Chapter 12
Identity and interaction in internet-mediated contexts

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1. Introduction

In a recent fictional short story, Salman Rushdie (2008) describes an epiphany experienced by Akbar the Great. It seems that Akbar, whose reputation was so vast as to be “too much to be a single human personage,” became suddenly aware of the indexicalities evoked by the pronouns “I” and “we” and the ways they contribute to constructing multiple selves and social worlds. In particular, Akbar began to meditate “about the disturbing possibilities of the first person singular, the ‘I’” in application to himself, and reciprocally, he became aware that perhaps his many subjects, who he had always reductively presumed to be monodimensional, were in fact pluralities of selves, “we-s,” just as he was. Akbar’s epiphany resulted in the following realization:

[I]t was accordingly inevitable that the men and women over whom he ruled should also conceive of themselves as “we”s. They saw themselves, perhaps, as plural entities made up of themselves plus their children, mothers, aunts, employers, co-worshipers, fellow-workers, clans, and friends. They, too, saw their selves as multiple, one self that was the father of their children, another that was their parents’ child; they knew themselves to be different with their employers than they were at home with their wives – in short, they were all bags of selves, bursting with plurality, just as he was. (p. 66)

This passage focuses attention on the permeable and contingent “I” as an entity-process that is always constituted in and among webs of culturally organized relationships. Identity work is not something that is done alone. Rather, identity is “the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586), a process that is performed and mutually enacted with the contributions, recognition, and confirmation or rejection of other people (Butler 1990). Indeed, current research has critiqued the assumption that identity is a priori or categorically stable (Blommaert 2005; Norton 2000). Rather, as Blommaert has proposed, identity is usefully examined as “particular forms...
of semiotic potential, organized in a repertoire” (emphasis in the original, p. 207). This allows for a “performance approach to identities, which focuses on identity as a form of socially meaningful practice” (ibid.: 208). For L2 learners, and more generally for participants in educational settings of all kinds, “learning” fundamentally involves developing new performative repertoires, often semiotic ones, and as such entails gaining the capacity to interactively enact relevant identities and to become, to paraphrase Lave and Wenger (1991), different kinds of persons over time. In this sense, “learning” and “identity” are aspects of dialectical transformation rooted in interactions with experienced or more established members of a community. Researchers utilizing language socialization frameworks have been particularly attuned to this issue and have described the conditions, some facilitative and others not, that help L2 learners develop discrete semiotic resources as well as a sensitivity to expected dispositions, normative patterns of interaction, and status-appropriate identity stances (Duff 2002; Ochs 1993; Tarone 2007).

In this chapter, we revisit and extend some of our earlier research on L2 learning in digitally mediated environments (Black 2006, 2008; Thorne 2003, 2008a, 2009) and focus particularly on the conditions and affordances that L2 participants mobilize in new media contexts. Inspired by Rushdie’s fictional account of Akbar the Great, we want to consider both the temporally emergent, performative, plural, and the malleable qualities of identities while also exploring the ways that humans sometimes seem to maintain a superordinate view of the self, of an “I”, that seems to have transportability across languages and contexts (e.g., Crawshaw et al. 2001). To quote again from Rushdie (2008), and on a very hot day many years ago on the plains of India, Akbar asked himself this question:

if his many-selved subjects managed to think of themselves in the singular rather than the plural, could he, too, be an “I”? Could there be an “I” that was simply oneself? Were there such naked, solitary “I”s buried beneath the overcrowded “we”s of the earth?

2. Doing identity in digital environments

The advent of the Internet has given rise to a wealth of online environments through which the everyday construction of identities are mediated by textual and multimodal tools involving what are arguably new literacies and communicative genres. A crucial component of identity construction in such
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spaces is ongoing interaction with close social networks of familiars as well as with geographically distant and anonymous audiences. In this chapter, we explore chronologically and in some cases also ontologically new language and literacy practices, such as Internet-mediated intercultural communication, blogging and instant messaging, fan fiction communities, and popular culture blogs and web sites that enable learners to develop language skills as they participate in socially meaningful practices and develop situated identities. In addition, drawing upon socioculturally informed identity research (e.g., Block 2007; Bucholz and Hall 2005; Gee 1996, 2004; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000), we describe Internet-mediated interactions that involve three interrelated dynamics: 1) indexical linkages to macro-level categories (such as nation state affiliation, cultural/linguistic/ethnic affiliations), 2) functionally defined subject positions (such as student, youth, author, editor, expert, and novice, among others), and 3) fluid shifts in language choice, stance, and style that enable participants to personalize, make relevant, and move forward a variety of social actions. Through these analyses, we suggest that language development in online environments is intimately linked to the capacity to construct functional selves (Gee 1999) through interaction, and empirically we assess various Internet-mediated contexts as sites for such engagements.

