

HOA3: Virtual Ethnography

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The virtual environment I selected for this assignment is the comments section on Instagram. This environment has always been intriguing to me to explore. It is rich in interactions that allow for meaningful observations and deep analyses about online cultures. The key question I am interested in exploring is mainly about how participants use language to express themselves in cyberculture. The specific post I chose is the one captured in the image below.



The post generated over 1500 comments. Based on over an hour of closely reading and studying the comments, I categorize them as follows, in a descending order of number of comments:

1. Objecting to Ortega being described as Latina.
2. Explaining why Ortega is Latina
3. Using Spanish to write their comments
4. Commenting on the entire comments section
5. Expressing pride and happiness about the main news
6. Explaining what the following terms mean: ethnicity, race, cultural appropriation
7. Questioning the show's classification as comedy
8. Commenting on the black and white elements of the image, claiming that it is a sign of 'Illuminati'
9. Spam comments

First, I would like to comment on how bemusing the amount of importance and attention people give to labels is. The majority of comments seemed to ignore the main news and care only about the description of Ortega as Latina.

The first observation is how the language used resembles speech, even though it appears as written text. I share Macfadyen's (2006) notion, "Though appearing as print, the writing of the virtual world is text that is becoming speech." (p. 10). I conclude that the use of speech-like text evidences the honesty and genuineness of the meaning communicated. It is not very much planned or constricted by the rules of perfect syntax and semantics expected to be found in print-based text. I like the use of the word 'becoming'; in my view, it suggests that virtual communications are and will continue to be real, authentic, and attested, and a type of identity and ethnicity formation.

One observation is that the nature of interactions among users or commentors is significantly respectful. It is not very hostile or offensive. Generally speaking, people are more concerned about making their own points than trying to be rude or personally attack other commentors. This 'netiquette' - ways in which 'the rules' of

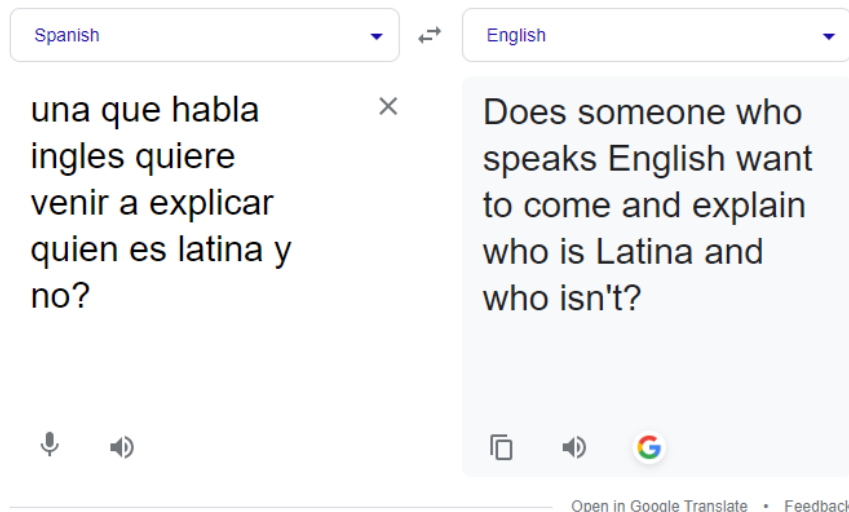
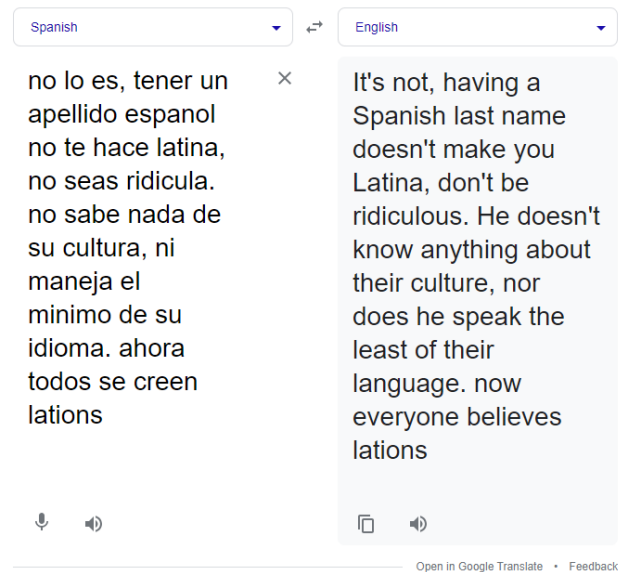
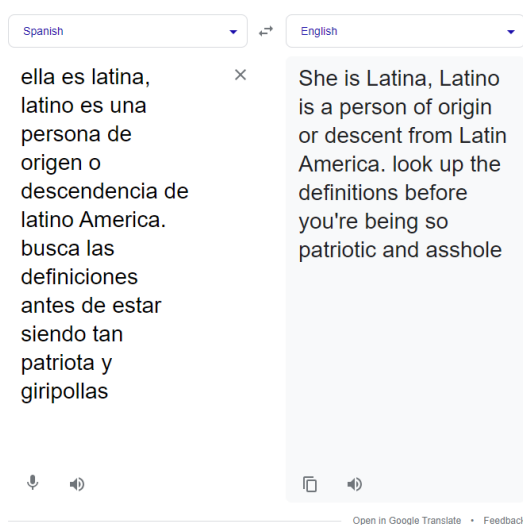
Internet culture (including language and behaviour) are normalized, maintained and manifested via specific communicative practices, to promote for example, group harmony (Conrad (2002); Kinnaly, 1997) is very apparent here and I wonder if it is a reflection of cyberculture or the different varied cultures of participants or commentors. I conclude it is both since, like Ess and Sudweeks (2012) point out, online environments and CMC technologies are not culturally neutral. People bring their own cultural values and identities into this virtual space. Additionally, these online environments are a culture of their own, so they do have their own rules (both implicit and explicit) that guide the actions of participants.

