

12-1-2009

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Jessica Lichy  
*University of Portsmouth*

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### Recommended Citation

Lichy, Jessica (2009) "Borders and Frontiers in the Information Age," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 14 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol14/iss1/2>

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Jessica Lichy

*University of Portsmouth*

## BORDERS AND FRONTIERS IN THE INFORMATION AGE

How universal is Internet communication? The context for this question is the introduction of communication via the Internet in a professional and social framework, at a time when both domains are undergoing significant growth in information and communication technology (ICT). As we reflect on recent developments in ICT, this article provides an insight into some of the linguistic challenges that have emerged as a result of Internet technology, raising issues of language evolution and cross-cultural communication. Reference is made to ongoing research into Internet communication in a cross-cultural context to illustrate the different ways in which Internet users communicate online via blogs.

Developments in ICT present a number of opportunities for businesses that operate across different cultures and linguistic communities. They also bring certain limitations, especially in the domain of cross-cultural communications. Effective communication in the international environment requires not only an understanding of language but also an appreciation of the nonverbal aspects of communication that are part of any speech community (Ferraro, 1994). It also depends on maintaining open-mindedness and avoiding ethnocentrism. Problems arise when people lose sight of the possibility that their words and actions can be misinterpreted in a different culture.

For this reason, some companies with a multilingual workforce communicate in *globish*, a minimalist English language of around 1,500 frequently used words (Stern, 2006). From an ideological perspective, it is thought that globish “will end the dominance of real English, with its cultural and political baggage, and take the pressure off other languages such as French” (Thorne, 2007). However, given that it is a manufactured language devoid of nuances, it is likely that speakers of globish will nevertheless strive for fluency in standard English, since it is doubtful whether such a simplified version of English can actually meet the sophisticated needs of the modern business world. Other companies favor *offshore English*—a form of English spoken by people whose first language is not English and who have learned the language as adults in a professional context rather than at school (Rees and Porter, 2008). However, neither globish nor offshore English can equip the

speaker for the pitfalls that can arise from cultural differences or the varying meanings and use of body language in different cultures.

In a relatively short time, the Internet has brought about new forms of communication that cross national borders and social classes; it has provided access to information previously withheld or unobtainable. For many businesses worldwide, English is the *de facto* language of international communication both online and offline, but owing to a complex array of factors this trend is far from widespread in France. French-speakers are linguistically anxious about the decline of their language, which is a problem that stems from the fact that French has long been fighting a losing battle against English for the position of dominant language in global communications within the institutions of the European Union (Oakes, 2002). The fact that countries favor English threatens to render French a marginal language (Borowiec, 2002). In the French hierarchy of prestige, language is a source of authority and intellectual superiority (Tombs and Fournier, 1992). What concerns the government most is that as French becomes less important on the international stage, this loss of prestige infiltrates and degrades the language as well. Linguistic evolution is a natural, ongoing process, but significant changes have been pushed by the younger generations in the *banlieues* (“impoverished suburbs”) ever since the nation-wide riots of November 2005. In this respect, language protection laws in France have been ineffective in maintaining the “purity” of French.

The French state has historically imposed French within its borders, including parts of the country that have their own language (and anti-French spirit), such as Brittany and Alsace (McDonald, 2004). Indeed, language has always been a political matter in France (Hagège, 2007). The law *Bas-Lauriol* of 1975 prohibits the use of foreign words in cases where a French equivalent exists. This legislation was modified to emphasize the notion that the language of the Republic is French for every citizen living in France—and was introduced in 1994 as the *Loi Toubon* (Bentz, 1997). Despite the measures that have been taken to thwart regional languages within France, concerns are also increasingly focused on the international position of the English language compared to French. Given the importance of linguistic control in France, this is a classic example of a double standard in the French fight against global English supremacy—in other words, the French state is both defender of linguistic pluralism and instigator of linguistic homogeneity. This hypocrisy is based on the presumed threat to French by English hegemony and is noticeable in the French government’s efforts to reintroduce French as a major language within the European Union (DGLFLF, 2006).

Linguistic legislation sends a clear message: France is a French-speaking society and so the economy should function in French. However, when judging language laws, one has to take into account not only their wording but also their implementation in everyday life. For example, knowledge of the French language is essential in order to be employed in France, but in reality this is not enforced.

