a negative experience for Hyacinth occurred on the forum of an online game. Almost two months after her final interview, Hyacinth contacted the researcher to describe an experience, this time, on a medium she had decided to attempt using, called *WebKare*, an online dating simulator with a forum attached. While Hyacinth read the forum postings often, she decided not to contribute due to the abusive nature of some posts. Although a large number of Japanese users were welcoming and helpful to Japanese learners, some were dissatisfied about the use of other languages, particularly Chinese and Korean, or the poor use of Japanese on the Website. While it is difficult to find examples of the more abusive posts as the moderators have been vigilant about censoring as many as possible, hostility towards language variation on the *WebKare* forum is evident, for example, in the following post from an anonymous user written in Japanese, which Hyacinth pointed out as typical of the debate:

Extract 1. Japanese *WebKare* Posting Example

> 日本語で書きなさい。
>
> ここは日本人のためのサービスです。
>
> 日本語が理解できないなら日本のサービスを受ける資格はありません。
>
> 中国だの韓国だのそれぞれの国で勝手に暴れなさい。
>
> (Write in Japanese.
>
> This is a service for Japanese people.
>
> If you cannot understand Japanese you have no right to use Japanese services.
>
> Whether you're from China or Korea, go act like savages in your own country.)
>
> (Anon. 20/09/2008)

Despite its aggressive wording, Hyacinth showed some sympathy to this writer's point of view, stating that she did not understand why people would use a Japanese site "if you only want to talk in another language." She said, "some Japanese users mentioned that some foreign users use 'I don't understand

Japanese/I'm foreign' as an excuse to avoid confrontation."

After such dissatisfaction among some users about the use of languages other than Japanese on the forum, the moderators announced a split, segregating the forum into two separate boards, *Oekaki Japanese* and *Scribble International*. (The announcement is viewable at: http://web-kare.jp/information/news/view/15). While this move may have appeased a number of users who wanted a Japanese-only forum, dissatisfaction is still obvious among users of the international board, which was developed with an English interface, although the majority of posts appear to be in Chinese. As another anonymous user commented in English on the newly-formed international board:

Extract 2. English WebKare Posting Example

> First of all; WEB-KARE's oekaki [the Japanese forum] is good so why people won't
>
> use it? ;o;
>
> Second; Chinese is over-rated! Let's use English too so that us non-asian people can
>
> also understand! (to tell the truth, I like more being in JP BBS since at least I can
>
> UNDERSTAND that. >__>)
>
> (Anon. 29/09/2008)

It is evident from this user's comment that despite her desire to use Japanese, the new forum setting did not facilitate this desire, and furthermore, the introduction of a new international board has not gone far to alleviate tensions over the use of Chinese. For Hyacinth, an Australian-Chinese-background learner of Japanese, hostility towards Chinese affected her motivation to engage in interaction on the forums.

Even so, Hyacinth saw the reaction of the *hostile* Japanese as symptomatic of their online space being invaded: "I think the frustrations are the invasion of a domain that [is] mostly Japanese." When asked what made the Website a Japanese domain, Hyacinth responded "Generally, the Website being completely in Japanese to me suggests that a level of Japanese is required to play it…especially with instructions in Japanese." Thus, in addition to the nationality of users, the language of moderation appears to contribute to perceptions of linguistic domains also.

It is important to note that most of the conversation on the forum regarding the use of WebKare in languages other than Japanese was carried out by anonymous users who, as in the two messages above, chose not to attach their name or avatar. Levy and Stockwell (2006) state that while anonymity in CMC can have positive effects such as giving L2 speakers more confidence to participate than they may have in face-to-face communication (as noted by Shibanai, 2007), negative effects, such as the *flaming* (hostile or insulting comments) seen above, are also fostered by the affordance of anonymity.

As mentioned earlier, the sense of anonymity afforded by some types of online communication has also led to claims that, so long as language use does not indicate otherwise, the signaling of *race*, ethnicity, *sex*, gender, or indeed any other aspect of identity online appears to be at the user's discretion (Burkhalter 1999; Herring 2003). Despite this commonly held view, none of the Australian participants in the current study attempted to hide or disguise their nationality, or their self-selected identity as language learners. On the contrary, participants took pains to emphasise their L2 identities online.

