

# **Studying Online Community: New Approaches for New Communities?**

**Lee M. Davis-Thalbourne**

This Thesis submitted in partial requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in  
Linguistics

**Department of Linguistics**

**School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics**

**MONASH UNIVERSITY**

**2007**

# Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	2
Abstract.....	4
Acknowledgements .....	4
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Justification .....	5
Case Studies – Real Communities used as examples .....	6
Sluggo.net: A stable community .....	7
Nexus War: A collection of interconnected communities.....	8
Thesis Outline: .....	10
List of Websites.....	10
Notes .....	11
Chapter 2: What is an Online Speech Community?.....	12
What is an Online Community?.....	12
Characteristics of an Online Community .....	14
Objections to Online Community.....	18
What is a Speech Community? .....	20
Extensions and Objections to the Speech Community Concept .....	22
Online Speech Communities – piecing it together .....	23
Mentioned Websites .....	24

Chapter 3: Problems with studying Online Speech Communities .....	25
Techniques in use – current styles and forms of online community study.....	25
“First Wave” – Structural differences and homogenous assumptions .....	25
“Second Wave” – Social differences and variation within CMC.....	26
Qualities of online communities, and the issues arising from them.....	27
Fluid Membership .....	28
Lack of Location .....	28
High External Connections .....	29
Conjunctional effects.....	31
Conclusion.....	32
Links and Notes.....	32
Chapter 4: New techniques for new communities? .....	33
Acts of Identity.....	33
Communities of Practice .....	35
Cyber-archaeology .....	36
Where our current approaches take us .....	38
Conclusion.....	39
Chapter 5: Conclusion .....	41
References .....	45

## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at online sociolinguistic research, in particular focusing on the techniques and approaches of the researchers involved. The characteristics of online communities are examined; specifically the online community's lack of physical location, high turnover rate and high levels of external connections. The utility of current approaches is viewed in the light of these characteristics. New approaches are discussed, in particular the Acts of Identity, Communities of Practice and Virtual Archaeology models. The Virtual Archaeology model is dismissed due to several factors, including its emphasis on observation rather than participation. Communities of practice and Acts of Identity are considered to be highly useful. The Acts of Identity model is praised due to its individualist focus and built-in assumptions of multiple codes, while the communities of practice approach is accepted due to the community of practice being a common pattern in online communities. It is decided that the new approaches, while not perfect, are still applicable, and that other approaches are likely to be complementary to these. Indeed, an eclectic approach is likely to improve our capacity to understand online communities as a whole. Finally, new directions are discussed, including researched based around our identified techniques, and the possibility of meta-research into whether our techniques *are* being utilized in a repeatable fashion.

## **Acknowledgements**

My greatest thanks to my supervisor, Kate Burrige, and to Julie Bradshaw, who put me on this track. Also many thanks to my various friends who assisted with the final proofreading of this thesis.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Online communities have been studied in detail by many authors in many fields, since they first came into existence some 30 years ago. In that time, a great deal of research has been created, using a variety of techniques. But an interesting question exists here – are online communities similar enough to offline communities for us to be able to use these techniques?

## *Justification*

This thesis is intended as a discussion of some of the basic assumptions of the study of online communities. The amount of research done on online communities has been quite astounding, and unsurprisingly much of the work has been built upon understandings of non-computer-mediated communities. But there is a question here, as to whether this is an appropriate base upon which to build this new line of research.

In particular, I question whether online communities are in reality similar enough to non-online communities that the techniques used to study one are relevant in the study of the other. Online communities exist in an entirely different contextual set than offline communities. As a crude example, most offline communities are primarily geographically based, even if loosely so – it is possible, if often difficult in this day and age, to draw a circle around a community, incorporating most of the context that an offline community is embedded within.

It is debatable, however, as to whether this can be done with online communities. Online communities tend not to have a large geographical component – members of a community can come from anywhere with an internet connection, and are more generally bound by interest, rather than location (McLaughlin, Osbourne & Smith, 1995). In some ways, this is no different to offline communities of interest, although the scale is far greater. It might seem appropriate to try and draw a boundary by semantic interest, circumscribing a number of online groups that seem closely related in interest. However even this may fail to adequately show the context of an online community as members of online communities often have extremely divergent interests. Further, communities often have high levels of external connections to other communities, and thus it may be that drawing any sort of boundary is likely to miss important inputs and outputs within the community to other communities.

Then comes another question, one specific to many sociolinguistic approaches: Can we be certain that online communities share linguistic codes, or even norms? Are they communities in the sociological sense, but not in a linguistic sense? It is often taken for granted (or deliberately constructed) that the online communities we study have singular codes/norms (see, for example Herring, 2003 as an example of how single norms are explicitly assumed), but can we really assume this? Online communities often have very fluid memberships so the expectation that stable codes will emerge may not hold true. This is noted often in research based around explicitly multilingual communities (see Araujo e Sa & Melo, 2007) and in some recent ESL research (see Ware & Kramsch, 2005; & Thoms, Liao & Szutsak, 2005), but what about supposedly single-language communities? Are they as homogenous in the codes and norms they use? If they are not, this may have significant implications for how we may approach their study.

It is for these reasons that I believe that this thesis is necessary. I think it is not only prudent, but perhaps crucial, to re-evaluate the approaches that we as sociolinguists use in order to study online communities, to see if we are truly capable of studying these communities adequately and, if we are not, to move towards approaches that allow us to better study these communities, or alternatively to adjust the approaches we are using now.

### ***Case Studies – Real Communities used as examples***

In the past, many researchers studying online communities have used educational communities (see for example Kazmer, 2007), or communities with a predominantly physically-based presence (such as city-based IRC chats) (for an example, see Androtsopoulos & Ziegler, 2004). However, I argue that such online communities are overwhelmingly outnumbered by communities that are not connected to educational establishments, or based around geographical locations. Most online communities are based around topics of interest, and tend to be quite multi-locational in the makeup of their members.

As such, I have chosen two established communities to be used as examples throughout this thesis. These communities are both reasonably well-established, have medium-to-large , internationally-based populations, and are based not around geographical location, but on online-specific topics of interest, which as noted above, I feel more accurately reflects the typical online community.

The communities I shall be using as examples are the Sluggy.net community, a rather old community based around a popular online comic, and the Nexus War communities, a much younger group of communities based around a small online game. These communities have been chosen because I am highly involved in both of these communities, being a regular contributor to both. As van der Spa comments in her research on the Fok! Community, being a member of the online community under study, especially a member of long-time standing, allows a unique perspective into the communities, which I shall be exploiting in discussing these examples (van der Spa, 2004)

### **Sluggy.net: A stable community**

As just mentioned, one of the examples of an online community this thesis will use is the forum community Sluggy.net. The community is based around a long-running online comic, Sluggy Freelance. However although the community also has a considerable amount of space devoted to topics well outside the community's original focus, to the point where individuals can exist on the forums without ever conversing about the forum's original topic. The online comic itself began in 1997, with various communities revolving around the comic, including mailing lists, usenet groups and even an early forum, until the current incarnation of the forums in 2002, which have existed effectively intact since that point.

Sluggy.net is typical of a relatively stable online community – while members still come and go, a reasonable contingent of members have remained since the beginning of the community. The community itself is still relatively small, with approximately 150-175 active members. Sluggy.net experiences a small level of growth, but has been spared the kind of explosive expansion that often accompanies online communities centred on very popular websites. As such, the community is, for the most part, highly stable, and functions relatively well for a large community. While the community has had various controversies within its lifetime, and has undergone various changes in leadership, Sluggy.net is rare in that it enjoys a long unbroken line of continuity, especially considering the community's age.

As a web-based bulletin board, Sluggy.net is a fairly traditional form of the medium. It is divided into several sub-boards, which are in turn divided into individual topic threads. Several boards are dedicated to discussion of the comic itself in various ways (for example, one is an explicit "Reactions" board, allowing users to broadcast their opinions of each individual comic strip, while another is a "Speculation" board, for users to discuss the comic in a broader

fashion), while there are a large number of boards dedicated to activities unrelated to the board (these include general discussion, political discussion, board-based games, and roleplaying). Further, there are several forums dedicated to the actual running of the community itself, including a general announcements board and a board explicitly for community leaders to discuss moderation of the board in general. The leaders are typically chosen by the existing community leaders from the members of the community, after which an interview process is conducted, and discussions held by the leadership group. This is not always the case, as there have been rare occasions where elections have been held for specific positions with the community leadership, but these occasions are few and far between.

Sluggy.net has been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, while having a primarily United States-based membership, it has a very large number of members from around the English-speaking world. Further, Sluggy.net is a large, active community surrounding a non-academic subject, which I believe is more representative of the online population of communities at large. Finally, I have been actively involved with this community for over 5 years, and this allows me a unique insight into the community's structure and history, which the choice of another community might otherwise not provide.

### **Nexus War: A collection of interconnected communities**

The second example that we shall be using is the community around the online game Nexus War. The community began in May, 2006, with the launch of the game itself. This community is an interesting one, as the community is effectively a large cloud of communities – the community, while still cohesive, is highly fragmented, due to the game's emphasis on factional warfare. With this said, the game encourages multiple characters within the experience, allowing a single player to become part of a large number of factions within the game. As such, it becomes quite difficult to determine the make-up of the community, and how many members the community actually possesses (ball park figures seem to indicate a general player population of around 1500-2000, with varying levels of community participation)

This group complexity is reflected in the technical composition of the community. The primary point of contact within the community are the game's official forums, but there also exists an entire official IRC server, as well as an incredibly large number of unofficial forums and chat-rooms, which are dedicated to various sub-groups within the community itself. Further, the game encourages a level of social interaction within the game, allowing players within the same

game location to speak and emote (ie use the speech facility to describe actions) to each other. The interconnection between all these various arenas of discourse is extremely complex. It is well-known within the community that certain individuals exist in multiple sub-groups, and even these subgroups are often big enough to form their own subgroups.