As new technologies open borders, it is increasingly difficult to implement linguistic legislation either offline or online. More and more people use Internet communication, which brings about more linguistic variety. To this end, various measures have been taken to preserve the French language, but they have had little impact. A project to develop a French news channel, *Chaîne d'Information Internationale*, to rival the dominance of online English-language news—namely, CNN and the BBC (El-Najjar, 2003)—attracted much media attention but was abandoned in 2003 after it ran into financial difficulty. The following year, work began on a state-funded Franco-German search engine, *Quæro*, to challenge Google. The inspiration for *Quæro* <<http://www.quaero.org>> was based on the notion that Google is perceived to be Anglo-centric and as such the French believe Google may portray a distorted view of French culture (Croft, 2005). The Canadians dismiss *Quæro* in the following light-hearted way,

The French have launched their own version of Google called Quæro. You just type in the subject you're interested in, and Quæro refuses to look it up for you. (Poehler, 2006)

The dominance of English in the early years of the Internet caused great consternation about a possible threat to minor languages and cultures. Although the volume of English Web content has since lessened, there is still concern about how English and other languages interact online. To Anglophones, this attention to language might seem excessive, but most English speakers are not confronted with non-mother tongue Web content. If and when the situation arises, it can generally be ignored. It is simply not a problem—for the time being. However, it is wise to bear in mind the speed at which ICT is evolving and the changes that technology imposes.

Computers, once the early business machines used for counting, have become an essential means of modern communication in fewer than twenty-five years. ICT has profoundly and irreversibly changed the way in which people conduct international transactions and intercultural exchanges. The “reach” and speed of Internet communication coupled with its unique characteristics of interactivity and personalization make this technology a valuable tool for

individuals and businesses alike (Chan-Olmsted and Ha, 2003) enabling people to communicate via synchronous and asynchronous means, using Internet tools such as instant messaging, VoIP, and Web conferencing. Within organizations, the Internet has enabled greater interpersonal communication among employees throughout the hierarchy, and can be considered a most democratic form of conducting business (Rodrigues, 2001). Yet, the emphasis on the speed of communications afforded by digital technology can increase the potential for cultural misunderstanding when, for instance, users share one terminology but with different intended meanings—resulting in ineffective business communication. This weakens the assumptions about the “global” nature of Internet communication.

While it can be argued that the Internet is universally available, it would be difficult to demonstrate that ICT contributes to the mutual understanding of people in different cultural settings. All that is known is that present-day society is characterized by the global flow of the cultural economy and the speed of technological progress. The point is that new technologies do not simply allow things to be done faster, better, and more cost-effectively; they fundamentally transform culture and human consciousness. And since culture is perpetuated through acts of communication, symbols, and beliefs, modern communication technologies are the most powerfully transformative of all.

Literature suggests that the Internet influences the evolution of language, but it is not yet known whether this is applicable to all Web users, or merely a particular segment of users. The overarching impression is that the Internet has enabled a dramatic expansion of the range and variety of language, providing unprecedented opportunities for businesses and personal creativity. Yet criticism is fueled by media opinion, and it can be argued that the Internet is bad for the future of language (Elis-Williams, 2005) on the basis that “techno speak” will rule, standards will be lost, and creativity diminished as globalization imposes sameness. The Internet is thus held responsible for encouraging “linguistic vandalism” (Gordon, 2002).

Internet technology was developed in English. This practice was only recently challenged when the number of non-English-speaking Internet users reached critical mass and questions were raised about cultural and linguistic hegemony. The dissemination of global communication norms and genres, like the dissemination of international languages, generally involves a one-way flow of expert knowledge from dominant to subordinate cultures. One of the most controversial aspects of globalization is this worldwide spread and dominance of American culture. The French are particularly hostile to an open global market that encourages diffusion of cross-cultural ideas and new

products and services (Doole and Lowe, 2007). The modern focus on ICT skills entails the dissemination of American ways of speaking and writing that reflects a consumerist culture (Block and Cameron, 2002). Anglo-American in origin, values of this nature are more easily accepted in countries like the United Kingdom than in France, given that the transmission of the American lifestyle goes beyond the arts and media—it promotes the notion that individual freedom has a higher value than government authority (Garten, 1998). This notion is incompatible with the French psyche.

The Internet has the potential to even out the benefits that can be gained from globalization, enabling individuals to communicate globally at low or no cost—but communication across frontiers requires a common language. There are currently more than two dozen languages with at least one million Internet users. Transnational communication thus raises the issue of a global “lingua franca” in the Information Age, but there is no conceivable way in which any authority could define an official language for the Internet. The Internet as a whole is not managed by anyone or anything, and this could only change if every country came to an agreement or if the entire world were under the control of one government. Since almost 75% of the world’s Internet population is estimated to be non-English speaking (Marcus, 2003), the question arises about how much time people use the Internet in their native language compared to in a foreign language. That there has been little research on this issue indicates the difficulties associated with gathering data on Internet use in different languages.