3. New literacies and communicative genres

A great deal of second language acquisition (SLA) research has focused primarily on linguistic achievement in formal learning environments (see Ellis 2008, for a comprehensive overview; see Thorne 2008a, for a review of L2 learning in digital contexts). However, many, and perhaps most, of one’s significant language development and socialization takes place in community and leisure contexts rather than inside the confines of the classroom (Thorne 2008b). In recent decades, community and leisure, as well as business and academic activities, increasingly involve communication and self-representation in Internet-mediated spaces, especially for teens and young adults. According to a recent Pew Internet and American Life survey, 64 percent of online teens spend time using interactive social media, creating original content, and sharing this content online (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill and Smith 2007). Such activities include creating and sharing artwork, photos, stories, and videos, contributing to webpages, blogs, and online journals, and remixing existing material into their own creative works (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill and Smith 2007). For many youths, full participation in these
activities involves not only traditional, print-based literacy, but also facility with new literacies and communicative genres that are emerging in tandem with Internet-mediated social contexts (Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Jenkins 2006; Thorne and Black 2007).

Research informed by the New Literacy Studies (NLS) tradition (e.g., Bazerman 1989; Gee 1992, 1996; Street 1984) has contributed greatly to current understandings of language and literacy learning as socially and culturally situated, constituted by and constitutive of context, and mediated by various tools and technologies. Recently, Lankshear and Knobel (2006) set out to delineate the “new” in literacy studies by differentiating between paradigmatic and ontological novelty in literacy research and practice. According to the authors, paradigmatic novelty refers to the aforementioned sociocultural conceptions of literacy that view language development and use as one component of learning to participate in socially significant practice. Another crucial component of effective participation is taking on recognizable social roles (Gee 1999) or functional and contributive identities within social practices. This paradigm provides a theoretical and methodological alternative to intra-individual psycholinguistic approaches to literacy (Lankshear and Knobel 2006) and is useful for understanding online contexts where identity and community are discursively constructed through a variety of text-based interactions.

Ontological novelty refers to the new communicative genres and social practices associated with post-typographic forms of text and textually mediated social performances. Lankshear and Knobel argue that ontologically new literacies reflect how “changes have occurred in the character and substance of literacies that are associated with larger changes in technology, institutions, media, and the economy, and with the rapid movement toward global scale in manufacture, finance, communications, and so on” (2006: 24; see also Gebhard 2004; Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996). The concept of ontological novelty encompasses the new literacies and communicative genres associated with technological mediation, but it also emphasizes how such mediation impacts literacy-related social practices along several fronts, including but not limited to scale (e.g., ease of communication with large numbers of people), space (e.g., ease of communication across geographic distance), and sensibility (e.g., emergence of collaborative and remixed forms of knowledge construction).

A number of studies have indicated the capacity for a shift in communicative modality to correlate with changes in communicative dynamics as well as to present opportunities and resources for variable presentations of self,
particularly among adolescents and young people (Jenkins 2006; Merchant 2005; Thurlow and McKay 2003; Turkle 1995; Walther 1996). Relatively early research studies carried out in the 1990s in particular, focused on the power of anonymity in digital, generally text-mediated environments, and the seemingly extraordinary capability of participants to construct relationships, identities, and to produce with others distinctive social ontologies (Lea and Spears 1995; Parks and Floyd 1996; Reingold 1993). Turkle, for example, described Internet information technologies as “doing more than providing an evocative object for our self-reflection . . . it is the basis for a new culture of simulation and a fundamental reconsideration of human identity” (1995: 321). One of Turkle’s informants contrastively described his real life (RL) and digital “realities” as follows: “RL is just one more window and it’s not usually my best one” (1995: 13). While relative anonymity is still common in many online settings, in contrast to reports from Turkle’s informants in the early 1990s, the contemporary era of ubiquitous forms of mediated communication, social networking technologies, online gaming, and Internet interest communities, illustrate a tendency toward interactional and social dynamics that interpenetrate with, and amplify, offline selves (Merchant 2006; Miller and Slater 2000). This is a consistent theme in all of the cases we explore below in the context of chronologically, and what we consider in some cases to be ontologically, new literacy practices, with an explicit focus on how language learners navigate identity construction, social relationships, and linguistic interaction in these Internet-mediated contexts.

4. Internet communication tools as catalysts for evoking and performing selves

Recent research has illustrated that students’ discursive framing of Internet-mediated L2 activity, both inside and outside of formal educational contexts, is significantly influenced by their prior and ongoing participation in an often large number of diverse online social networks (Thorne 2000, 2003). The core argument forwarded in this research is that Internet communication tools, like all human creations, are culturally specific meditational means that qualitatively affect human activity (e.g., Cole 1996; Kaptelinen and Nardi 2006; Shaffer and Clinton 2006). However, we also wish to make clear that our argument for the cultural quality of Internet environments and tools, and the many forms of communicative activity they mediate, are not in any way suggestive of technological determinism. Rather, as Wertsch (1991: 119) has
described, “[o]nly by being part of action do mediational means come into being and play their role. They have no magical power in and of themselves.” In essence, tool socialization results in the establishment of “cultures-of-use”, the idea that technologies come to be identified with specific forms of interaction as well as expectations of genre-specific communicative activity (Thorne 2003; Thorne and Black 2007; Thorne, Black and Sykes 2009).