The official forum is delineated in much the same way as the Sluggy.net boards, with boards dedicated to the game, as well as boards dedicated to topics outside the game, and boards specifically dedicated to the running of the forum itself. The chat section of the community is highly diverse, with a primary “official” channel, and a large number of unofficial channels. The game itself consists of individual locations where individuals within that location can interact with each other in various ways (including communication), much like a classical MUD[1] (indeed, many individuals within the game has indeed described Nexus War as a “slightly more graphical MUD”). Outside these “official” channels of communication, there are also incredibly large numbers of forums dedicated to individual “factions” within the game.

The Nexus War collection of communities, with so many vectors of communication, is rather atypical of online communities. Many within the community itself would proclaim that all of these communities connect to each other (as many players exist in multiple factions and communicate via a very large number of given vectors), and even if one were to restrict the group, exactly how to do so would be troublesome – there is enough networking going on between various sections of the community it would be difficult to neatly create a circle around even a reasonably small section of the community, and including every community would be incredibly difficult due to the large number of them. This is in stark contract to many other communities, in which a single vector of communication can reasonably be assumed, and in which it can be expected that the majority of the community's proceedings will occur within a single online site. Even if there are multiple vectors, or multiple sites of communication, one can usually expect that there will be a primary point of community where most of the community will exist, but this cannot even be assumed in the Nexus War communities - the official community can only be seen as a subset of the community, rather than the primary gateway, as many players are highly active in their faction communities, but do not ever participate in the greater game community.

While Sluggy.net is a reasonably non-problematic community, being relatively self-contained, The Nexus War cloud of communities are included as a community that are in many ways quite

problematic to study. Further, the community is relatively new, being in operation for only a year. Finally, I have been involved with the Nexus War community for a considerable period of its existence, and I am even a member of leadership within the official forums, providing me with impressive insight into the community itself, and the steps that were taken to encourage the community to form in a healthy manner.

### ***Thesis Outline:***

This chapter has been dedicated primarily to providing a basic outline of the issues involved in this thesis, as well as a discussion of the communities that we shall be using as examples and talking points throughout this thesis.

Chapter 2 will be spent discussing the literature around online speech communities, delving into the question of what, precisely, a speech community is, and what general characteristics we know about them. I will then explore exactly how an online community differs from the offline community.

Chapter 3 builds on what was discussed in the second chapter by focusing on some of the issues surrounding the study of online communities, using techniques taken from the study of offline communities.

Chapter 4 will then look at possible further approaches for studying online communities, in particular looking at certain approaches that seem highly appropriate for the study of online groups, but until this point have yet to be used for this purpose.

Chapter 5 rounds out this thesis, providing a summary of all that has been discussed, and outlines some interesting directions for further research in this area.

### ***List of Websites***

- Sluggy.net Forums: <http://www.sluggy.net/forum>
- Nexus War: <http://www.nexuswar.com>
- Nexus War Official Forums: <http://forums.nexuswar.com>
- Nexus War Official IRC server: <irc://irc.nexuswar.com>

- List of Nexus War factions and their communities:  
<http://wiki.nexuswar.com/index.php/Category:Factions>

## **Notes**

[1] A MUD (multi-user dungeon) is a type of online environment where users use text commands to interact with a given environment, usually an environment based around a fantasy setting. These environments were typically accessed via external clients, with users of these environments interacting with both other users and objects within the environment. This form of online environment has dropped in popularity since the introduction of the World Wide Web in the mid 90's, although the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) has often been described as a more sophisticated graphical form of the MUD.

## Chapter 2: What is an Online Speech Community?

The question I use as the title of this chapter is a very big one, and thus I believe that it is useful to split the question into its constituent questions. Thus, this chapter will be broadly separated into two basic questions:

1. What is an online community?
2. What is a speech community?

These two questions are of course, still quite broad, fundamental questions, as perhaps is to be expected. They are, however, questions that individually have provoked much discussion in the literatures of sociology and sociolinguistics.

### ***What is an Online Community?***

Before we can discuss online community, we must first understand that the concept is intimately tied to the more general concepts of community, perhaps far more so than the speech community concept. Much debate surrounds the online community concept, primarily because of conceptions of community established previously. In fact, there have been more than a few sociologists who question the very concept of an online community because of this established work. Thus, before we move into the definitions of online community, it is first important to discuss the more general community concept.

As might be expected, the question of the definition of a *community* is an incredibly difficult one. There has been considerable work written on the subject, and indeed much work written on the sheer number of definitions of the term *community* within the various literatures (as an indication, Hillery in 1955 counted 94 different definitions, according to Brint, 2001!). Indeed, there is a considerable line of work categorising the various definitions of *community*, in an attempt to determine if there is any single thread moving through the various definitions.

Most definitions of *community* traditionally connect to Ferdinand Tönnies's 1887 definition of *Gemeinschaft*. This definition builds upon the idea of village-based association, with individuals existing within the association for reasons greater than personal interest, often based around kin-connections, with shared social mores including beliefs, behaviours and responsibilities,

generally located in small groups. This is in opposition to the *Gesellschaft* concept, where individuals associate in large groups primarily for self-interest rather than for any maintenance of the group as a whole and lack any shared social mores (Tönnies, 1887).

This definition, with its connotations of egalitarianism and heavy association, has always harkened to a primarily physical presence, although Tönnies did conceive of *Gemeinschaft* existing in a less physically oriented group, such as a religion (Tönnies, 1887). Indeed, more recent discussions of the *Gemeinschaft* concept have explicitly worked on frameworks incorporating online communities. One example of this is Brint's (2001) work building a typology of communities based on four specific criteria, in which online communities are considered simply a dispersed, non face-to-face community.

The term *online community* itself (also known as *virtual community*) has its roots back to 1993, with Howard Reingold's book *The virtual community*. (Reingold, 1993). The definitions of online community are not generally agreed upon by all who study them. Indeed, there are perhaps as many different definitions of online communities as there are people who study them. The commercialisation of the internet has simply continued the trend – the term “community” became a buzz-word. In time any commercial endeavour was attempting to create “community” by adding some form of social software (Preece, 2000). Even worse, stepping outside the online context, community is often bandied about by people who simply wish to use the term's positive connotations in order to advance their own agenda. As such, the very definition of the term “community” is extremely murky, and in some circumstances almost meaningless. Thus, great amounts of research have been written in an attempt to try and narrow the definition of online communities in a way that allows researchers to make meaningful distinctions in their studies.

With that said, there are some definitions within the literature which are more useful than others. Indeed, Howard Reingold's original definition is as follows:

[...] virtual communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchanges words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks.  
(Reingold, 1993:57-58)

This definition, I think nicely captures a very broad view of virtual communities. In specific it

touches on several important attributes: that there must be some persistent contact, that they exist within online communication technologies, and that they do not need a connection to a physical space. It is extremely broad, allowing a very large number of groups to be considered communities. This broadness is partially a blessing, as it prevents us from being bogged down in specifics. This broadness is also a problem, however, as such a broad definition prevents us from discriminating specific types of online groups. If we wish to work on discriminating online communities from other online groups, more specified definitions are clearly required.

An alternative definition comes from a workshop held at the *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* conference in Boston, a workshop dedicated to a multi-disciplinary discussion of the nature of physical and online communities. In this definition, five core attributes are recognised, as well as a collection of non-core attributes. The five core attributes are:

- members have some shared goal, interest, need, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community
- members engage in repeated active participation and there are often intense interactions, strong emotional ties and shared activities occurring between participants
- members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources
- reciprocity of information, support and services between members
- shared context (social conventions, language, protocols).

(Whittaker, Issacs & O'Day, 1997)

This is a list that well defines communities both online and off, and as such is not *perfect* as a primary definition of an online community. Of course, a single additional point would be sufficient, that an online community is:

- explicitly mediated through the use of information technologies such as forums, chat, instant messaging, etc.

## **Characteristics of an Online Community**

Despite this wide variation, however, we find certain structural patterns manifesting in online communities, regardless of the medium.

## **Fluid Membership**

Within online communities, the population does not typically remain stable – the membership of the population is usually in a fairly constant state of flux, with new members arriving, and old members leaving, in a quite rapid progression, far more rapidly than such behaviour observed offline.

The reason for this is hypothesised but not well studied. Kazmer's (2007) study of online world disengagement discusses some reasons for users leaving a community. Among other things, many individuals enter a community explicitly expecting the association to be temporary. Even when it is not, circumstances involving either the user or the community can force an individual to leave a community. On the website Sluggy.net, it is occasionally the case that individuals will leave for their own reasons, despite enjoying the environment that the forum provides. Often this is due to conflicts within the site, or due to changes within the user demographic – in effect, for many of the same reasons as individuals will tend to leave offline associations.

However, some researchers seem to feel that this behaviour is partly a structural phenomenon, as well as a simple social issue. It has been noted by quite a few researchers (see Bruckman & Jensen, 2002; Shirky, 2003) that online communities seem to generally follow a given life cycle, which often includes a strong decline as individuals splinter off into new communities and projects.

