REVIEW OF *ALWAYS ON: LANGUAGE IN AN ONLINE AND MOBILE WORLD*

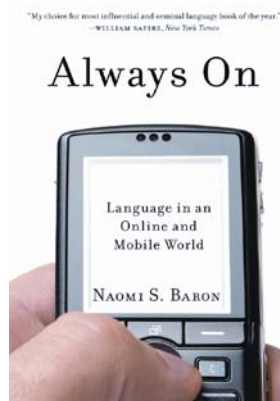**Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World**

Naomi S. Baron

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Naomi Baron's (2008) *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*, provides an overview of trends in digital communication and the impact these trends and practices have for personal interconnectivity, literacy, attitudes towards privacy and ownership, and the ongoing negotiation of linguistic norms. Formatted as a popular book (i.e., each chapter includes social commentary in the form of comics and cartoons, and in-text citation is replaced with chapter notes at the end of the book), *Always On* has a target audience that includes the non-specialist interested in the ongoing debate regarding the impact of technology on language and society (see, for example, Crystal, 2008) as well as scholars and students involved in research on computer-mediated communication.

The book is divided into ten chapters which describe the types and histories of online and mobile communication and examine how linguistic and social norms change and evolve as these technological tools are increasingly embedded in daily life. Key chapters incorporate cross-disciplinary research on specific communication technologies (e.g., IM, mobile phones) and draw historical parallels to related technologies and communication practices (e.g., telephones, call-in talk shows). Several central chapters, in addition to synthesizing research from anthropology, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, education, and neuroscience, include the results of original research carried out by Baron and her colleagues on select US undergraduate populations over the past decade to examine popular assumptions or questions concerning patterns of behavior and linguistic features of online and mobile communication.

The first two chapters of the book lay the groundwork for the following eight, each of which addresses the book's central themes in depth. While Chapter One serves to establish the overarching goal of the book, to explore the social, linguistic and literacy consequences of living in an online and mobile world, Chapter Two provides a basic introduction to the types of electronically mediated forms of communication explored in the following chapters. Although redundant for researchers already familiar with Wikis, MUDs and Facebook, by itself, Chapter Two serves as an easy and concise overview of recent communication technologies for scholars and students who are new to common digital contexts.

The focus of Chapter Three, electronic discourse management, takes up the theme of how individuals control the amount of spoken and written communication they are exposed to. The foremost focus in this chapter is technology-mediated multitasking. Perhaps most interesting to those who are themselves avid multitaskers or find themselves teaching students who engage in technology-mediated multitasking during class lectures is the research Baron identifies as the cognitive consequences of common

multitasking behaviors. Chapter Three also reports on the first of several of Baron's own pilot studies peppered throughout the book. The data reported consist of responses collected from American University undergraduates during 2004 and 2005 to a questionnaire regarding multitasking practices involving Instant Messaging (IM).

Of greatest relevance to applied linguists doing research in computer-mediated contexts are the next four chapters, which focus in particular on linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of electronic-mediated communication. Chapter Four tackles questions often raised by those unfamiliar with CMC discourse regarding its relationship to written or spoken language. Baron synthesizes work in anthropology, corpus-linguistics, and CMC studies (e.g., Baron 2003; Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998; Chafe & Danielwicz, 1987) to provide an overview of key differences in the discoursal, lexical and morphosyntactic properties of speech and writing. In addition, the author also provides readers with a brief overview of research on gender differences across modalities to set up the results of a study of IM language conducted in 2003. Although the results of this small-scale study can at best be used to provide a snapshot of the linguistic features of a specific population's IMs (a limitation Baron acknowledges), the discussion of key units of analysis used as well as an overview of the data collection procedure is particularly valuable for those interested in conducting similar comparative research on different populations.