In application to instructed L2 contexts, the cultures-of-use notion reminds us that technologies are historically structured and structuring forms of culture which evoke preferred and dispreferred social, relational, and interactional possibilities. To illustrate this point, we describe two foreign language classroom related settings within which the use of Internet communication technologies demonstrates opportunities for gaining a sense of self-efficacy using, and to articulate and perform relevant selves through, a new language.

In the spring of 2002, the first author of this chapter helped to organize an Internet-mediated intercultural exchange between students studying French as a foreign language in the U.S. and students studying English in France (Kinginger and Belz 2005; Thorne 2003, 2005, 2006). E-mail was selected as the primary communication medium and surprisingly (to the designers of the intervention), a significant number of the American students refused to engage in age-peer communication using this tool. For these students, e-mail was used exclusively for vertical communication across generational and power lines (e.g., with teachers, parents, employers) but was not suitable for age-peer relationship building, which was the core pedagogical thrust of the project. A few dissatisfied students self-initiated a migration of their interpersonal correspondence to instant messenger (IM), and the effect was enormous.

Two issues are particularly important for the current discussion – the shift to IM, which at this time was the clear communication tool of choice for peer interaction among university-aged youth in the United States (e.g., Shiu and Lenhart 2004), and the subordination of French language study as an educational activity to the use of French (and English) as a resource for the building of personally meaningful relationships. A focal student reported, and provided transcripts to illustrate, daily IM conversations with her French key-pal, some of which extended to multiple hours of mixed French–English communication. The following IM excerpt (which has not been orthographically modified, though certain turns have been removed to save space) illustrates what for Kirsten (the American student) was a pivotal shift in self-efficacy that marked the first moment she perceived herself as a speaker, rather than a student, of French. Note that Oliver is her French interlocutor (both Kirsten and Oliver are pseudonyms):
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(1) 1. **O:** by the way, I don’t know what smart means?
2. **O:** . . .
3. **K:** smart means ..hmmm
4. **K:** how to describe that
5. **K:** intelligent
6. **O:** I mean what does intelligent mean?
7. **O:** no I know what the word means
8. **K:** it’s the same thing
9. **O:** but I’m not sure I grasp the idea
10. **K:** ooh..
11. **K:** hmmm
12. **O:** kind of philosophical huh?
13. **K:** yeah.. you know.. aux Etats-Unis nous avons deux types d’intelligence [in the United States we have two types of intelligence]
14. **O:** vraiment? [really?]
15. **O:** Je veux savoir!!! [I want to know!]
16. **K:** il y a “l’intelligence des livres” et “l’intelligence dans la vie” [’there is “book smart” and “life smart”’]
17. **O:** donc l’intelligence des livres c’est le savoir? [’therefore book intelligence is knowledge?’]
18. **K:** oui.. et l’autre est “common sense” [’yes.. and the other is “common sense”’]
19. **O:** on peut lire beaucoup et savoir beaucoup de choses tout en étant stupide je suis d’accord [’one can read a lot and know a lot of things and be stupid at the same time I agree’]
20. **K:** oui! [’yes!’]
21. **O:** cool
22. **K:** le ‘common sense’ est . . . par example, j’ai une amie qui sait beaucoup des choses.. mais elle a mis METAL dans le microwave.. [’“common sense” is . . . for example, I have a friend who knows a lot of things.. but she put METAL in the microwave.’]
23. **O:** oups [’oops’]
24. **K:** elle n’a pas de “common sense” [’she doesn’t have “common sense”’]

Kirsten provided her own post-hoc analysis of this dialog. References to the IM transcript are shown in bracket parentheticals [line #]:
Kirsten: The first couple of lines of this [transcript], there’s a particular example and I’ll show you . . . Here’s where, this was the true part, where I was like, “wow, I really have learned a lot of French!” (line 1) “By the way, I don’t know what smart means.” Smart means intelligent, like, I made the translation, I was like, but that’s stupid that he didn’t know that because intelligent is the same word in both languages! (line 6) “But what does intelligence mean.” And he’s like (line 7) “no I know what the word means,” like [ventriloquating Olivier] “come on stupid,” I’m like, yeah (line 8) “it’s the same thing.” And he said, (line 9) “but I’m not sure I grasp the idea.” And I said (lines 10–11) “ohh” “hmmm.” And he said (line 12), “kind of philosophical.” And I said (line 13) “yeah,” and then I went into French. And I was [laughing] so proud of myself. And I, you know, then I wrote, (line 13) “aux Etats-Unis nous avons deux types d’intelligence,” right, like life smart and book smart, and then he’s like (line 15), initially glossing Olivier’s message in English then referring to the French, “I have got to know this!!! Je veux savoir!!!” with three exclamation points and that was like, that was the beginning of my explaining in French, and I was like “wow!” . . . That was the first one we, that was the first time that I was like, “I made a connection in French.” I was so proud. It was like, “wow, that’s me, in French, and he understood me!” (Thorne 2003: 52)