A second observation is that there is abundant use of hypertext which employs multimodalities such as images and symbols in addition to text. Users use GIF, emojis, capitalized and repeated letters (pleaaaaase), and punctuation marks to convey and stress not only meaning but also tone. Also, there is plentiful use of cyber abbreviations such as *cuz*, *irl*, *wtf*, *ffs*. This is an interesting phenomenon that demonstrates the need for human beings to innovate and maintain a strong sense of identity. Moreover, it leads me to the conclusion that this discourse system represents an important component that defines cyber culture and establishes it as an independent and unique culture, and emphasizes its fast-paced nature. This nature calls for the use of the Principle of Linguistic Economy. Jia-ying & Li-li (2023) explain, ‘‘The principle of linguistic economy, also known as the principle of Least Effort, is predicated on the idea that people naturally gravitate towards utilizing the minimum number of symbols necessary to effectively convey their intended message while ensuring comprehension on the part of the recipient.’’ (p. 4). The researchers discuss the effects of using cyber abbreviations and contend that these abbreviations ‘‘hinder an individual’s development by limiting their sensory expression, thereby hindering the richness of linguistic expressions. Over time, this leads to a lack of linguistic acuity, causing linguistic attrition’’. (Jia-ying & Li-li, 2023, p. 6).

There is some use of curse words and little flaming or roasting.

I was particularly impressed by the use of the Spanish language as a form of strong assertion, a power move to reinforce the idea that white English-speaking people can’t determine who is Latina and who is not. Also, to make another different point (contradicting, perhaps) that Ortega is not considered Latina because she does not

speak Spanish. Language is understood to be a very important component of identity and ethnicity. I conclude that these behaviors (the creation and use of cyber abbreviations, using Spanish, and writing text that resembles speech) are examples of what Macfadyen describes, “individual and group ritual “text acts” through which individuals agentically and dynamically attest to their ethnicity.” (p. 11, 2023), whether this ethnicity is real or virtual. Below is a small sample of the comments made in Spanish, translated into English using Google Translate.



Another observation is how similar the online behaviors of people from different cultures. I can't help but make such comparative observations sometimes, especially between Western culture and Arab culture (the culture of people who speak Arabic and live mainly in the Middle East). This could be evidence that online environments impose their own cultural rules and expectations. They affect interactions and communications among all kinds of users. The fact that an individual uses social media helps, whether the individual realizes it or not, in achieving what Ess (2002) describe as "a democratic electronic global village". Just being exposed to so many diverse cultures, identities, values, opinions, and viewpoints affects, consciously or unconsciously, a person's perspective. Could the Socratic education Ess (2002) discusses be achieved, maybe partially, through mere exposure to and frequent use of online environments?

Other observations I made:

- ✓ There still seems to be a huge lack of understanding regarding what freedom of speech means online. The argument summarized in the two comments below (phrased by me) still exists which I find baffling.

A: This is none of your business. You do not have the right to say this.

B: This is a public platform. If it's posted here, then everyone can comment and say whatever they want.

- ✓ It is also so baffling to me how people insist that online arguments with strangers matter so much. Some users actually take the time to not only post their own comments but to reply to other comments and browse other users' pages. How much free time do you have and why do you care SO MUCH?
- ✓ Can people use curse words so often face-to-face as they do online? The physical distance and anonymity truly aid in the brutally honest (or rude) expression of one's self.

The only challenge I faced was keeping my focus on the online environment and how it is used and not on the contents of the comments. Other than that, this was fairly achievable and enjoyable.

References

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