Chapter Five expands upon the theme of discourse management introduced in Chapter Three and also explores the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) in IM away messages and in Facebook pages in two separate pilot studies. The first of these includes linguistic and content analysis conducted on a select number of IM away messages produced by students during a two-week period in 2002. Baron augments the linguistic and content analysis of these away messages with interview data from participants regarding their perceptions of different types of away messages as well as their expectations for good away messages. The second study, a questionnaire-based investigation of attitudes, beliefs and practices surrounding Facebook use in 2006, is unexpectedly timely in light of current criticism regarding Facebook's shifting privacy settings and ownership of personal data. The expansion that has occurred in Facebook since 2006, when the data were collected, casts these findings in an interesting historical light. These student responses may at best illuminate a fleeting perspective on social networking practices and provide an interesting baseline against which to contrast more recently collected data in a wider variety of contexts.

In Chapter Six, Baron moves on to discuss one-to-many electronic-mediated discourse and begins by drawing a parallel between the social function of blogs and other historical and modern forms of one-to-many communication (i.e., speaker's corners, letters to the editor, and radio talk-shows). In addition to outlining the history and characteristics of different types of blogs, Baron then explores other types of multiparty electronic-mediated communication including YouTube and Wikis. What unites these media, Baron argues, is their ability to afford individuals self-expression to communicate with potentially vast audiences.

In the following chapter, Baron moves from Internet-mediated communication to mobile phones. This chapter includes a cross-cultural perspective on the historical proliferation of mobile telephone use in multiple regions around the world and the corresponding emergence of text-messaging. Following a discussion of some of the social norms that have grown up around the use of mobile phones in different countries, the latter half of this chapter presents the results of two pilot studies, conducted by Baron and Rich Ling, addressing attitudes towards usage and a comparative linguistic analysis of text messaging. The first, a questionnaire-based study conducted in 2005, examined the mobile-phone based practices of US university students at two different universities. Of greater interest to those involved in language-related research, however, is the second study, which examined specific linguistic features of text messages produced by two university undergraduate populations, including message length, punctuation, and use of emoticons and lexical shortenings. Chapter Seven then revisits the linguistic analysis of IM discussed in Chapter Five to present a side-by-side comparison of the language features of these two types

of written synchronous electronic-mediated communication and to identify a range of similarities and differences between the two. The comparison of data generated by two related but separate participant groups provides an interesting starting point for future carefully designed studies that compare the language of these two electronically-mediated contexts.

The next two chapters take up the question of the impact of digital discourse on spoken and written language. In the same vein as Crystal (2008), Baron also argues against scapegoating IM and text-messaging for perceived shifts in writing norms and standards. Instead, she attributes these shifts to an overarching change in attitude towards linguistic consistency, which itself stems from the changing function and presence of the written word, the growth in the literacy rate, and the decreasing use of language as a social marker. At best, these new technologies are amplifying or accelerating pre-existing ongoing linguistic tendencies. Chapter Nine explores this theme further by focusing on the particular influence reading and writing online is having on general literacy practices and written culture. In particular, Baron describes the impact that the ease of producing and publishing electronic texts and the affordance of electronic-search tools appear to be having on hurried writing and reading, resulting in what Baron labels "snippet literacy" and "vapor text." She concludes this chapter by articulating questions concerning the future role of books and literacy, touching on issues of ownership, publishing trends, language standards, and norms for acceptable text length.

In the final chapter, Baron ends on a cautionary note with an overview of many of the social, linguistic, and cultural consequences of being always on and offers the following warning: "Modern language technologies are invaluable aids to human productivity, social connectedness, safety, and relaxation. However, we may need to learn to use them more responsibly" (p. 231).

Overall, *Always On* brings together multidisciplinary research on the social, cognitive, and linguistic impact of online and mobile communication from a US perspective, supplemented with the results of original pilot research conducted over the past decade. Written as a popular text, *Always On* is an easy read, accessible to academic and non-academic audiences. As a result, however, although providing an overview of the research and results from various pilot studies, it does not include sufficient description of the methods or instruments used for those interested in replication or validation. While Chapter Seven does provide a contrastive overview of mobile phone practices, the remainder of the book is exclusively US-focused and does not explore the social and linguistic consequences and practices of other populations who may also find themselves always on. However, Baron's *Always On* is a provocative and insightful overview of the changing face of US social interaction, literacy, and spoken and written language as mediated by early 21st century online and mobile communication technologies.

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