Kirsten explained the significance of this portion of her first three-hour IM session with Oliver as a pivotal shift in her confidence to communicate in French, what Wegerif (1998) terms a threshold moment. Wegerif proposed that success or failure in on-line education (and one might argue in other endeavors as well) depends on participants constructing a space of engagement through which they can position themselves as insiders with a vested interest in the communicative and social activities at hand. The case of Kirsten and Oliver is compelling for it shows that interpersonally “authentic” engagement (e.g., intrinsically motivated activity as defined by van Lier 1996) began as part of a formal educational process but attained its maturity when the interaction migrated into a communicative medium that both participants felt was more conducive to interpersonal relationship building. Based on Kristen’s interview data and the transcripts of her e-mail and IM interactions, the catalyst pushing classroom language learning over the threshold to L2 use for purposes of meaningful communication was tool-related – the move to the use of IM, which was her everyday age-peer communication tool of choice.

The second case we report in this section is drawn from an ongoing research project with American high school students enrolled in an advanced placement (or AP, a designation reflecting university level instruction) Spanish foreign language course. Students in the course were provided with personal blog
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sites, given open or topic driven writing assignments, and were responsible for commenting on their peer’s blog posts on a weekly basis. The students used IM for Spanish language interaction with interlocutors of their choice and turned in transcripts of the sessions as evidence of completing the assignment. At the time of this writing, 28 students have participated in approximately 45-minute ethnographic interviews during which they were asked to talk about their everyday uses of instant messaging, blogging, and other online activities, and to reflect on the uses of blogs and IM for the learning of Spanish. Our overarching focus in this project is to examine the relations between in and out of school technology use and pedagogically, to attempt to establish conditions that would make possible a transformation from L2 learning as a mechanical process to envisaging potentially multiple languages as resources for carrying out significant social actions and performances (Thorne 2009).

Analyzing interrelations between academic and social-personal presentations of self, we found that blog use formed an interstitial communication space where both academic and nonacademic discursive features were articulated through personally relevant expression, in essence that students were writing both to fulfill a class requirement while also writing to and for one another. This hoped-for outcome was confirmed in the interviews:

(3) Student 1: I think [blogging] is helpful in a way, because you kind of find that common ground between your teacher and your peers. You think about how you’re gonna direct and drive your conversation, like you wanna make sure that, you know, your teacher understands how you feel, at the same time you wanna make sure that your peers know what you feel, and it’s just different because your peers might be going through the same thing, but your teacher might not necessarily understand what you’re going through, so you wanna make sure that they both understand. (italics added for emphasis)

In this excerpt, the student explicitly states a sense of agency and self-efficacy, “you think about how you’re gonna direct and drive your conversation.” She also indicates a clear awareness of the need to speak to multiple audiences, “you wanna make sure that [students and the teacher] both understand.” The student’s repeated emphasis on her intent to successfully represent her feelings in L2 writing suggests that her primary concern is to establish and maintain intersubjectivity with her teacher and classmates.

A surprising finding was that a number of students reported cross-posting Spanish language entries to their personal blog spaces and conversely, translating into Spanish some of their writing that had initially been posted to
their personal sites. Canagarajah (2006) describes these sorts of authorial moves with the term “shuttling,” characterized as instances when writers strategically shift between defined social-textual conventions and make use of a variety of semiotic resources to achieve personally relevant intentions. To paraphrase Canagarajah, writing is not merely constitutive; it is also performative, context-transforming, and acts as an affordance for the ongoing negotiation of voice and presentation of self (2006: 602–3). This is an especially salient point given the importance of blogging, and increasingly social networking environments such as facebook.com, to the social and recreational lives of many young adults. In contrast to earlier research that described the centripetal flow of exogenous online communicative practices into instructed L2 uses of technology (e.g., Thorne 2000, 2003), here we see centrifugal flows of textual practices that were initiated in instructional settings but which also suggest a semiotic ecology that is inclusive of both schooling and students’ broader lifeworld contexts.

The Spanish AP course participants also described what Thorne (2000: 8) has termed a “late modern communicative aesthetic” that appears to operate above the level of any particular language:

(4) Student 2: I’ve noticed that people sort of find their own style of writing blogs or IM and you sort of adopt that as you go whether it be in English or Spanish.

(5) Student 3: You have Spanish IMs, so being clever and using words well and you know how it is . . . you have to make up a personality using words, so you have to do that in Spanish.