The Internet is a transformational technology that embodies ongoing change. As the Web becomes increasingly international, the current dominance of the English language will change over time and the need for multilingual and cross-lingual content will become more apparent. Even now the balance of power is shifting, and the proportion of English speakers on the Internet is in decline. More than a fifth of the world’s population speaks Chinese, and this will have a significant impact on the way the Web grows as a whole.

For EU institutions, having a single internal working language—such as English—would be the most efficient way of conducting business. However, for member states from the large non-Anglophone language communities, such a situation would be unacceptable and it would also contradict the EU policy for language diversity (Ammon, 2006). To a non-Francophone, the decline of the French language may seem inconsequential or even exaggerated, but to a native speaker it is akin to a social change that, owing to the conservative culture of the French and their general apathy toward English, is cause for concern.

This sentiment may change with future generations who will be more familiar with English through ICT at school, and then later at work. Although the spread of American culture cannot be stopped (because of satellites, the Internet, and other forms of communication), in order to give a more fair representation of other civilizations, efforts could be made to encourage cultural diversity around the globe and funding for native entrepreneurs who wish to create local cultural industries. The onus is also on other cultures worldwide to take responsibility for diffusing online materials that reflect non-American culture. This initiative has already proved to be successful for minority cultures such as the Confédération War 'l Leur (a group of 73 Celtic associations), which organizes and promotes Breton socio-cultural activities at <<http://warleur.com/accueil.php>>. It supports the view that the Internet is a tool that can be used to maintain cultures offline as well as online (Hardouin and de Montesquiou, 2000). This notion is confirmed by Wright (2006): “the WWW appears to be a medium that will contribute to the preservation and promotion of regional and minority languages” given that certain of these languages now occupy a greater percentage of Internet space than they have traditionally had in print publication.

The popularity and accessibility of the Internet has been the driving force behind many improvements and new developments (Hardmeier, 2005). The growth of wireless technology that allows users to access the Internet while moving from one geographic location to another provides even more options for user interaction. Location-based services allow users to surf the Internet to find services and products in their local vicinity such as making an online reservation at a nearby restaurant. This is an area in which the United States lags behind European users (McKenzie, 2006). Interestingly, making a dinner reservation online is an established service in the United Kingdom but because of its British origin, when it was introduced to the French market in 2006 it met with what Beausseron (2007) describes as “une rigidité d’esprit très française” (24; “typical French single-mindedness”) in a country that considers itself the capital of gastronomy. Beausseron (2007) explains:

On ne peut pas s’empêcher de penser qu’il y a vraiment une différence de mentalité entre les Anglo-Saxons et les Français ... les seconds étant plus hostiles à la nouveauté que les premiers. (25)

(One cannot help but think that there really is a difference between Anglo-Saxons and the French ... the latter being more hostile to new technology than the former.)

As wireless technology becomes more widespread, it is expected that different cultures will use different types of devices to access the Internet; for example, UK users are more likely to adopt mobile technology whereas French users will probably use stand-alone devices. These differences stem from the fact that the Internet is not a culture-free product (Hermeking, 2005), since Internet consumption tends to depend on marketing, which is influenced by culture. This can be seen in the ways in which people from different cultural backgrounds use Internet-based services such as Web logging (or blogging).

Blogging offers a unique opportunity for individuals to communicate on the Web. Increasingly, blogs are used by the corporate world as a form of public relations; blogging enables companies and executives to talk informally with customers, business partners, and employees. Likewise, blogs are becoming equally indispensable to politicians who wish to publicize information and inform potential voters. The demand for information by blog has grown very quickly and is an indication of the perceived value of the medium, in view of the time needed to update content on a regular basis.

Estimations are unreliable (Klein, 2007) but it is thought that millions of Internet users regularly blog, ranging from pre-teens to senior citizens. Despite being reticent users of the Internet, the French have adopted blogging with great enthusiasm. To some extent, blogs are slowly replacing the traditional café conversations in France (Le Meur, 2006). Compared to English-language blogs, French blogs are longer, more critical, more negative, more egocentric, and more provocative (Crampton, 2006). They reflect a French cultural stereotype.