Language "Learners?" "Users?" "Foreigners?"

Rather than hiding their *L2 learner* or *L2 user* identities, the Australian participants in the present study instead brought them to the fore, through the use of both linguistic and visual means. In some cases, participants even identified themselves as foreigners, in stark contrast with the idea of the Internet as a placeless space, and instead, highlighting the extent to which participants viewed Japanese domains as Japanese-owned spaces.

Critics of traditional applied linguistics research have problematised the distinction that has been made between *native-* and *non-native* speakers, as if these were given, absolute categories. Perhaps the most famous call for consideration of these terms was made by Firth and Wagner (1997), arguing that mainstream theory skews our view of language learners/users by focusing on them as NNSs who strive to reach NS-like competence. In this view, other social identities of individuals are in danger of being overlooked.

Sealey and Carter (2004), too, have highlighted the danger of *selective measurement* whereby the researcher makes use of a preconceived concept, such as *NNS* or *learner*, already infused with theoretical notions. Sealey and Carter outline their approach to social categories by identifying two types: those constituted by involuntaristic characteristics, and those characterised by a degree of choice on the part of their members, emphasising that "actors' understandings are a central element in the theoretical description of social collectives" (2001, p. 7).

Rather than the researcher imposing the categories of learner or native-speaker, in the present study, participants identified themselves as learners or native-speakers, as is evidenced in their interview data, and sometimes, in their online interactions themselves. However, as identity is fluid, Firth and Wagner's (1997) point that these identities may not always be the most relevant in a given interaction, is taken into consideration. Drawing on the case studies of participants' Facebook and Mixi use, this section will examine the fluidity of participants' identities across different language domains online through an analysis of SNS profiles.

As previously outlined, half of the Australian participants in the current study (Alisha, Ellise, Kaylene, Noah, Oscar, and Zac) were members of Mixi, and for five of them, Mixi was their most commonly used CMC medium in Japanese. Mixi profiles typically consist of a display photo, a list of basic information, a self-introduction, and a list of likes and interests, all of which are optional to complete.

All six participants who were members of Mixi clearly stated in their profiles that they were not Japanese, or that they were studying Japanese. All listed 海外オーストラリア(Overseas: Australia) as their current address. This is a set expression included in a list on the site, in which countries other than Japan are automatically prefixed *Overseas*. Yet, of course, providing one's current country of residence alone does not differentiate a student of Japanese as a foreign language from a NS from Japan currently living overseas, for example. So in addition to this, Noah and Oscar also added Australia as their birthplace. Furthermore, Alisha, Ellise, and Zac all explicitly stated their nationality in the body of their profiles. This information often took precedence over other biographic details or participants' interests.

Alisha's profile opened with the statement 「オーストラリア人だ」 (I am Australian). Ellise's profile also started with a statement of nationality: 「私はオーストラリア人とイギリ ス人ですけれども今オーストラリアに住んでいます！」 (I am Australian and English, however I am living in Australia at the moment!). Zac's profile read 「ザックです。オーストラリア人 で２３歳です」 (I'm Zac. I am Australian and 23 years old). Kaylene's approach was a little less direct, simply implying her *foreignness* by stating 「この日記は、きっと下手で外国人 っぽいな日本語か「ケイリー語」になっちゃうごめんね」(I'm sorry, this blog will probably end up being very badly written and the Japanese is that of a foreigner, or even *Kaylese*), referring to herself as a foreigner, and her own idiolect as Kaylese (ケイリー語).

Furthermore, some participants were also careful to emphasise the fact that they are still studying Japanese. Ellise's second line was 「今は大学で日本語を勉強しています」 (I am studying Japanese

at university at the moment). Similarly, Oscar stated 「今、日本語と中国語を勉強しています」(At the moment, I am studying Japanese and Chinese). Noah included a lengthy description of his language learning history, excerpted below.