(6) Student 4: When I come into class, I would say hola Señora, and sometimes I find myself saying that in my Physics class, you know, . . . even online, I’d randomly [IM] my friends in Spanish and I feel like I’m really learning and it’s just, like, becoming more natural.

These student comments suggest that they perceive Spanish as a viable language for performing identity work. At the same time, they rather casually deemphasize the particularities of any specific language and instead focus on doing things with and through language, including the L2 they are studying, such as “finding a style,” “being clever and using words well,” and “making up a personality.” Rampton (2006) has described language crossing and stylization as agentive practices in which young people appropriate semiotic resources and utilize them for their social meaning potentials. In these excerpts, we see the use of ritualized greetings, hola Señora, as a form of
crossing in Student 4’s use of Spanish in her Physics class. Stylization, the strategic use of socially salient features of a linguistic variety for pragmatic purposes, appears throughout the interviews, blog, and IM data as a resource for solidarity building and alignment, production of the self as a multilingual and witty interlocutor, and to serve a variety of ritualized pragmatic functions. Theorizing such communicative activity, in his model of expansive learning, Engeström (2001) describes a broadening of the object of activity (the overall goal or orientation of activity) through the collaborative creation and internalization of new mediational resources. For many of these students, the use of blogs and IM appear to have initiated a new goal associated with Spanish language use and learning, that of figuring out how to become an interesting interlocutor with Spanish as one resource for doing so (data and analysis drawn from Thorne 2009).

In the case of Kirsten using French to engage in IM discussions where she came to function as herself (“that’s me”) but “in French,” and the Spanish AP students forging socially relevant opportunities for “finding a style” and creating a “personality using words,” there appears to be bidirectional attention to both an articulation of a consistent and robust self and thoughtful acknowledgement of its reception and confirmation by others. Examining this creative tension, Paul Ricoeur (1992) formulated two fundamental properties of identity, the reflexive “I” (ipse, “appertaining to the self”) and the categorical identification of oneself as like others (idem, “the same as”). Together, ipse and idem form a dual process – that of an individual’s capacity to manifest a coherent self across time and space, and the agentive capacity to negotiate, and to learn from and appropriate for future use, new forms of expression that emerge in interaction with social structures and actual and/or imagined/ constructed interlocutors. Crawshaw et al.1 (2001: 108) have expressed that for Ricoeur, “[w]hat is vital in this process . . . is that the discourse . . . be uniquely subjective in the best sense of that word, i.e. active and intentional.” As Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000: 170) have argued, this notion is particularly important in the context of L2 learning since “ultimate attainment in second language learning relies on one’s agency. While the first language and subjectivities are an indisputable given, the new ones are arrived at by choice.”

The question of whether the online literacies engaged in by these students constitute ontological novelty is arguable, but the agentive movements between school-based and socially relevant uses of an L2 are clearly evident. Equally important is the ability exhibited by some of the students to recognize a “me,” a “self,” or a “personality” that combined with a keen awareness of the multiple semiotic resources that might be used to realize contingently
useful identities. For applied linguists working in instructed L2 (and particularly foreign language) contexts, linguistically mediated agentive action, in digital contexts, and otherwise warrants continued attention for its potential to catalyze new semiotic repertoires.

5. Language and identity in online fan fiction

While not chronologically new, the practice of fan fiction writing has blossomed via technological mediation and has had a significant impact on many teens’ literacy development and social interaction during the past decade. Fan fiction refers to texts based on existing popular cultural materials, such as books, movies, television shows, and video games, to name just a few. Some early examples of fan fiction could arguably include Robert Henryson’s expansions of Geoffrey Chaucer’s work in the 1400s (Pugh 2005), William Gillette’s play based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s character Sherlock Holmes (Pugh 2005), and even John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* might be considered a form of biblical fan fiction. The advent of online publishing has brought about significant changes in the practice of fan fiction writing, as media aficionados from across the globe meet online to share, read, and discuss each other’s stories. As a literacy practice, online fan fiction provides a salient example of the ontological shifts that Lankshear and Knobel (2006) describe in relation to new literacies. Moreover, as will be discussed in this section, these shifts have discernable implications for the language development and socialization of youth participating in online fan fiction writing spaces.

Data for this section were drawn from a longitudinal study of the largest fan fiction archival site on the web, *Fanfiction.net* (FFN). At last count, the site housed over a million fictions, with nearly 400,000 in the *Harry Potter* section alone. While the demography varies, the majority of texts on FFN were authored by native English-speaking adolescents living in North America. However, the popularity of the site has grown to the extent that FFN now has servers in Europe and Asia as well as the U.S., hosts fictions in over 30 different languages, and has expanded to include a user-base from around the globe. The aim of this study was to examine the literacy and social practices of adolescent English language learners (ELLs) participating in the FFN community. In order to develop a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of literate engagement and social interaction in this space, the second author of this chapter spent three years as a participant observer on the site.
Data included artifacts such as participants’ fan fiction texts, reader feedback or reviews of these texts, public interaction on the site, and interviews with participants.