Bruckman & Jensen in particular chronicle the rise and fall of MediaMOO, a text-based multi-user environment designed to be a professional community for media researchers. They discovered that as the community became more successful, and continued to grow, the group of people involved began to diversify, and this very diversification meant that individuals who had been attracted to the MOO originally began to want different things from the community. These individuals often had no real control over the MediaMOO community as it was, so they instead began to form new communities that were better tuned to the styles of interaction they were looking for. This was not, of course, the only reason for the decline of the MediaMOO community (the general decline of client-based multi-user environments in general was a major contributor, as was the opening of many other communities and the general maturation of the target audience), but the many other contributors to the MOO's decline were generally related to this splintering phenomenon (Bruckman & Jensen, 2002).

It may well be worth mentioning at this point that this is not particularly uncommon in offline

associations and groups either – it is extremely rare for individuals to choose to stay with a particular organisation for a lifetime (Bruckman & Jenson, 2002), and so it is not surprising that online communities suffer much the same. What seems to be different with online communities is the pure ease with which individuals seem to be able to leave their online grouping of choice. Offline communities often take a great deal of effort to start, the costs are usually high in terms of time and personal resources. Starting the same community online seems to greatly decrease this cost (especially when such communities are formed in already-existing social software), thus they can proliferate very quickly in reaction to perceived deficiencies in existing communities (Shirky, 2003). As such, the splintering of communities online seems to occur in a somewhat more exaggerated fashion than communities offline.

Further, I suspect online communities have been around for long enough that there are likely multiple communities for just about every conceivable topic. If (as seems to inevitably happen) an individual finds that a community is no longer meeting their needs and desires, it becomes rather easy to simply find another community. There is rarely a sense of needing to stay with a particular community due to lack of ability to find another. This I believe contributes to the fluidity of online community memberships over offline communities – very few people will stay in an online community that does nothing for them, whereas offline communities may well be the only viable community of that type in the area.

### **Lack of Location**

Online communities, unlike offline communities, have no innate spatial location – they have no fixed position in any physical place. The capacity to access a website from any connected location across the earth means that one may participate in any online community regardless of physical location (Crystal, 2006).

Despite the online community's distinct lack of a physical location, the question of "space" is constantly used by researchers. I do not think this is a particularly useful metaphor when discussing online communities. While space and spatial bounds are quite useful in discussing communities grounded in real space, the issue of "virtual space" is fraught with peril. The perception of virtual space has no real basis in fact – the internet, despite common perceptions, is not a new world, it is simply a network. Among other things, the concept of distance is a very simple concept to resolve faced with two physical communities, but when applied to virtual communities, the concept begins to break down, or at the very least becomes blurry and

confusing. What do we mean if two online communities are “close” to each other? If they reside on the same server, then perhaps this is physically true, but this tells us nothing meaningful about the community itself. It is true that on some websites, there is a deliberate move towards explicitly working towards a space-like geography (especially in online games such as Nexus War), but this is a deliberate choice on the website’s presentation, not a property of websites in general. The very existence of the hyperlink starts breaking down conceptions of space, as in reality any component of the internet can be immediately linked to or from anywhere else. As such, concepts such as distance have no real meaning, and if this is the case, how can we say the concept of space is at all useful? Even discussions of topical closeness are not often useful comparatively.

Further, the metaphor of space has other unsavoury aspects to it not directly related to its status as a community – Kathleen Olsen (2005) has written on the issues of the cyberspace as place metaphor and the unsavoury effects it has had on the legal system as it related to the internet. In particular, Olsen explored how the metaphor of space and property has resulted in the crime of trespass being notoriously misused in the legal systems of America. Corporations and other individuals wishing to protect the sanctity of their systems attempted to conflate two definitions of trespass, trespass against property (illegal entry into owned land), and trespass against chattel (illegal usage of owned property), each with specific level of harm that is required for successful prosecution. By using the cyberspace as place metaphor, lawyers attempted to use the harm requirements of trespass against property (in which no harm was required), in order to secure prosecution against what should have been trespass against chattel (in which definite harm needed to be shown). The result, as could be expected, was a highly suspect legal situation which is only recently being cleared up, due purely to the confusion of cyberspace being treated effectively as real estate, and hence a physical location, rather than property (Olsen, 2005).

So, if we do not use space as a metaphor, what other possibilities could we use? Networks are a possible metaphor, and possibly closer to the truth of the current situation. Perhaps instead of perceiving websites as physical places, we should instead treating them as nodes in a network, as this works nicely with the nature of online linking.

### **High External Connections**

Members of online communities, perhaps more than other communities, tend to belong to a number of other online communities, often each community being completely unconnected to

each other. This, of course, is not uncommon in offline communities, with individuals often connecting themselves to multiple communities, but it seems much more pronounced in online communities. Nowhere is this perhaps more obvious than in the world of blogs. Blogs, a style of website where a single individual (or group of individuals) write entries asynchronously, with most recent posts displayed prominently at the top, are often used by individuals as a way of dispersing interesting content to their viewers (Crystal, 2006). Often these viewers have blogs themselves, and choose to write entries about that given content, further dispersing this information, thus links and information are often spread at quite incredible speeds, from blog to blog and then to other online communities, primarily because of this phenomenon of large-scale connections between communities.

Extremely popular blogs such as Slashdot, Metafilter and Boing Boing (see links in appendix) often link to smaller communities, suddenly bringing a large influx of individuals from the larger site to the smaller site. Often, a single large blog will post new content, whereupon the audience will quickly disperse it far beyond its original audience, thanks to the highly connective nature of the various blogging communities. This leads to a highly interesting phenomenon where the extremely large audiences, considered part of the community around the blog, will then descend on smaller websites that are given attention in these very large blogs, often providing a short-term boost in numbers, as the community incorporates such a large number of new individuals.

In addition to this, there is often a case of groups of individuals who meet on one online community and who then choose to form smaller groups in other online communities. One excellent example is from the Sluggy.net community, where individuals from the community often share their blogs with each other, creating a further community slightly off-side from the original.

## **Objections to Online Community**

Of course, the question as to whether online communities exist at all has been raised by many researchers. Are online groups so radically different from offline communities that it is completely impossible for online communities to form at all?

Several researchers have looked askance at the various qualities of online communities, asking if these qualities allow the kind of community that is expressed offline to manifest online. If we are to take the online community as a strict analogy of the offline community, then we would

need to identify several key attributes:

Much of this, of course, is dependent on one's definition of "community". Fernback & Thompson (1995) view community as a highly active phenomenon, of which the capacity for social change is one of the major constituents (in much the sense as the term *community action*). Their statements, written over a decade ago, questioned the capacity for online communities to encourage civil action, stating that "Indeed, it seems most likely that the virtual public sphere brought about by [computer mediated communication] will serve a cathartic role, allowing the public to feel involved rather than to advance actual participation." (Fernback & Thompson, 1995) In this sense, I think, Fernback and Thompson are correct, but I suspect that they define "community" too tightly. Indeed, going by their definition, it would be supremely difficult to find communities that follow their definition within offline communities, as many groups that we would consider "communities" (like, for instance, the academic community) do not tend to push for civil action at all. In short, I think that Fernback & Thompson place far too much emphasis on a community's desire/ability for social change.

On the other side of the subject, Kling and Courtright (2001) do not necessarily attack the concept of online community, but do question its almost universal usage as a way to denote a group of people interacting online. They note that a great number of researchers (including such luminaries in the field as Jenny Preece) seem to use the term effectively because of its ubiquity within the field, but Kling and Courtright argue that this extremely wide use of the term has no utility to the study of online communities, and indeed may very well actively hurt attempts to delve in-depth into exactly how online groups interact and form. By considering online community so broadly as to simply be viewed as "online group", they argue, we lose the capacity to distinguish groups that might otherwise have absolutely nothing in common with each other.

An example could be between a group of people using instant messaging without any real group interaction, and a full-fledged online chat channel with individuals constantly communicating to the group as a whole – both are online groups, but it would be difficult to claim that the instant messaging group has any real sense of community, due to their being no real acceptance of group as a whole, and the interactions within the group being purely two-way. On the other hand, the chat channel clearly has some form of communal communication – everyone is involved, individuals are likely to indicate their view as a community apart from others.

Choosing to consider both groups as communities, then, means we have no tools to discriminate between these two types of online group.

I think their arguments have merit. However I think this confirms what is already generally considered important in online studies in that a tight definition of the online community concept is essential. Kling's and Courtright's arguments seem geared primarily towards individuals who would use the term *community* far too loosely, towards individuals who would use the term as any other technology buzzword.

Despite these attacks on online community, I think that the concept is solid. Indeed, most objections to the online community concept seem to take previous definitions of the term as gospel, ignoring the fact that the community concept has constantly evolved (and even if it hadn't, even Tönnies's conception of *Gemeinschaft* was not entirely married to a space-restricted community).

### ***What is a Speech Community?***

The term "speech community" has a long and illustrious history within sociolinguistics, going back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Bloomfield coining the term, and Gumperz; Labov and Hymes building on and improving the term in the 1960-70s. Several varying definitions of the term have emerged, and the concept is hotly debated even today. The term itself is rather nebulous, perhaps due to the vagueness of the term "community", as noted above.