Extract 3. Noah's Mixi Profile

私は２００６年から今まで日本語を勉強しています。最初はＲ大学で日本語の勉強を始ま

ったんですが後八ヶ月に卒業しました。短いコースでしたけどすごく楽しくて興味深った。

今はＭ大学で勉強しています。もちろん日本語の勉強を続けています。

(I have been studying Japanese since 2006 up to now. At first, I began studying Japanese at R University, but I graduated after eight months. It was a short course, but a lot of fun and I was very interested. Now, I am studying at M University. Of course, I am continuing with my Japanese study.)

Finally, several participants also used the Interests section to further focus on language. Four out of six participants, Ellise, Noah, Oscar, and Zac, all listed 「語学」 (language study) as a hobby.

Although a major theme of all six profiles, it would be erroneous to presume that being a foreigner / language learner was the only identity at the forefront of participants' profile construction. Another observable pattern concerns interest in Japanese culture, something all participants took pains to emphasise. Four of the six participants used Japan-related photographs for their display picture; Alisha, a photo of herself in the snow in Japan, Zac, likewise, a photo of himself with a snow sculpture in Japan. Ellise used a *purikura* (Print Club photo sticker) of herself and a Japanese friend, complete with Japanese graffiti, and Oscar's profile photo was a snapshot of the neighborhood he lived in while on exchange in Japan.

All six also listed Japanese-related likes and interests. This may appear unsurprising, given that an interest in Japanese culture is hardly remarkable among students of Japanese, or even among the youth population of Australia more generally, as Larson (2003) notes. However, interesting comparisons can be drawn between participants' English domain SNS profiles (in this case, Facebook), and their Japanese domain (Mixi) profiles. None of the participants mentioned any of the Japanese-specific interests that they displayed on Mixi (Japanese television dramas, *karaoke*, *anime* cartoons, *manga* comics, *shogi* chess, Japanese alcohol and foods, or even language learning), in their English Facebook profiles. This demonstrates the context-specifity of participants' identity displays as shown in Table 5.

Lastly, although all six participants went to great lengths to foreground their non-native status, and emphasise their interest in Japanese culture, this does not mean that they cast themselves in a wholly subordinate role. This is clearest in the case of Noah, who positioned himself as a learner of Japanese, but an expert in English:

「私は日本で英語の教師にたりたいんです。…feel free to ask me for help with English」

(I want to become a teacher of English in Japan…)

Zac also divulged his aspirations to become an English teacher, and offered to speak in English or Japanese with anyone interested:

「私の夢は日本で英語教師になりたいです。そのためにいっぱい日本人の友達を作って、

日本語と英語で話したいです。」

(My dream is that I want to become an English teacher in Japan. Therefore I want to make a lot of Japanese friends, and talk in Japanese and English.)

Table 5. *Australian Participants' Interests on Mixi and Facebook Profiles*

Participant	Mixi Interests	Facebook Interests
Alisha	Swimming, Japanese anime and music	None listed
Ellise	Sports, *karaoke*, band, cooking, *sake*, shopping, driving, language study, Japanese TV dramas and video games, ice skating, AFL, *tantanmen* noodles, the 300 Yen Bar	Acting, singing, travelling, reading, talking, shopping
Kaylene	Travel, art, language study, reading, Internet	Stuff, music
Oscar	Movies, sport, food, travel, language study, reading, TV, video games, Internet, Japanese chess	None listed
Noah	Language study, *manga*	No profile
Zac	Watching movies, sport, watching sport, listening to music, cooking, *sake*, driving, travel, language study, *manga*, TV, video games, Internet	No profile
Lucas	No profile	Sleeping Eating Video gaming

DISCUSSION

It is apparent from both participants' interview comments and from the evidence of opportunities for language acquisition (expanded upon in more detail in Pasfield-Neofitou, 2010) that there are a number of benefits of participation in *Japanese domains* for learners of Japanese. One important benefit is greater access to the language, as *Japanese domains* tend to be populated predominantly by NS. The presence of Japanese NS also leads to opportunities for learners to view NS-NS communication, which can later be used as a model for their own language use. Participation in language-specific virtual communities may also act as a springboard for greater access to popular culture and other authentic materials via links posted by other users and advertising from Website sponsors.