The development of specialized blogs will lead to a fragmentation of the online community not just by subject matter or category but also by age (rather than gender). While the focus of the blog potentially attracts many people interested in a particular issue, the writing style (as well as the actual content) might be suited to certain age groups; thus communities form by content, with sub-communities forming based on age and/or writing style. Technically speaking, a blogger can be anonymous, but the maturity and linguistic competence of the writer indicates the approximate age of the person, attracting similar people. Technology, business, and politics dominate the 100 most influential blogs in Europe, but a third of all postings are personal diary-style blogs. In France, blogs about food account for 19 of the top 100 blogs, although this category is insignificant in other European countries (MacKenzie, 2006).

The sheer speed with which blogs have been adopted indicates that the value of peer influence has been significant; users are lured by the combination

of frequent updates with real-time comments. It seems that other factors such as culture, age, and native language have had less influence on the adoption of blogging, which is why there could be more similarities between French and United Kingdom blogs (with French blogs being more grammatically correct) than between French and United Kingdom Internet uses.

A recent investigation into Internet communication (Lichy, 2009) confirms the extent to which blogs resemble offline language evolution in which French appears more consistent and slower to change than English. In this investigation a case study was undertaken to compare the various comments posted in English and French on Skype News over a four-month period in 2006 (n=134). From a cultural perspective, the research showed that the *purpose* for blogging was not the same in English-language blogs compared to French-language blogs. Blogging is frequently used as a form of communication exchange by English-speaking bloggers, inviting other bloggers to contribute information. In contrast, for many Francophone users, blogging is a means of posting information, similar to a notice board, rather than a means to establish two-way communication. Consequently, the majority of comments posted in French necessitated no response, regardless of age group or gender. The case study revealed three other findings for consideration;

- that Web users vary greatly in the amount of personal information they are prepared to leave online, and that cultural differences are still very evident in blogging,
- that some age groups blog more than others, and that men and women do not blog to the same extent, and
- that blogs are characterized by surges in use (periods of intense blogging followed by calmer periods).

Skype offers bloggers the opportunity of providing personal information in the “about me” section. In the case study, many people added a Web link to another site or to a personal blog. Some bloggers stated that they would provide information upon request. Others used this space for *self-marketing*, for instance, to advertise a service or to promote the organization where they work. Many bloggers included brief details of their personal interests, and one French blogger used this space to publicize his support of “anti-SMS [Short Message Service] language” efforts, encouraging others to do likewise. People seeking employment used this space to announce their availability for work, and some teachers advocated Skype as a practical way of communicating

with students. Few women revealed their full personal profile—and female bloggers generally used more grammatically correct language. Frequent bloggers used a succinct writing style, avoided complex punctuation, and left the reader in no doubt about the point of the comment posted. Of the bloggers who left a personal profile, men blogged more than women each month and English was used more than French.

The fact that there were surges in blog use during September and November raises the question of the accuracy of published statistics that claim a steady increase in blog use over recent years as opposed to the observed surges. This is a prime example of where primary data conflict with online statistics. Internet data appear to be haphazard in general and vary according to the country of origin and methods of data collection. Given the proliferation of media sources, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know which sources of information are credible. In trying to explain the surges, and assuming that most people take some form of a summer break, it is likely that the September surge was due to the “post-vacation” mood, when people are still getting back into a routine of work, study, or habitual activity. October in this case would be a less busy month since workloads and activities have to be set, leaving Web users less time to surf and blog. November in France is a month with two bank holidays which most people extend into an extended weekend (referred to as *faire le pont*), freeing up time to go online. Blogging activity in the United Kingdom was also higher in November than in October although there were no bank holidays. December was once again a quieter month for blogging in both countries, as many Web users had other “year end” preoccupations. These findings illustrate the degree to which cross-cultural values continue to affect the way in which people communicate online, despite the universal availability of Internet technology.

Studies suggest an alternative explanation for irregular blogging. It is possible that the surges in blog activity mark the beginning of a decline in the popularity of blogging (Solove, 2006). The notion is based on the belief that if people have not created a blog by 2007, there is little chance they ever will.

The case study showed that English-language bloggers in many different age groups used ICT terminology or “net speak.” French bloggers wavered between using French and English technical words but overall, the older the blogger, the less the likelihood of using English terminology and technical jargon. Some English vocabulary was used in French-language blogs by bloggers aged 20–29 and 30–39 when discussing technical issues. When comments appeared in English they were generally followed by French retorts. In the majority of cases, more comments were posted by male bloggers

under the age of 30 than any other age group; this finding is consistent with Lenhart's PewInternet blog study (2006) in the United States. Overall, in both languages, communicating the message seemed more important than ensuring correct syntax—although older bloggers often used more correct syntax, notwithstanding the use of capital letters for emphasis.