The FFN website is designed to promote maximum interaction and composition-related collaboration between site members. For example, when an author posts a fiction on FFN, readers have the option to publicly post reviews of the story. By default, these reviews are “signed,” meaning that they provide a link back to the reviewer’s biographical profile on FFN and any stories that they have authored. This hyperlinked system provides a built-in infrastructure for helping new members of the site make connections with other fans and develop social networks to bolster their self-confidence and assist them in improving their writing skills.

The case study participant discussed in this section is a native Mandarin Chinese speaker who moved from Shanghai, China to a large Canadian city when she was eleven. According to data collected through online interviews, when Nanako (pseudonym) first arrived in Canada, she did not speak any English, so she initially struggled with her courses and had difficulty making friends. About two and a half years after moving to North America and beginning to learn English, Nanako began composing and posting her own Japanese animation or anime-based fan fiction texts in English. Her participation in this space was a helpful conduit for her language learning endeavors, as it provided a range of opportunities for authentic interaction with a diverse group of individuals who shared her interest in anime.

Nanako’s process of identity construction on FFN was a dynamic process that shifted over time and involved the appropriation and selective integration of a variety of popular cultural, linguistic, and cultural resources for her fan fiction texts. In her initial forays into writing on the site, Nanako was very humble and somewhat conservative, both in her writing and in her representation of self. For example, the majority of Nanako’s stories began with what is known in the fan fiction community as Author’s Notes (abbreviated as A/N within the community). These notes are the author’s direct commentary to the audience, and they often contain information such as explanatory notes about the storyline, the author’s state of mind while composing, or general asides about relevant topics. In the A/Ns from Nanako’s early texts, she explicitly and implicitly positioned herself as a novice and as an ELL; however, as can be seen in the following A/N introducing her story Complete, she initially framed her novice status in terms of her lack of experience with writing in a particular media canon rather than as related to her status as a novice English writer:
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(7) **A/N:** Konnichiwa! Tadaima! This is my first Beyblade song fic, so please go easy on it. I just love Ray/Mariah fics, they are so kawaii together! ^_^ Read and Review! And no flames! Thank you! By the way, this is in Mariah’s POV on the night when Ray lost his bit beast.

By pointing out that this is her first story about the *anime* series *Beyblade*, directly requesting that readers “go easy” on her in their feedback, and emphatically requesting “no flames!” (flames are harsh, hostile forms of critique or commentary), Nanako was attempting to mitigate potential critique of her story. Later in the chapter, Nanako introduced a flashback to explain the emotional bond between the *Beyblade* characters Ray and Mariah. While it is common practice for fan fiction authors to create their own prequels and sequels to existing media canons, Nanako revealed her uncertainty as a novice writer when she prefaced this flashback with an explanatory note stating “I made this up, I don’t really know much about Ray and Mariah’s past.” At the end of the chapter, Nanako concluded her story with the following A/N, “ok, this is kinda sad, but please tell me if it’s good or not, cause if you guys don’t like it then I won’t write more.”

Taken together, these A/Ns create a picture of a young woman who is unsure of her knowledge and abilities as a fan writer. In the opening A/N, she explicitly referenced her novice status and assumed a potential for pointed critique and/or harsh criticism from the audience. In the next example, rather than claiming artistic license for her authorial choices in creating the flashback, she instead noted that she did not really know much about the characters’ pasts as an explanation for possible discrepancies in the flashback. In the final A/N, she suggested that she would discontinue the story if the audience did not like it. Collectively, these A/Ns contributed to Nanako’s functional identity as a novice author and discursively constructed a writing space in which feedback from a knowledgeable and potentially critical audience was expected.

Nonetheless, as can be seen in the following reviews of the chapter, the vast majority of Nanako’s audience provided feedback in ways that both offered her guidance and impetus for continuing her story and helped to bolster her confidence in her writing abilities. For instance, two reviewers wrote:

(8) **Awwwww!** This is so cute! You keep bouncing between past tense and present tense, but otherwise, I’ve got nothing to complain about. This is so cute! I love it!
Both of these reviewers provided clear and enthusiastic support for Nanako’s abilities as a writer. Both reviews also offer evidence of the ontologically new qualities of online fan fiction. For example, had Nanako been writing this story for an English class or to share with her offline friends, it is likely that feedback would have come from a somewhat homogenous group of adolescents of roughly the same age and from similar cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds. Instead, the digital medium provided Nanako with responses on a much broader scale, drawing from an audience of adolescent and college-age fans from around the world. The reviews also illustrate the collaborative sensibility of composing online fan fiction. For example, one reviewer participated in Nanako’s writing process by offering her specific grammatical feedback, while the other offered pointed requests for a happy ending and a particular romantic pairing. These types of participatory features are common enough in reviews of online fan fiction that they might be considered an integral part of the genre (see Black 2007 for a detailed discussion of the genre of fan fiction reviews). However, as will be discussed in the following section, readers may have been particularly attentive to grammar and spelling in Nanako’s fictions, because at the start of her stories she often self-identifies as an L2 learner and explicitly states that she is trying to improve her English writing.