Perhaps most importantly though, a sense of *virtual immersion* and of being in *someone else's* space, may develop L2 learners' motivation to use the target language, due to actual or perceived audience demographics. However, simultaneously, a feeling of being a *foreigner* or of trespassing on *someone else's* space can also result in severe effects on a learner's desire to attempt communication in their L2.

The identification of language-specific *domains* was based not only on the analytical coding of the interaction data collected, but also an *in vivo* coding of interviews with participants. This finding was particularly related to interaction spaces aimed at groups such as SNSs, like Facebook and Mixi, and also Websites or forums, rather than typically one-on-one interaction channels such as private e-mail, which tended to be viewed more neutrally, and have more even language choice patterns[3]. Thus, in this respect it appears that networks or *domains* are influenced and continuously sustained by the social interaction of individuals.

The domain in which any given interaction is perceived as being situated was found to affect participants' situated activity in terms of language choice, and use of contextual resources. A sense of being immersed

in someone else's space had both positive and negative effects regarding opportunities for language acquisition, as summed up in Alisha's comments. She stated that the Internet environment gave her an opportunity to be surrounded by the language, but also made her feel that she would always be a Japanese as a second-language speaker. Positive effects included Alisha's sense of virtual immersion or perception of joining a *virtual community*, and greater exposure to Japanese. This greater exposure led to some participants drawing on the communication between NSs they saw as models, and gave them greater access to authentic cultural materials, as well as to linguistic assistance from NSs. Some of the negative effects documented include intolerance towards other languages or ethnic groups. However, the Australian participants were also found to create their own Japanese-specific spaces and Japanese-learner identities via their profiles, of which they had ownership, with social networking profiles constituting an important site for the ongoing construction of identities.

Participants' self-identification as *foreign* or *non-native* may have been beneficial in a number of ways. The main goals participants had for using their L2 online were social and educational. By constructing their identities online as learners of the language, they mitigated any potential loss of face due to their language competency, and by construing themselves as experts in English or as foreigners, they may have made themselves more attractive to Japanese members who were actively looking for a foreign or English-speaking contact. In fact, at least one participant in the present study met her closest Japanese friend in this way. Secondly, by describing themselves as learners, they invited correction and other forms of repair, which were surprisingly frequent in the public forum of Mixi in particular, as further described in Pasfield-Neofitou (2010).

Being a part of a virtual community, in particular, gaining access to an authentic audience, was the most important source of motivation for L2 production identified in the present study. A sense of being heard and understood appeared to increase participants' sense of achievement, and increase the likelihood of their continued engagement in L2 use online. This suggests that Blood's (2002) observations with respect to the importance of an authentic audience in a monolingual first-language blog environment holds true in L2 settings also.

Being an L2 learner was also found to be an important identity for many participants in their online interactions, as evidenced in their foregrounding of this aspect in their profiles. Furthermore, their identification of themselves as foreigners online is further evidence of their perception of Japanese-owned and moderated domains such as Mixi as Japanese domains, and themselves as outsiders. This finding challenges views of Internet communication as neutral, equalising or more democratic, and demonstrates that it is possible to feel like a foreigner (and to be treated as one) even in what has been viewed as a gigantic, placeless cyberspace.

NOTES

1. danah boyd's name is spelled in all lowercase in all of her publications; her preferred format has been retained here.

2. The term *domain* is an *in vivo* code description which emerged from participant's observations, and is distinct from the technical use of the term *domain* to refer to a component of URLs that indicates ownership or control of a Website or other online resource (although this may be a relevant factor in user's perceptions). Mixi, for example, is owned by a Japanese company, and Facebook, an American company, yet the perceived ownership of Facebook extends beyond the national boundary of the US and across *the West*.

3. Although English use dominated participants' e-mail communication (62% compared to 25%), this ratio was influenced by the fact that the Australian students' university e-mail accounts at the time of data collection did not support Japanese. If the e-mails sent to or from an Australian university e-mail address

are excluded, the figure is much more balanced (54% *English* or *Mostly English*, 46% *Japanese* or *Mostly Japanese*).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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