A speech community, at its most basic, is a group of individuals who share linguistic properties. Gumperz considered these linguistic properties to be actual languages, as seen in his definition:

Any human aggregate characterised by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use (Gumperz, 1971:114)

It is also important to note that Gumperz focused heavily on interaction between speech communities – extending Bloomfield's views on the external/internal requirements of a community, he notes that a speech community must have a certain level of social cohesiveness. So two groups that happen to share a linguistic code, but do not consider themselves a single coherent group would not qualify as a single speech community. He also notes that a speech community (extending from the previous note) must somehow be cut off from other communities, be it by geography or social disconnection (It can be seen here how the

external/internal requirements are very closely related to each other) (Gumperz, 1971).

Labov and Hymes instead consider the linguistic properties to be much broader, incorporating rules of language norms and social connotations of code-use within the group. Labov's definition of a speech community, formulated as follows, has been immensely influential in sociolinguistics:

The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms. These norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behaviour, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage. (Labov, 1972:120-1)

This definition has several important elements which explain their general application. Firstly, the definition in terms of norms rather than language allows for easy extension to multilingual communities. Secondly, the participation in shared norms is not implied as blind adherence to the norms – this definition easily incorporates groups within the same speech community who react quite differently to the norms that they collectively interact with.

Even with this definition, there arise questions as to how best to apply it. The question of scale is one of the more interesting debates – how big can a grouping be and still be considered a speech community? Is it a concept best placed in a macro-level perspective, or can it work within a more micro-level framework? Labov's first mention of the speech community concept, in his study of the Lower East Side of New York, seems to focus on a relatively micro-level analysis. His later study of the speech community of Philadelphia takes a much larger sample, perhaps taking the use of the term into macro-level analysis. Hymes was of the strongest belief that the speech community was most useful as a local-level concept, and thus believed that smaller groups were better suited to the speech community concept than larger ones (Hymes, 1974). As a general tendency, sociolinguists tend to choose to utilise the concept in a mostly micro-level – specific social/geographic groups are taken as the studied group, rather than whole societies (although Labov's definitions could well extend to such a study). It should be noted, however, that there is considerable evidence for a lower-bound on speech community targets – Jackson, for example, found that the speech community concept simply was not useful on a scale of two nuclear families living in the same house (Jackson, 1974).

However, there are alternative views on the macro-/micro- debate. Romaine, for example,

chooses instead to place “speech community” as one scale step below “language” (Romaine, 1982), a considerably different view from that generally held. Romaine then places networks and social groups underneath speech communities, but arguments are common on this subject (Patrick, 2002). Perhaps it is simply the case that the speech community framework can be utilised in both macro and micro-levels – that it is, for the most part, an extensible construct that can be usefully used at multiple scales of study.

### **Extensions and Objections to the Speech Community Concept**

Other theorists have sought to refine or even redefine the speech community concept, seeing flaws or merely just extending out earlier definitions to cover specific studies and circumstances. One important refinement in recent times has been the disconnection of the speech community concept from the actual languages spoken within them, specifically the introduction of non-exclusivity – the ability for a single speaker to be part of multiple speech communities at once. Saville-Troike discusses the topic at length, noting:

Individuals, particularly in complex societies, may thus participate in a number of discrete or overlapping speech communities, just as they participate in a variety of social settings. Which one or ones a person orients himself or herself to at any moment – which set of rules he or she uses – is part of the strategy of communication. (Saville-Troike, 2003)

Effectively, this extension of the speech community concept accepts the premise that an individual’s social identity (which their speech community is part of) is multi-faceted, and can incorporate many different possibilities, and each of these possibilities may in turn connect the individual to a different speech community. In this case, then, it becomes important to treat the speech community as a highly social construct, and identify as much as possible the social context surrounding the groups being studied.

There are also theorists and researchers who outright reject the speech community concept, or at the very least reject the view of a speech community being an objective concept. These include the radical subjectivist approach, influenced greatly by the work of Robert LePage. Le Page’s work on Caribbean sociolinguistic groups were based around the idea of rejecting a community-style concept and focusing primarily on individual data, attempting to form new theories and concepts based on this individualist approach, including issues relating to group language (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985).

Corder is typical of theorists who choose to reject more objective views of the speech community, and instead build their definitions upon the identifications found within the group. As Corder notes:

A speech community is a group of people who *regard themselves* as speaking the same language; It need have no other defining attributes. In other words, a speech community is defined by *its beliefs*, not its language. (Corder, 1973:53)

Apart from this, however, Corder's definition tends to adhere fairly closely to a Labovian conception, defining this "same language" as sharing a set of norms which the speakers themselves may not "live up to" perfectly. In effect, Corder's speech community is self-defined by belief in a set of norms that do not necessarily mirror the actual linguistic reality of communication (Corder, 1973). However, Corder's definition, while nicely broad, could be considered *too* broad – under Corder's definition, practically any group might be considered a speech community, in effect meaning that the speech community concept is roughly analogous to "group", and in such a sense has no real utility. Indeed, this is a serious issue with the speech community concept, one that has often raised its head (in this sense it is much analogous to the concept of online community, having a large number of definitions, but always in the trap of "defining too much").

### ***Online Speech Communities – piecing it together***

With the combinations of these community definitions, I think it is worth piecing together the disparate definitions to form our working definition for this thesis. Of course, the definitions do not fit precisely: some selection of criteria is needed to come up with a coherent definition.

I believe that an online speech community concept should not be completely inclusive – I think that, in order to be a valuable concept, it needs to state what we can and cannot expect from our studies. As we have seen in both community concepts, expanding out the term to include everything and everyone may very well cause us to miss important features.

I think that a workable definition of an online speech community is as follows:

An online speech community is a community of speakers utilising computer-mediated communication, interacting with a set of shared language norms.

I have chosen to use a more Labovian definition of speech community due to what I think is a very clear flexibility within the definition, while simultaneously being quite specific on what

communities aren't included within the definition. Two disparate communities without any contact are unlikely to be able to be included into a single speech community.

In the next chapter, we will begin discussing the problems that online speech communities present within their study.

### ***Mentioned Websites***

Slashdot: <http://www.slashdot.org> – large online news portal for geek subjects (IT, popular culture, electronics, sociology, etc. In many ways Slashdot can be considered an early form of a communal weblog, and for a short period in the early 1990s was one of the largest websites in existence.

MetaFilter: <http://www.metafilter.com/> - A large communal weblog, where members may post content links that may interest other users, leave comments, etc.

Boing Boing: <http://www.boingboing.net/> - A highly popular weblog with a small number of major contributors, who post news and interesting links on an extremely wide variety of subjects.

## **Chapter 3: Problems with studying Online Speech Communities**

In the previous chapter, we took a detailed view at the structure of online speech communities – their general characteristics. In particular, we looked at the difference between online speech communities and the offline speech communities that have been more extensively studied. In this chapter, I intend to extend on this in a very specific manner – to show why the characteristics of online speech communities make the sociolinguistic study of them problematic.

### ***Techniques in use – current styles and forms of online community study***

It would be poorly of us to jump straight into a discussion of the pitfalls of online community without first reviewing the techniques currently in use in their study. Recent work has seen some considerable discussion on the nature and direction of online sociolinguistic research and, as such, it would be prudent of us to review such work.

### **“First Wave” – Structural differences and homogenous assumptions**

Georgakopoulou (2006) and Androutsopoulos (2006) both claim that computer-mediated communication research has undergone several transformations since the early 90s, with several clear delineations of research methodology. Androutsopoulos has noted that early research (which he calls the “first wave”) has perpetuated a certain mythology surrounding online languages, bringing forth a conception that language on the internet is “distinct, homogenous and indecipherable to ‘outsiders’” (Androutsopoulos, 2006:420). Androutsopoulos in particular notes David Crystal’s work (Crystal, 2001) on online languages as being an exemplar for this paradigm of CMC research throughout the 1990s, but many, many examples of such research can be found in the literature.

This style of research typically took very small samples, or even simply anecdotal evidence, making theories based on this rather incomplete evidence. These studies were primarily interested in language differences, and treated online language like a particular genre or register. Indeed, this sort of study typically made no real effort to look at social variation in online

communication – instead, very medium-based analyses were used. A common distinction was the use of the synchronous/asynchronous distinction, marking a difference between real-time online chat (for example, instant messaging and chat) and bulletin boards and forums. Communication was thus compared on such high-level distinctions, but it was extremely rare for studies in this age examine variation *within* media, to look at variation between multiple communities, or within online communities themselves. (Androutsopoulos, 2006)

As might be seen, this first wave of research allowed us to break into online communication, but typically at an extremely shallow level. Online communities were often mentioned, but never really studied in any empirical sense. The first wave of CMC language research focused primarily on the media of CMC, rather than on any sense of CMC as a component of online community.

### **“Second Wave” – Social differences and variation within CMC**

Androutsopoulos (2006) notes that after the first wave of CMC research, researchers started to take seriously the issue of online language heterogeneity and as a result began to look at variation within online communities. With this change in focus came a considerable change in the methodology of the research used. This “second wave” takes the media differences as given, and instead begins focusing on the communities that are built around these media differences, seeing how communities utilise the new language found in order to function like any other community.