Over the next few months, Nanako continued writing and receiving reviews on this and her other FFN stories. Around three months later, she posted the first chapter of *Crazy Love Letters*, a fan fiction based on the anime series *Card Captor Sakura*. For Nanako, this text provided opportunities for her to index new aspects of her identity, take on different social roles within the community, and to renegotiate her relationship with readers. For example, as can be seen in the following A/N, after posting on the site for several months, Nanako began positioning herself, not as a novice within certain media canons but instead as a novice English user:

(10) A/N: Konnichiwa (‘hello’) minna-san! This is my new story ^^. Please excuse my grammar and spelling mistakes. Because English is my second language. Also, I’m still trying to improve my writing skills. . . . . . so this story might be really sucks.
In this note, Nanako takes on the functional identity of an ELL who is hoping to improve her English skills by writing on FFN. In this way, she implicitly positions experienced English-speaking audience members as experts who could help her by providing feedback on her stories.

Through their varied responses to Nanako’s self-representation as an ELL, readers actively contributed to the authorial identity that Nanako was constructing. In addition, their comments contributed to the discursive construction of the writing context. Many explicitly referenced Nanako’s identity as an ELL, as in the following excerpt from a review:

(11) Keep up the good work. And I wish you well with all your tests. Don’t worry about English being a second language. Where I come from proper English is a second language to most people, and some never learn it. And I couldn’t find nothing wrong with your grammar off the top of my head.

Other readers, in spite of Nanako’s request that they “excuse [her] grammar and spelling mistakes,” responded by providing explicit grammatical feedback on Nanako’s writing in the form of recasts or focused critique of specific linguistic structures, as in the following review:

(12) lol. Happy early birthday *gives her sugar* I really love your fic. It’s so . . . sugary lol. I like sugar . . . I have a couple of suggestions though. One is this: the past and present tense (sp). Like “I had this to do still”. Two is the spelling every here and there. and Three, like the wording of some things like “And thanks again for cheering me up when I’m losing hopes and upset” in the fic. Okay. That’s all. Sorry for wasting your time. Ja ne. (‘see you later’)

These two audience members responded to Nanako’s self-representation as an ELL author in distinct ways. The first reviewer suggested that Nanako’s English grammar was fine and encouraged her to keep up the “good work,” thus foregrounding her identity as a successful writer. The second reviewer, however, directly responded to Nanako as an ELL looking to improve her writing skills by pointing out grammatical errors in her text. However, this reviewer was also careful to temper the grammatical feedback with a positive introductory comment and a mitigating statement at the end of the review. Both examples are illustrative of the different ways in which the audience actively contributed, not only to Nanako’s skill development, but also to her developing functional identity as a popular writer.
As further evidence of her shifting identity in this space, Nanako went on to index different aspects of her cultural and linguistic background and renegotiate her role within the FFN community. Many of these shifts can be seen in her choices of languages and thematic topics in her stories. For example, in her early months on FFN, Nanako’s texts were primarily written in English with some token Japanese phrases. The token use of Japanese, such as greetings, leave-takings, and popular expressions, is a common practice within the *anime* fan community and serves as a way for fans to index their enthusiasm for and insider status within the realm of *anime* fandom. However, it was not until she had been writing on the site for many months, had received hundreds of supportive reviews from readers, and had developed some confidence in her role as a fan fiction author and English user that Nanako began integrating her first language of Mandarin Chinese and more complex Japanese linguistic structures, which she was learning in language classes at school, into her texts. In the following excerpt, Nanako uses Romanized Mandarin as well as traditional Chinese characters to construct a dialogue between two anime characters and then a subsequent A/N:

(13) Xiaolang, wo hao e ah, wo men neng bu men chi fan ah? Wo de du zhi dou zai gu ji gu ji de xiao le. (‘Xiaolang, I’m so hungry, can we eat already? My stomach is growling.’)

Meiling changed the subject and flashed Syaoran a sweet smile as well. But Syaoran just looked at her in disgust. Syaoran passed Sakura some of the sushi he made and smiled. “Here, try some of this, I made it just for you.” He said and gazed at Sakura caringly.

