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Beautiful script, cute spelling and glamorous words: Doing girlhood through language playfulness on Israeli blogs

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ABSTRACT

Research on language and gender in CMC has evolved through two trajectories: differences between men and women, and the performance of gender through linguistic resources; both are still underrepresented in languages other than English. While previous studies of language playfulness in CMC have focused mainly on typography and orthography, this study demonstrates a playful principle evoked for performing a specific gender identity across four linguistic levels: digital typography, deviant orthography and morphology, and lexical borrowing. The paper emerges from a larger ethnography of the Hebrew-language blogosphere. I argue gender is performed online through linguistic style choices associated with stereotypical differences and offer CMC constraints and globalization as layers of sensibility that interplay with feminist discourse on language and gender.

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1. Introduction

Research on gender and language in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has evolved through two trajectories: differences in language use and communication styles between men and women (e.g., Herring 1993, 2000; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Kapidzic and Herring, 2011) and the performance of gender through linguistic resources (e.g., Danet, 1998; Katsuno and Yano, 2007; Del Teso-Craviotto, 2008), exploring the diversity *among* men and *among* women who perform a variety of masculinities and femininities. The findings on gender differences in CMC have been consistent with gender differences in spoken communication (Kapidzic and Herring, 2011); however, gender performance through language online has been less explored and both trajectories are still underrepresented in languages other than English.

This paper is concerned with the ways a group of Israeli girls employ linguistic resources for performing a specific feminine identity on their blogs. Specifically, I look at the playful use of four linguistic levels: digital typography, deviant orthography and morphology, and lexical borrowing. While previous studies of language playfulness in CMC have focused mainly on the levels of typography and/or orthography (Herring, 2012), this study demonstrates a playful principle evoked for performing a specific gender identity across four linguistic levels. Although this study clearly associates with the research trope of gender performance through language, I will argue for a connection between the discourses of gender differences and gender performance in CMC by demonstrating that gender is performed online through linguistic style choices associated with stereotypical differences.

The paper emerges from a larger ethnography of girls' engagement with new media literacies in the Hebrew-language blogosphere. The study is based on posts sampled between 2004 and 2007 from the blogs of 140 Israeli girls aged 11–16

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on *Israblog*, Israel's largest blog-hosting website and populated mainly by adolescent girls. This paper contributes to the recently growing interest in multilingualism on the internet (Danet and Herring, 2003, 2007) and offers a compelling case study of the interplay between language, gender, cultural globalization, and CMC.

2. Language and gender

Research on language and gender emerged from a motivation to explore the reflection of social differences/inequalities between men and women (e.g., Lakoff, 1975) and initially was based on the assumption that gender is a fixed category and on the sociolinguistic framework of speech communities. In the early 1990s, however, the field was revolutionized by two concepts that changed both the perception of gendered identity and the contexts in which it was analyzed. Butler (1990) extended Goffman's identity-performance concept in supporting her argument that gender is not simply a biological category but, rather, a set of performed rituals—something we do, not something we are. Research on language and gender then took a “performance turn” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003), exploring the diversity *among* men and *among* women who perform a variety of masculinities and femininities.

One well-known example of this approach is Kira Hall's (1995) study of phone-sex service workers, which demonstrates how women (and one man) move between diverse feminine identities performed solely through their speech styles and other discursive resources. At the same time, the classic sociolinguistic framework of speech community was also being problematized and has now largely been replaced with the notion of “community of practice” (Bucholtz, 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The turn to practice theory has encouraged research on language and gender to take on more refined microanalyses of various linguistic practices involved in the performance and struggle over gender identities. The focus is thus on language as local practice (e.g. Pennycook, 2010) and on vernacular practice.

Much of the prominent research on gender and language is concerned with spoken discourse among groups of girls (e.g., Bucholtz, 1999; Coates, 1999; Goodwin, 2006), with less attention given to written discourse (mostly fictional, see Gilbert, 1993; Orellana, 1999). Indeed, the historical tendency of linguistics as a field is to focus mainly on spoken language, especially where nonstandard language is concerned (Sebba, 2003). This has, of course, changed with the advent of CMC.

3. Gender and language in CMC

The first wave of new media language research was mainly descriptive (e.g. Crystal, 2001), listing formal features of new media genres. Increasingly, it has been complemented by analyses that shed light on how different contextual parameters shape and are evoked in the discourse of various new media (see Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011 for a comprehensive review of the paradigm). In this way, we can trace the study of language and gender in new media in Susan Herring's pioneering research (1993, 2000) through to more “doing gender” approaches (Rodino, 1997) and studies of multigender identity play (Danet, 1998; Turkle, 1997). All gender identities are produced through everyday communicators' discursive repertoires, of which language is a key one (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Eckert and Rickford, 2001). Where in off-line life this may also include clothing, gestures, hairstyles, and so on, gender performances online rely heavily on language.

Danet (2001) refers to the computer as a grand piano on our desktop. Indeed, in early online text-based communities, the use of keyboard was interpreted as voice and tones production. (For instance, the use of CAPS was interpreted as shouting.) In this way, digital texts could be regarded as objects to look *at* rather than to look *through* for their meaning; this also invites aesthetic play (Lanham, 1993). Danet (2001) defines playfulness as playing *with* the rules as opposed to playing *by* the rules, a definition that applies to deviant orthography and typography. Typography is not to be looked at as an abstract sign system, but as a situated code choice that is always part of a specific genre in a specific communicative situation (Androutsopoulos, 2004). Playful practices with orthography and typography demonstrate how people convey social meaning through form and not solely through content (Sebba, 2003), signifying the discourse and text as sources of fascination apart from the semantic content they convey (Kataoka, 1997).

In this regard, vernacular forms of nonstandard orthography have been common throughout history (Shortis, 2007); however, the first known example of online, English-language subcultural language play is *leet* (stands for elite), the creative orthographic and typographic practices of (usually male) hackers (Raymond, 1991). Additional studies on youth subculture discourse (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2007; Sebba, 2003) have demonstrated that deviant orthography and misspelling are signifiers for speech styles and social identities. Few of these studies, however, emphasize linguistic playfulness as means of performing gender identities (e.g. Del Teso-Craviotto, 2008) and none demonstrate a consecutive identity-performance principle evoked on several linguistic levels.

While studies exploring gender differences in English-language CMC genres argue whether patterns are changing (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Kapidzic and Herring, 2011), evidence on language use from the multilingual web shows women and girls employ diverse linguistic resources to purposely perform specific feminine identities (e.g., Zelenkauskaitė and Herring, 2006; Kataoka, 1997; Katsuno and Yano, 2007; Nishimura, 2010). This paper suggests a bridge between the discourses of gender performance and gender differences by presenting ethnographic evidence from the Hebrew-speaking web of girls' playfulness with four linguistic levels on their blogs.

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