Such a radical change of priorities naturally means a significant shift in research techniques used. Instead of simple recording of anecdotes and lists of new words and phenomena, this new social approach requires the use of more sociological techniques in study. One of the major new sets of techniques in this second wave of CMC study is computer-mediated discourse analysis. Rather than take small samples of anecdotal evidence, researchers used content analysis of large corpuses of data in order to take advantage of online communication’s tendency to leave textual traces. Discourse analysis has been used for quite some time in sociology as well as discourse linguistics, but it has only relatively recently become a force in online community study (Herring, 2004).

Discourse analysis works on two theoretical assumptions. Firstly, that discourse exhibits recurrent patterns, ie that patterns that emerge from the discourse studied will continue to recur in other parts of the same discourse, and that such patterns can generalise to other discourses.

Second, discourse analysis assumes that discourse involves the speaker making choices, in particular that they reflect choices made at a cognitive, social and linguistic level. As such, discourse analysis can allow us to make generalisations about non-linguistic behaviour, as well as simply the discourse under study. Computer-mediated discourse analysis adds another assumption to this mix - that computer mediated discourse is not wholly determined by the inherent technology utilised in its production, ie that more factors than merely the technology used to communicate dictate the discourse that emerges. These three assumptions work to provide us with a powerful means of investigating online communities, the language choices found within them, and the nature of those choices (Herring, 2004).

This is, perhaps, merely an online-specific form of what is essentially a type of online ethnography – the use of ethnographic techniques to study online communities. This form of research is not new, of course, as sociologists have been utilising the technique on online communities for quite some time, but in CMC research it has begun to assert itself as a powerful approach to studying online communities and language choices. Indeed, it could well be considered that the ethnographic approach is perhaps the first time that online communities have been the actual focus of study, rather than the individual or the actual language itself.

Ethnographic studies can themselves be divided into two broad approaches, delineated mostly by their focus. The first approach is the primarily online approach, relying heavily on discourse analysis to the exclusion of other ethnographic techniques. This is exemplified by researchers such as Hine (2000) and Herring. This approach can itself be further delineated by participation, ie whether the researcher chooses to actively participate in a given community (or have already been actively participating), or explicitly chooses against such participation.

The second approach is a much broader approach, combining both online and offline ethnographic features, performing discourse analysis as well as more offline techniques such as interviews and surveys. The advantages of these techniques are obvious, but so are its limitations – such a technique is perhaps not particularly useful if there is no offline component to a particular community.

### ***Qualities of online communities, and the issues arising from them***

There were several general qualities of online communities discussed in the previous chapter. I would now like to look at each of these qualities, showing the difficulties they present to

sociolinguistic study.

## **Fluid Membership**

The property of fluid membership within online communities is an unfortunate issue in the possibility of ethnographic study. While online communities generally have some small stable of regulars, the halo of lurkers and low-level participants changes constantly. This leads to several interesting notes, however. If a community's population is changing at such a vast rate that the entire population shifts during a given ethnographic study, then there are obviously issues about whether we are actually looking at a real community – communities, even online, tend to have at least some sort of stable presence. In such a case, study of the group in question may not be possible at all.

One major issue that this fluid membership can pose to researchers is in individual-based case studies – studies that use singular individuals as loci for studies of larger groups (for example, studies utilising a social network approach) may find that their locus departs the community long before any useful information can be found. This could lead to a great deal of researching needing to be re-done if the researcher is specifically concentrating on the community in particular rather than the individual. In studies that focused on the individual, such an incident may well be quite useful, allowing a researcher to study an individual's transition out of a community. This, of course, assumes that the individual in question leaves useful traces that allow the researcher to follow them, which is certainly not always the case.

However, I think such issues are probably easily accounted for, so long as researchers are aware of the issue. One could consider the possibility of an ethnographer attempting to ingratiate themselves into a community and being dismayed as the elements of the community they are interacting with disappear, but I think that any ethnographic study would be more likely to find this sort of issue interesting, rather than problematic, if they are indeed utilising a macro-level approach. Certainly, the opportunity to watch a community change as the individuals involved disappear and new individuals take their place is rare, and it is an interesting element of online communities that such possibilities exist in such an accelerated fashion.

## **Lack of Location**

We have noted that many communities lack any real sort of physical “location” – the members of the community are spread out, often among many demographics and geographical locations. Again, this is not entirely new to online communities – there have been attempts at studying

communities that are widespread geographically, although these have typically been based around professional communities that are united in various demographic terms.

Any sort of geographically diverse community has special issues when being studied, especially if a more offline ethnographic approach is being considered - performing face-to-face interviews is especially difficult if the vast majority of the community you are studying are half-way around the world, and other methods of interview are often prone to issues of bias. Further, with the pseudonymous nature of online identities, there is always the issue surrounding accuracy of information in such a system – how, precisely, does one know that the identity being projected in a given community is the user’s real identity?

However, this objection may not be as well-merited as it first appears – while there has been an astonishing amount of literature researching the nature of identity on the internet (indeed, the nature of identity in online systems has been a major point of study within online studies throughout and perhaps even before the first wave of CMC research), the issue of individuals forging their own identities has been shown to be greatly exaggerated. Studies based on cases of individuals forging identities on communities seem to indicate that, much like in offline communities, individuals tend not to lie about their identities when participating in communities, and certainly expect others to reciprocate in a like fashion. This is primarily due to the fact that if such falsehoods are discovered, the individual responsible is generally regarded with extreme hostility by the community, as would be the case in many situations where an individual is caught in a lie. Identity construction does exist in dating and cybersex chatrooms, where there is no expectation of further contact with the individuals involved (Koch et al, 2005). However, when building relations with individuals, users prefer to use their own identity, and tend to spurn those who do not do the same. In a community situation, the probability of individuals accurately projecting their identity is quite high, thus researchers should not generally have issues with false credentials online, at least within stable communities (Shirky, 2003).

### **High External Connections**

I suspect that this quality perhaps provides us with one of the most problematic elements of online communities generally.

Androutsopoulos (2006) has noted that perhaps one of the most promising techniques for studying online communities rest in ethnographic studies, used quite extensively in online

community research in the sociological literature. I agree with him to an extent, but I wonder how useful ethnographic techniques are to communities that do not seem to have a well-established border, or for communities such as the Nexus War diaspora of communities. An ethnographic study may well allow us to focus on a smaller group, but at the serious cost of dismissing further available context. In some communities this is a real problem – how do we decide where the boundaries lie on the community we are studying? Very often, fads and fashions flow through online communities via the connections from other communities, and the act of isolating a single community for the purpose of study can miss a great deal of this quite important social practice.

Of course, the problem can manifest itself in an entirely different direction. Some online communities are, more correctly, multiple communities existing in the same general system. It may well be that studying the entire system will lead to very murky results as individual communities end up having very distinct characteristics that are not shared by the rest of the community. The Nexus War communities are a good example of this – many smaller groups within the larger system have extremely different views and customs relating to community interaction and even the game itself (such examples often manifest in debates within the official forum for the game, as seen in [1]). In fact, the issue of communities-within-communities has been mentioned before, especially in cases of very large online communities, such as Meira van der Spa's research into the Fok! Online forum community (van der Spa, 2004), although not looked at in any great detail.

In fact, it seems that once a community reaches a certain size, it will begin naturally fracturing, forming connected, but independent, communities within the same online site. This is very obvious in social networking sites such as LiveJournal and MySpace – there is such an immensely large number of users utilising the network that it is impractical and, indeed, undesirable to maintain links to every other user. Users instead choose the connections they wish to maintain, often forming small cliques of individuals within the network. This shows up in many smaller communities as well in a less obvious fashion – the Sluggy.Net forum sub-boards each have different groups of users posting, and some users choose to post only on specific sub-boards. This leads to different demographics on each board, creating smaller communities within the larger community, to no apparent detriment to the rest of the community.

## **Conjunctional effects**

In many ways, some of the most troubling issues regarding online communities come from a combination of these effects. While a single effect may cause minor issues that might otherwise be overcome simply by being aware of it (or at the very least, dismissed as long as research relating to that condition is held constant), there are conjunctional effects that turn out to be much more difficult to overcome.

One rather dangerous conjunctional effect comes from the combination of high external connections and a fluid membership – while, individually, each of these effects causes some difficulty, the combination of the two create conditions where a researcher may simply be unsure as to where the community starts and ends, both on a macro, community level and on a purely individual level. If we consider that online communities tend to have individuals in varying levels of membership at any given time, and that members of other communities may commonly participate in other communities on occasion (as was often the case on USENET, see Baym, 1995), it can become especially difficult for a researcher studying an unfamiliar community to identify who, exactly, is participating in the actual community, and who is merely “dropping in”. Worse, individuals who are participating for a single incident with no real desire to continue interaction with the community are not often easily discernable from individuals who are just beginning their allegiance with the community. Often, the only way to identify such issues is to directly contact the individuals, but of course the individuals themselves may not even know of their status themselves, as the incident they are engaged in may well change their position! The problem, it seems, is deeper than one might otherwise imagine.

Thankfully, however, it seems that with the decline of USENET, communities where this sort of extreme lack of borders exist are much rarer these days, due to changes in the design philosophy of the social software used. Such extremely amorphous communities, with such incredibly porous borders are not commonly seen. Even the Nexus War group of communities does not possess such porous boundaries – each community within the Nexus War group is technically unconnected to all the others. While individuals often participate in multiple communities, there is very rarely “accidental exposure”, as is generally common on USENET systems, due to each community belonging on independent systems, and thus each community being incapable of “cross-posting” to another.

## ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, we have looked at how online communities are currently studied within online sociolinguistics, and some issues that arise from these studies when applied to the online community. We have seen how first wave CMC research has practically ignored the online community as a primary unit of study, and how a more recent second wave has started using ethnographic techniques as a way of moving towards a true sociolinguistic approach of computer-mediated communication.

Further, we have discussed the various features of online communities, finding various issues that are involved with applying ethnographic and other techniques to online communication. While several features have proven to be either beneficial or easily taken into account, the property of high external connections seems to be a difficult one for ethnographic techniques. How can we study a community when it is so difficult to determine the borders of online communities? When studying large communities, communities large enough to have fractured into small sub-communities, do we study all these groups as a single entity, or do we choose to focus on a single group, knowing that we will lose considerable context in our focus? These are important issues, I think, and issues that need careful evaluation.

So, where do we go from here? Is it worth working towards different techniques? What other possible techniques exist? Or is it simply impossible to study online communities period? These questions will be answered in the next chapter.

## ***Links and Notes***

[1] <http://forums.nexuswar.com/viewtopic.php?t=11011> Topic: "Pick on someone your own size", a thread regarding high-powered characters within the game attacking characters of much lower power – the community is widely split as to the acceptability of this practice, and some factions within the game explicitly attack lower-powered characters as a preference.

## Chapter 4: New techniques for new communities?

In the previous chapter, we identified issues relating to the use of current techniques (like ethnographical studies) to study online communities as they stand. With these issues identified, I intend to look at possible other techniques for the study of online communities, as well as look at the question of whether our current techniques are still suitable, despite the flaws identified.

Within this chapter we will look at three major approaches to the study of sociolinguistics, and view their application to online sociolinguistic work: The Acts of Identity approach, the Community of Practice framework, and the cyber-archaeology approach.

### ***Acts of Identity***

There are more than just community-based approaches available, and indeed these are not totally uncommon, either. Individual-based approaches follow more subjective approaches, working on the principle that community-level of study is too abstracted, and that an individual-approach level is a more powerful and objective approach to sociolinguistic study.

In a way, this might seem rather oxymoronic – an attempt to study social groups by focusing on the individual. However, this approach has been used by multiple individuals, most notably Robert LePage, whose “Acts of Identity” model has been enormously influential. LePage’s work is built around the rejection of language as an abstract object of study, instead focusing on a primarily speaker-based model. (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985). Further, the Acts of Identity model rejects the idea even of objectively defineable groups, considering all groups to be constructs that individuals build for themselves:

Neither ‘race’ nor ‘ethnic group’ nor ‘language’ turns out to be a clearly-definable external object. Rather, each is a concept we form as individuals, and the extent to which, and the manner in which, we *project our concepts* on to those around us and establish networks of shared suppositions *determines the nature of the groups* in our society and their mode of operation. (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985:247)

LePage’s model focuses around the desire of individual speakers to identify with the groups that

they perceive around them. To this end, they utilise the various linguistic tools at their disposal in order to try and adapt themselves to the groups that they perceive.

LePage's Acts of Identity have not, to date, reached online community studies under any researcher (although there have been some studies touching on online extensions to offline communities, see Su & Walters, 2006), but in many respects might well be useful for such a community. LePage's theories were built around highly heterogenous and complex linguistic communities in the Caribbean, where it became highly difficult to identify individual codes to use as bases for community boundaries. In a sense, this is also much the case in online communities – communities, due to the nature of their highly fragmented boundaries and high turnover rate, may tend to lack any single code, or even any single language norm, despite being a coherent community. An Acts of identity model may well suit this environment, allowing us to learn a great deal. Learning to move away from singular norm/code models of speech communities may well assist us greatly in learning more about how those from different speech communities come together to form new communities.

For example, the Acts of Identity model could theoretically provide us with a great deal of insight into how individual members of Sluggy.net use the various codes and language identities procured in other communities to establish themselves as individual entities within the Sluggy.net community. No two speakers in this case have identical internet histories, having moved around different online (and offline!) groups, and thus not only have different linguistic histories, but will indeed have differing perceptions of Sluggy.net's community values. If this occurs, then it would go some way to explaining how it is that, despite each individual observing the same basic data about the various social rules and protocols that govern interaction, some fit in almost perfectly, some require many months of coaxing and socialisation to become active members, and why some members simply cannot peacefully contribute to the community, and quickly depart. It may also go some way to identifying the many word games and the popularity of the site of various "internet language games", where members of the community build entire threads based on lampooning certain internet codes.

Even more so, the focus on individual perception obviously allows the option of a person's perception of a community and their codes changing over time. As an individual becomes an active member of a community, their perceptions of the community are likely to be highly different to when they first encountered the community. As they continue to interact, their

perceptions of the community and its members will continue to evolve, and their language use, attitudes and actions will continue to change in response, perhaps to the point where they can no longer meaningfully attach themselves to that community, and thus leave either temporarily or permanently.

These are, of course, only two applications of the Acts of Identity model that could shed light on online community behaviour. Many more applications potentially exist, and I believe that it is quite unfortunate that online researchers seem to have disregarded the Acts of Identity model. For all intents and purposes, it seems to be a perfect fit for online communication.

### ***Communities of Practice***

The Community of Practice approach attempts to look at communities from another angle – instead of attempting to map out the structure of a community, the approach attempts to focus on the goals and activities that a community is attempting to perform.

A Community of Practice can be defined as:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a Community of Practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992:464)

From this definition, we can see that an approach utilising the Community of Practice concept will focus very much on the *actions* and *practices* of the social group in question. In many ways, this makes the Community of Practice concept a highly specific one, a framework that relates to very specific types of communities. However, these particular types of communities are not restricted to the offline world – the community united by a single practice, whose actions and language can be seen as working towards the culmination of that practice, is a construct wholly independent of offline status. There are many communities online that seem almost exemplars of the Community of Practice concept in that they are communities that have emerged around websites built around very specific goals. One obvious example that can be seen is the community surrounding the various Wikipedias. By their own admission, all work and all interaction that exists within that community is ostensibly based around improving the

quality of the given Wikipedia. (Meta Contributors, 2007). In Wikipedia's case, communities of practice could very easily allow us to gain insight into various problems that the community has identified, such as the escalation of conflict between well-established individuals, which are often purely escalations of words. Each side of the conflict often exacerbates the situation, but occasionally individuals manage to short-circuit such conflicts. Because these sorts of conflicts are often directly involved with Wikipedia's purposes (or are often framed as such, even if they are not), a community of practice approach can assist us in identifying the mechanisms used by people in both conflict escalation and conflict resolution. This is especially apparent as very often such conflicts draw in very large numbers of people and go on for extremely long periods of time, so two-party resolution mechanics often do not have much bearing – but approaching the issue from a community of practice perspective can help us identify the speech strategies around these conflicts.

Somewhat bizarrely, there does not seem to be a great deal of research built around the community of practice framework in online sociolinguistics, despite the very clear utility of the approach for many online communities. One of the very few examples of online community of practice work is Johnson's work on online educational communities of practice. In this case, Johnson used a community of practice based around teachers interested in using computer-based English as Foreign Language teaching (Johnson, 2006), staying true to the genesis of the concept as an explanatory concept for educational communities (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). I am certain, however, that there is utility in the community of practice framework for a great many communities online.

However, it is certainly worth pointing out that not all online communities meet the criteria of a community of practice. Looking at our example communities, Sluggy.net does not really meet the criterion for a community of practice – while the community is ostensibly built around the discussion of a web-comic (and thus would seem to have a uniting purpose) in reality the community is quite diffuse in the motivations and actions of the individual posters. The community of practice approach is, thus, not a panacea for online community research, but should certainly be considered another tool in its study.

### ***Cyber-archaeology***

Another approach to online study is one known as cyber-archaeology – effectively, studying online communities and “civilisations” using an archaeological perspective. Cyber-archaeology

was first brought up by Jones (1997) as an alternate means for the study of CMC. Jones felt that CMC study of the time was being extremely short-sighted, and that applying an archaeological perspective to online communities could help with this issue:

Archaeologists don't research communities and cultures directly; rather they examine the remains of human habitation. Of direct relevance to CMC researchers, archaeologists have also shown that the material components of settlements play a substantial and essential role in many large-scale transformations of human community life. This is because material becomes recognizable as an actor without intent, whose operations are played out on a scale beyond the limited perceptions of daily community life. Likewise it is being proposed that virtual-communities and cyber-cultures can also be examined one step removed from social theory, where human intent is not of particular importance and larger-scale cultural changes can be assessed. Of course this can only be done if we take an archaeological perspective so that the patterning of cyber-artifacts can be examined. In other words, it is being suggested that virtual communities and virtual settlements be systematically researched via the longer term perspective of cyber-archaeology. (Jones, 1997)

Jones's work has been enormously influential, due to its focus on the issue of "virtual settlements", and the introduction of rigorous sets of criteria for the existence of online community. Indeed, as has been noted in previous chapters this is a common talking point in research relating to online communities, and having specific criteria that can be readily followed by researchers attempting to discern the nature of the online group under study has been tremendously useful (For examples of the use of Jones's work in this way, see Liu, 1999; and Efimova & Hendrick, 2005).