(A/N: just like Er Kang/尔康 from Huan Zhu Ge Ge/还珠格格 ^^;;)

As can be seen with the Chinese in the previous example, she also took on a knowledgeable role in relation to these languages by providing translations of the Chinese and Japanese for her readers. In addition, Nanako’s stories began to focus on themes and topics related to aspects of her identity as an Asian female, such as Japanese and Chinese history and arranged marriage (see Black 2006 for a more detailed discussion). During this time, she also changed the biographical information on her profile page to indicate her Asian heritage and to express her affiliation with a range of pan-Asian popular cultural material, such as Chinese television series and Japanese movies and music.
Readers responded to this shift in Nanako’s writing in several different ways. Some readers expressed appreciation for Nanako’s integration of multiple languages in her fictions, such as, “I’m learning so much Chinese and Japanese every time I read!” Others expressed appreciation for her knowledge of multiple languages, “you are very smart to know so much about these languages.” These reviews represent the ongoing negotiation of functional identity roles, such as expert/teacher, novice/learner, between Nanako and her readers over time. When Nanako first started writing on FFN, she had only been learning English for two and a half years, was unsure of her abilities as a writer, and was worried about how her texts would be received. Readers responded to this by offering encouragement and occasionally by taking on roles as experts, providing their own suggestions for her storylines and offering information about the anime series. Over time, however, she realized that her Asian heritage and knowledge of Asian languages and cultures was a form of capital within this community. Thus, she began to position herself as an expert in this regard. Moreover, as her stories were increasingly well-received within the community, she gained more confidence in her abilities and began to position herself as a successful author within the community by creating a mailing list to let readers know when her popular stories were updated, as well as by taking a less deferential tone in her A/Ns and general interactions with the audience.

Nanako’s participation in FFN provides a clear illustration of how writer–reader interactions around online fan fiction differ from typical peer-review practices in classrooms in ways that describe an ontologically new literacy practice in a number of specific ways. The first is the immediacy and breadth of response that the Internet provides: authors on FFN are able to post their fictions and within moments receive feedback from an audience that spans several continents. A second dynamic involves the potential for collaborative construction of space that such online environments offer. While many aspects of FFN are constrained by the site design and user-interface, as can be seen from the previous examples, there still exists a great deal of flexibility for site members to negotiate social roles and participate in the discursive construction of the writing space. A third marked difference is the collaborative style of writing and the distributed nature of knowledge construction on FFN. In many classrooms, writing papers together and sharing answers is viewed as a form of cheating, and the teacher generally retains the role of expert. However, fan communities provide multiple opportunities for participants to collaboratively author fictions, share various forms of knowledge, and to perform as teachers and learners as well as experts and novices, on various topics.
In this sense, tools do more than mediate; they re-mediate human activity to create new morphologies of action. As Shaffer and Clinton (2006) have argued, drawing upon Latour (e.g., 1996), this position both builds upon Vygotskian principles of mediation while it also challenges its dichotomization of tools as distinctive or separate from the humans who use them. In this stronger view of mediation, tools, like people, are also actants and as such, they influence human agents based on their material and ideal properties, histories of use, and contingent roles in ongoing activity. In the context of digitally mediated social activity, humans and their material and symbolic tools, histories, and conventions are argued to interdependently produce what have been termed in this chapter (and volume) “identities” and/or “selves.”

For their part, online fan texts reflect the “changing character and substance” of ontologically new literacies in a variety of ways. Fan fictions, while primarily text-based, reflect the globalized nature of popular culture and the shared aesthetic sensibility of a world-wide youth culture that has come about via technological mediation. In composing their texts, fans draw from a range of multimodal popular cultural materials, such as songs, images, video, and games, remixing them to create new texts that represent the varied literate abilities and cultural understandings that youths bring to these activities. Online fan fiction also offers new potential for the construction of fluid identities that can be negotiated and changed over time. In physical space, L2 learners are often ascribed certain roles based on their physical characteristics, history of classroom interactions, and institutional labels that designate language ability. While these characteristics are not completely eliminated online, the Internet-mediated format for interaction and out-of-school context can provide L2 learners with a greater range of possibilities for self-representation and the construction of identities as capable users of multiple social languages.

The relationship between identities/selves and language learning is a critically important area of research, and despite the considerable body of scholarship that exists, it is one that will remain fresh and continuously emergent as the tableau of human generated tools, cultures, and literacy practices continue to evolve and transform. As the digital cultures researcher Dana Boyd (2008: 154) describes it: “[D]igital networks will never merely map the social, but inevitably develop their own dynamics through which they become the social.” And as for Akbar the Great’s dilemma about whether we are “bags of selves,” or rather, “solitary ‘I’s buried beneath the overcrowded ‘we’s of the earth” (Rushdie 2008), this question will benefit from continued empirical investigation, as Merchant (2006: 242) has suggested:
The online environments that new technology provides offer new challenges and possibilities for self-presentation and impression formation in human communication. Whether or not online environments actually create new people or simply help us to see ourselves in new ways may be a debate that we need to leave behind in favour of a more sophisticated analysis of digital interaction.

Note

1. See Crawshaw et al. (2001) for an excellent discussion of Ricoeur’s model of identity in application to L2 residence abroad. The authors would like to thank Christina Higgins for alerting them to the Crawshaw et al. (2001) study.