To conclude the discussion on language in the Information Age, given that languages evolve with each technological development and that technology advances at an increasing speed, it is likely that the English language will continue to spread more quickly than French. Web users in France may use anglicized technical jargon but such terms do not appear in a French dictionary unless the Académie Française sanctions them. Language protection laws in France have been relatively successful in maintaining the purity of language in official communication but this is far from true for other forms of communication, particularly online communication. Legislation takes time to draft, and is difficult to enforce; many Web users are familiar with anglicized Internet vernacular before the correct (official) French terms are selected.

Critics accuse the Internet of posing a threat to national sovereignty and individual identity by spreading Anglo-American jargon and encouraging a cultural convergence among Web users. It is more realistic to say that the Internet is merely speeding up a process that happens naturally over time. Indeed, the Internet facilitates global communication for Web users and as a result makes people less ethnocentric. In terms of convenience, the advantages of the Internet far outweigh the disadvantages. Never before has there been such a resource; providing information-rich data, instant communication, and online publishing for any Web user. Online publishing in particular plays a prominent part in spreading new ideas, opinions, and beliefs, which over time accelerate cultural convergence among certain groups of Internet users in different cultures and linguistic communities. It can be argued that widespread Internet use is leading to the emergence of a global cyber-culture characterized by a heavy reliance on online services. But despite this convergence, online consumers are much more likely to explore a Web site and make a purchase if the site is in their native language (Cremers, 2006). This is leading to a fragmentation based on cultural and linguistic preferences.

From a business perspective, new patterns of segmentation are emerging as the online marketplace continues to evolve. Instead of English-language sites for one mass audience, Web content developers are required to design more-specialized sites in several languages that serve particular user groups. Although there is evidence of some convergence of user behavior (in the adop-

tion of online communication, Internet telephony, and social networking), differences emerge as Web users demand specific online services, whether free or for a fee, and as non-English providers grow in number.

As a final point, the future of Internet use in general will be shaped by the users, leaving non-users to form a subculture characterized by their refusal to embrace ICT. Web users will continue to shape technological developments in contrast to previous technological advancements which were commissioned by the military or large corporations. Younger Web users (the Net Gen and Generation Y) will spend more time online than watching television; and people will become more relaxed about disclosing personal data online when the perceived benefits of sharing information outweigh the drawbacks of losing some privacy. The anonymity and convenience of digital money will progressively replace cash transactions, bringing with it concerns for illicit trading (drugs, fraud, money laundering, terrorist financing, and routine tax evasion). This may prompt governments to address the issue of whether or not to monitor electronic cash payments. Web users will become accustomed to using free Internet-based services—in particular, information searches and everyday news—and will no longer be prepared to pay for offline equivalents, such as the traditional media.

Organizations react to consumer demand by providing more multi-lingual services online (both free and for a fee) with a greater entertainment value and by making their Web sites easy to navigate and to return to. Government intervention in Internet policy will also increase. Repressive governments try to prevent access to popular sites such as YouTube (Turkey) or install sophisticated software to filter, block, and monitor hundreds of thousands of sites (China); other Internet users continue to risk long prison sentences for posting comments online that violate Islamic tradition (Middle East and North Africa).

A number of Internet users will eventually place greater reliance on information reported in blogs than in the traditional media, since comments are often posted “live” and as such will be perceived as more up to date and reliable. Similarly, “off the record” reporting will become a thing of the past as camera-phones and other mobile devices record conversations and actions to a point where infringement of privacy becomes an issue. English will probably remain the universal language of global communications, but other languages such as Mandarin Chinese will grow in prominence. The long-term influence of Internet use will contribute to the decline in language accuracy—partly as a result of the abbreviated forms of language used with various ICT devices, but also because of the introduction of non-grammar-based language classes in the school curriculum. Classes such as information

technology, environmental studies, and foreign languages all provide necessary skills that school children today need to learn in order to be equipped for modern society and the global job market.

Changes of this nature challenge theories of innovation adoption. They call for modifications to be made to existing models and for the creation of new models to explain the evolving dynamics of Internet communication in different cultures and linguistic communities. Yet, despite this technological progress, it remains debatable whether the world will be a better place as a result of the greater transparency of people and institutions afforded by the Internet.

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