In a sense, I think that Virtual Archaeology has some important points about the current study of online communities in a broader sociological sense. We do not seem to be studying online communities in a particular long-sighted way, although I would argue that perhaps this is because it has proven extremely difficult to find communities that last for periods long enough to move out of the short- or medium-term. It is perhaps a valid point that taking a longer-term view of the online communities we study would provide us with a wealth of knowledge about the workings of these communities. However, I do not believe that Cyber-archaeology has any real utility in this regard that is not already handled by current techniques. Cyber-archaeology, as described by Jones, is really just Computer-mediated discourse analysis, with an

archaeological perspective detailing priorities of study. Worse, the archaeological framework is one that restricts us to observation, rather than participation.

Further, the framework does not seem particularly sturdy for the study of language use in particular. The use of language is, in and of itself, a highly active one. Archaeological techniques may be able to look back and provide us with occasional snatches of words and contexts, but they are hard-pressed to provide us with information about every-day contexts of language use. While it is true that online communities leave much of their everyday language use out in the open for anyone to find, we perhaps miss the temporal clues and contexts by which everyday utterances contribute to. This is perhaps unsurprising, seeing as archaeology and sociolinguistics have entirely different aims and practices.

Finally, the archaeological approach makes note of a need to look at communities from a “cyber-archaeological timescale” which, firstly, doesn’t seem to have any real definition, and number two, seems to run directly into the problem of the short life-expectancy of many online communities. Some communities simply do not last long enough for any sort of archaeological timespan. Even if we take this to mean looking at communities as an aggregate at this timeframe, it is not at all obvious that taking an extreme long-term perspective will reveal much about the social uses of language.

### ***Where our current approaches take us***

Despite our rather dim view in the last chapter of current approaches, I do not think that we should give up on our current approaches just yet. I think that despite the flaws in these approaches there is a large amount of information we can stand to gain from these approaches, and we would be fools to dismiss such approaches simply because they are not perfectly suited to the task of online study.

Instead, I think that we merely need to view what we are doing with caution. Ethnography and CMDA are powerful and broad techniques, with a great deal of practical application, but as we apply them to new situation and new circumstances, we should understand where our techniques come up short, and remember to identify these limitations as we study these communities. By being informed as to the limitations of our studies, we can avoid problems with overgeneralising of our findings, as well as help identify places where other theorists may well be able to come up with more sophisticated techniques to cover what our current techniques cannot.

Further to this is the observation that ethnography and CMDA are by no means incompatible with the approaches that we have shown above. The approaches we have looked at, being extremely broad, require a framework to make the observations gleaned from them into some form of sense. The approaches we discussed in the last chapter are two very important ones, as is the general approach exemplified by speech community studies in general, and I believe that we can only improve our knowledge of the workings of online language use by combining perspectives.

So, where do our current approaches take us? I believe that they can take us quite far – it is not difficult to see the utility of these approaches. However, focusing purely on the approaches that we are familiar with is, I think, a poor choice. We must be willing to embrace multiple approaches if we are to fully understand the sociolinguistic situations that we study. Every approach has some sort of utility, both current and new. Acts of Identity, for example, can allow us to focus on the individual while retaining a social view, but such an approach is useless without an ethnographic method. Alternatively, Communities of practice are extremely useful for understanding purpose-based communities online, but may have issues with communities based purely around social interaction, or communities built around geographical communities – in this case a speech community approach seems useful. Even better, through new approaches we can better understand the limitations of previous approaches, learning to compensate for these limitations. In short, we should not rest on our laurels, nor should we seek to discard the foundations of our discipline.

## ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, we have gone through a short list of frameworks and approaches in an attempt to find new directions for online sociolinguistic research. While some of these approaches do not appear to provide us with any significant advantage against approaches we currently have at our disposal, other approaches may well provide us with some measure of additional power in exploring the unique characteristics of online communities, as well as the commonalities between online and offline communities. Acts of Identity theory seems well-placed to work within the unstable populations of online communities, while Communities of Practice seem highly useful for investigating the many new wiki-based communities, and other communities built around common goals. There are, of course, other methods which do not seem to be particularly useful for our goals, in particular the approach of virtual archaeology – an approach

that seems rather useful for sociology as a whole, but seems entirely invalid with any sociolinguistic study that would even remotely focus on the actions of individuals.

However, it would be wrong for us to suggest that these new methods should completely replace our current practices. Well besides the fact that our current practices are not intrinsically flawed, our current approaches provide entirely different insights to the approaches provided above, and I believe that in such a diverse field such as sociolinguistics, we should encourage a diverse range of approaches to the topic – looking at social use of language from as many different angles as can be managed seems to be far more powerful an approach than looking only a single way.

With this said, however, I also think that it is important to maintain focus on what exactly it is we are studying. Approaches such as Virtual Archaeology may contribute meaningfully to sociological understandings of online communication but as sociolinguists we must be primarily focused on the language, not just the community. In reality, while we study the community as a matter of course, we do so through the medium of how the community (and those within the community) utilises language to perform various social functions. It is important, I feel, to remember this in particular, and to not get sidetracked into techniques that focus on more general sociology, rather than the linguistic qualities.

I guess, in a sense, that the conclusion that I believe can be drawn from this chapter is one of synthesis – that we can learn more by including more methods of study, rather than choosing exclude methods. Some methods indeed seem inappropriate to the methods of our study, but even in this case, it is arguable that such techniques could very well improve our knowledge though other means.

In the next chapter, I will conclude this thesis, providing my final thoughts as to what I've discussed here, as well as pointing out the many new directions that this thesis may provide to others.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to look at the current state of online community research, attempting to look at various issues associated with online study. We have taken a long look at the definitions of the subject matter at work here (within both the *speech community* concept and the *online community* concept), and identified that there are specific observed issues within online communities that might theoretically make study of them difficult or misleading.

There is an interesting question here, mirrored by other authors, that the online community concept is a highly difficult one to operationalise well enough to research. As Herring (2004) has noted, most operationalisations of community are highly arbitrary, and often built around one particular approach or another. We know that the online community is built around the general community concept, and we know that the community concept is a highly abstracted one, and these two features alone make the definitions highly fuzzy, and often extremely arbitrary. In many ways, the term *community* seems to be a word with very few denotations and a great deal of connotations.

Although in a lot of ways, this set of connotations might well be considered the uniting point of much community research, despite the great difficulty of pinning them down, although using these connotations as the primary rallying point would be unfortunate – basing an approach on the “general feeling” of a concept is likely to prevent researchers from pursuing such a concept in an objective fashion. It is unlikely that this state of affairs will change in the near-future, as it seems that the community concept means so many things to so many researchers in so many disciplines. The concept of community, it seems will simply have to retain its given fuzziness, thanks to the very history of the word.

We then took a quick look at how we are studying online communities, and took a much deeper look at how exactly the features of online communities might interfere or lead astray unwary researchers. In this we noted that the high external connections of online communities may very likely cause issues with scope in online community research, making it difficult to identify “where to stop” in any given community. We also determined that the lack of physical location observed in online communities often provides difficulties to more traditional ethnographic techniques, as participants in a given speech community are more likely to be spread over the globe, making interviews and such techniques difficult if not impossible. This doesn’t rule out ethnographic techniques that are only dependent of the community under study, such as

computer-mediated discourse analysis. We also had a look at how some of these effects “stack”, and cause much greater problems than they might otherwise, such as how fluid membership and fuzzy community borders can lead to extreme difficulty in even identifying a community due to the intrusion of multiple other communities.

In chapter four, we took what we have learned from our previous chapters and applied them to finding possible new approaches to studying online communities in such a way that we can avoid such issues. We took a look at several alternate approaches to online communities, from LePage’s Acts of Identity model, to the Communities of Practice framework, to the Virtual Archaeology framework. We saw that the Virtual archaeology framework, while perhaps useful in some respects, led to some serious issues, as the framework seemed to be more likely to focus on long-term behaviour, rather than the day-to-day utterances which tend to be more directly connected to the aims of sociolinguistics. However, we did see that the Acts of Identity model seemed more than appropriate for online community research, in many ways, and that the Communities of Practice model, while not necessarily a perfect fit for all communities, was certainly a very useful approach overall, and one I think that should be encouraged for online research.

These approaches, of course, are more than compatible with the techniques currently utilised in online research, and indeed I think that it is important to stress that the issues presented in this thesis are primarily situational in nature, rather than truly unsurmountable, theoretical issues. Certain situations and types of studies are likely to have issues, but these issues can be mitigated by the wary researcher. Knowledge of the issues can allow us to design studies specifically to mitigate these concerns. Indeed, some of these concerns may well be worthy of future research – are the high external links of online communities as obvious as I have made them out to be, or are these links effectively invisible within specific online communities? Is it inevitable for communities to fracture into smaller communities as they grow, or is it possible for a community to scale indefinitely online? These are interesting questions, certain to have interesting answers not only for sociolinguists, but for those attempting to build online communities as well.

Where does this lead us? This thesis, I think, shows us that we have a great deal of uncharted territory ahead, that as much as we are learning about online communities and their language use, there is clearly a great deal that we don’t know. The possible direction of online research

are but expanding as we watch, and it may not be long before we see another distinct wave of research. In many ways, one could consider that online sociolinguistics is very quickly catching up to its offline counterpart, as we begin to learn about the similarities and differences, and how far we can generalise from offline communities to those online. There are many questions, to be answered here, not just from our current perspective, but from many other as yet untapped perspectives.

In this study we have taken another look at several possible research approaches that could be better utilised in our attempt to study online communities, and I think that we have identified to very impressive candidates for further study. Communities of Practice are now just beginning to be utilised as means of studying online communities, as can be seen with Johnson's study on online educational communities of practice (Johnson, 2006). Looking at communities with this field of view is likely to provide us with an excellent new perspective.

The other notable candidate that we have looked at is the Acts of Identity model. The fragmented nature of codes online and the constant mixing of online communities would seem to be the perfect circumstances to utilise the Acts of Identity model. Certainly, I feel that studies building on an Acts of Identity model are likely to show us a great deal of interesting data, especially, for example, how individuals use their previous online history (and thus, the various codes they have assimilated) to achieve their aims and goals in their current communities. The Acts of Identity model, thus, is a much underutilised model in this field of research, and I think it would be to the advantage of all to rectify this.

Another important point which I feel should be explored is the interesting question of full investigation into the useability of our current research techniques. This thesis has looked at these questions from a more theoretical perspective, attempting to derive possible issues from first principles, but the possibility that these are not the only issues at bay, or that these issues may not, in fact, be problematic for researchers, cannot and should not be ignored. While there have been large numbers of papers discussing the use of certain techniques (such as Herring's paper on computer-mediated discourse analysis), there does not seem to be any real practical research being done into the very techniques that we are using, and I believe that this is a direction that should certainly be investigated. At the very least, it is worth investigating the actual usage of techniques if only to investigate whether they are being utilised effectively by researchers, and if the techniques themselves are being utilised in a consistent fashion.

Effectively, it may well be worth auditing our techniques, to determine whether such techniques are repeatable to the very large number of linguists who may be using them.

In the end, I suspect that online community research, as much as it has begun to mature as a field, is still very much in a growing phase. Despite the advantage of sociolinguistics in this field, in particular the fact that online communities are often quite heavily text-based, in many ways we are still feeling our way through the various qualities of online communities. But I believe that it is important to recognise that a field as new as online sociolinguistics may well require a great deal of review work – taking all our studies as gospel, I think, is not the way towards full understanding. It is certainly worth taking a step back and looking at the research and asking how much we can really discern from the material, and how the studies that are becoming major cornerstones of our understanding of online communities are being used by the studies that come after them. Sociolinguistics is a field where it can be exceptionally difficult to remain impartial, and indeed it is debatable as to whether impartiality is a useful trait. Burawoy, for example, has stated that sociology has long since passed the point where true impartiality is at all useful, as in social circles, discarding values and politics limits our knowledge of these groups greatly. Sociolinguistics perhaps has a stronger leg to stand on in regards to impartiality than pure sociology, with its focus on language, but with its simultaneous focus of social interactions, it makes sense that perhaps a truly impartial approach may limit our understanding of the underlying social processes that govern language use (Burawoy, 2005).

I believe that this thesis has gone some way to opening ourselves to the kind of self-review that I think would be highly useful for this discipline. Our lack of knowledge about online communities has, I think, drawn us into an odd area where we have many views, but are lacking one in particular – a view of our position in the midst of them all. This thesis has not gone so far as to aggressively pursue this line of inquiry, but I think that simply identifying this line of inquiry is an important first step. The next, perhaps, is to identify where, exactly, we need to enquire, and what techniques will be needed to complete this line of inquiry. Alas, this is beyond the scope of this thesis, and I hope that other researchers take the lead that this thesis has provided.

## References

- Androutsopoulos, Jannis** (2006) Introduction: Sociolinguists and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(4), pp419-438.
- Androutsopoulos, Jannis / Evelyn Ziegler** (2004). Exploring language variation on the Internet: Regional speech in a chat community. In: Gunnarsson, Britt-Louise et al. (eds.) *Language Variation in Europe: Papers from the Second International Conference on Language Variation in Europe*, 99-111. Uppsala:Uppsala University Press.
- Araujo e Sa, Maria Helena & Melo, Silvia** (2007) Online Plurilingual Interaction in the Development of Language Awareness. *Language Awareness*, 16(1), pp7-20
- Baym, Nancy K.** (1995) The Emergence of Community in Computer-mediated Communication. In Steven G. Jones (ed) *CyberSociety: Computer-mediated communication and community*, pp138-163
- Brint, Steven** (2001) *Gemeinschaft* Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept. *Sociological Theory*, 19(1), pp1-23
- Bruckman, Amy and Jensen, Carlos** (2002). "The Mystery of the Death of MediaMOO, Seven Years of Evolution of an Online Community." In *Building Virtual Communities*. Edited by Ann Renninger and Wesley Shumar. Pp. 21-33. Cambridge University Press.
- Burawoy, Michael** (2005) Third Wave Sociology and the End of Pure Science. *The American Sociologist*, 26(3-4), pp152-165
- Corder, S.,** (1973) *Introducing Applied Linguistics*. Hammondsworth: Penguin.
- Crystal, David** (2006) *Language and the Internet, 2ed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Eckert, Penelope & McConnell-Ginet, Sally** (1992) Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-based Practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21, pp461-490
- Efimova, L. & Hendrick S.** (2005) In Search of a Virtual Settlement: An exploration of Weblog Community Boundaries. In *Proceedings of Communities & Technology 2005*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

- Fernback, J. & Thompson, B.** (1995) Virtual Communities: Abort, retry, failure? Retrieved April 10, 2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.well.com/user/hlr/texts/VCCivil.html>.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra** (2006) Postscript: Computer-mediated communication in sociolinguistics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(4), pp548-557.
- Gotved, Stine** (2006) Time and space in cyber social reality. *New Media & Society*, Vol 8 (3), pp467-486.
- Gumperz, J. J.** (1971) *Language in Social Groups*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Herring, Susan** (2003) Computer Mediated Discourse. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen & Heidi E. Hamilton (eds). Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- Herring, Susan C.** (2001) Computer-mediated Discourse. In Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (eds) *The handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- Herring, Susan C.** (2004) Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, & J. H. Gray (eds.), *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning* (pp. 338-376). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hine, Christine** (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. Sage Publications.
- Hymes, Dell** (1974) *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Koch, Sabine C., Mueller, Barbara, Kruse, Lenelis & Zumbach, Joerg** (2005) Constructing Gender in Chat Groups. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 53(1), pp29-41.
- Jackson, J.** (1974) Language identity of the Columbian Vaupés Indians. In R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds), *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, pp50-64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, Christopher M.** (2006) Establishing an online community of practice for instructors of English as a foreign language. PhD Thesis, Nova Southeastern University.
- Jones, Quentin.** (1997). Virtual-communities, virtual settlements & cyber-archaeology: A theoretical outline. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3(3). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol3/issue3/jones.html> (accessed 01/06/2007)

- Kazmer**, Michelle M. (2007) Beyond C U L8R: Disengaging from online social worlds. *New Media & Society*, Vol 9 (1), pp111-138.
- Kazmer**, Michelle M. (2007) Beyond C U L8R: disengaging from online social worlds. *New media & society*, 9(1), pp111-138.
- Labov**, William (1972) *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- LePage**, Robert B. & Tabouret-Keller, Andree. (1985). *Acts of Identity: Creole-based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Liu**, Geoffrey Z. (1999) Virtual community presence in Internet Relay Chatting. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 5(1). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue1/liu.html> (accessed 01/06/2007)
- Meta Contributors** (2007) *The Wikipedia Community*. Retrieved June 6, 2007 from the World Wide Web: [http://meta.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=The\\_Wikipedia\\_Community&oldid=546016#Community.27s\\_role](http://meta.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Wikipedia_Community&oldid=546016#Community.27s_role)
- Olson**, Kathleen K. (2005) Cyberspace as place and the limits of metaphor. *Convergence: The International Journal Of Research Into New Media Technologies*, vol. 11, (1), pp10-18
- Patrick**, Peter L. (2002) The Speech Community. In JK Chambers, Peter Trudgill & Natalie Schilling-Estes, (eds) *The Handbook of Language Variation & Change*, pp573-597. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Preece**, Jenny (2000) *Online Communities: designing usability, supporting sociability*. New York: John Wiley.
- Reingold**, Howard (1993) *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the electric frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley
- Saville-Troike**, Muriel (2003) *The Ethnography of Communication, 3ed*. Malden: Blackwell
- Shirky**, Clay (2003) *A Group Is Its Own Worst Enemy*. Retrieved June 6, 2007 from the World Wide Web: [http://www.shirky.com/writings/group\\_enemy.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/group_enemy.html)
- Su**, Hsi-yao. (2005). *Language styling and switching in speech and online contexts: identity and*

*language ideologies in Taiwan*. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin. Available electronically from <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/848>

**Thoms**, Joshua, Jiao, Jianling & Szustack, Anja (2005) The Use of L1 in an L2 On-Line Chat Activity. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 62(1), pp161-182

**Tönnies**, Ferdinand [1887] (1957) *Community and Society [Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft]*. Translated by Charles P. Loomis. New York: Harper

**van der Spa**, Meira (2004) Cyber-Communities: Idle Talk or Inspirational Interaction? *Educational Technology, Research and Development*. Vol. 52(2), pp97-106

**Ware**, Paige D. & Kramsch, Claire (2005) Towards an Intercultural Stance: Teaching German and English through Telecollaboration. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(2), pp190-205

**Whittaker**, Steve, **Isaacs**, Ellen & **O'Day**, Vicki (1997) Widening the Net: Workshop Report on the Theory and Practice of Physical and Network Communities. SIGCHI Bulletin, Vol 29 (3). Retrieved April 24, 2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://bulletin.sigchi.org/archive/1997.3/whittaker.html>