Identifying Identity – Using Second Life in the Teaching of Sociolinguistics for the Raising of Gender Awareness

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Abstract

The present paper presents further innovative use of virtual worlds under the pilot stages of ASSIS (A Second Step in Second Life), a project funded by Umeå University. One of the aims of the project is to make use of the affordances offered by Second Life in order to raise sociolinguistic language awareness among teacher trainees and other students studying courses in sociolinguistics. Several experiments were conducted where creative use of the avatar in combination with so-called “voice-morphing” (a tool which allows the voice of the speaker to be distorted so that a male speaker can sound more feminine and vice versa) allowed students to enter the virtual world incognito in order to “experience” a different linguistic identity. Activities were conducted in cross-cultural settings involving students from Sweden and Chile. The paper presents a model for how language awareness issues can be internalised through first-hand experience in virtual worlds.

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Second Life; Virtual Worlds; language learning; sociolinguistics; voice morphing; gender; identity; telecollaboration

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1. Introduction

Language learning in virtual worlds is gradually coming of age and the body of research in the field is growing. As recently as 2009, this research was very limited and rather anecdotal. Most of what was written involved speculation about the potential of what virtual worlds could offer language education, but there were very few concrete descriptions of case studies involving the use of such environments in real courses (Deutschmann & Panichi 2009:73). Since then several studies within the field have been published. These include specific case descriptions of language courses taught in virtual worlds (Seng-Chee Ta & Yin-Mei Won, 2011; Petersen 2010; Zheng et al. 2009), more systematic descriptions of language course development in virtual worlds using frameworks such as action research and activity theory (Deutschmann et al. 2011; Deutschmann 2011; Antoniadou 2011), models for task and environment design in virtual worlds (Deutschmann 2010; Blasing 2010; Molk-Danielsen et al. 2009; Schiller 2009; Molk-Danielsen et al. 2010), explorations of communicative aspects specific to virtual worlds (Deutschmann & Panichi 2009; Wigham & Chanier 2011), teacher and student perceptions of the learning environment and technology readiness (Wang et al. 2011; Wang et al. 2009), comparative studies of language learning in virtual worlds with more traditional CMC tools (Jauregi et al. 20011), as well as systematic mappings of the affordances of virtual worlds and best practice models for teaching languages in these environments (Deutschmann 2010; Lim 2009; Omale et al. 2009, Mayrath et al. 2009). In addition several EU-funded projects such as AVALON², NIFLAR³ and AVATAR⁴ have been dedicated to the developed and exploration of language-learning scenarios in virtual worlds.

This particular study can best be described as a case study of experiments making use of a fairly recent addition to the list of affordances available in Second Life, namely that of voice morphing. The activities described constitute pilot trials under ASSIS (A Second Step in Second Life), a project funded by Umeå University, with the aim to use the affordances offered by virtual worlds in order to raise gender awareness among language teacher trainees and also to allow students to discuss gender issues in an international context. Here it is relevant to point out that the application of gender-based analysis to the subject at hand is an obligatory part of all Swedish university programmes, and of particular importance to teacher trainees in languages, language being one important variable defining gender identity. The specific setting of these pilot trials was a course in sociolinguistics at Master’s level dealing with the subject of language and gender where some activities involving Second Life were integrated.

In the course, the constructionist views of gender, the idea that we ‘do’ gender rather than ‘are’ gender, was explored on a theoretical level. According to this view, gender is not a stable state, but rather constructed in the interplay between interlocutors where both/all parties contribute to the construction (see West & Zimmerman 1987 and Crawford 1995, for example). One project aim was thus to raise awareness of the role of the second person in gender construction through experiments, where the affordances of Second Life could be used to allow students to ‘experience’ gender construction first-hand using voice-morphing and avatar construction.

These ‘experiments’ basically constituted the two activities described below. An additional aim of the project was to create an international collaborative environment so that the questions at hand could be discussed from different cultural standpoints. The relative success/failure of this telecollaborative activity will also be reported below. In addition we will also give an account of the technical success/failure of the project both from a student and teacher perspective.

2. Method

Two activities were carried out in Second Life during the course under the framework of the project. The first one involved making recordings using so-called matched guise technique (see 2.1 below). The second activity involved getting our students to discuss language and gender issues with participants from different cultural backgrounds. Here the students also had the opportunity to enter the conversations under assumed gender identity and they were also asked to analyse the conversations in terms of gendered behaviour (see 2.2 below). All in all there were four female students from Umeå who participated in the activities. They were joined by eight outside participants in the collaborative discussions: six from Chile, four from Finland and two from Canada.

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² Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONline (www.avalonlearning.eu/)
³ Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research (www.niflar.eu/)
⁴ Added Value of teAching in a virtuAl woRld (www.avatarproject.eu/)

one from Spain and one from the United States. Of these, six were females and two were males. Note that for the second discussion, only the six participants from Chile were present.

2.1. Matched-Guise Tests

In this experiment we tried to adapt a classic sociolinguistic experimental technique (matched-guise technique) using the possibilities that virtual worlds offer. In the original studies, the researchers (see Lambert et al. 1960 and Giles & Powesland 1975, for example) wanted to investigate how listeners' attitudes were affected by the accent of the speaker. An actor would read a text using a number of different accents. This recording was then played to respondents or ‘judges’, who in turn were asked to evaluate the speaker on a number of personal characteristics such as intelligence, confidence, honesty, sincerity etc. Of course the ‘judges’ did not know that the same person was speaking all the time. The study showed that the person reading was evaluated differently depending on what accent was used. Since then the technique has been used in a number of studies (see Cavarallo & Chin 2009 and Young 2003, for example) investigating different aspects of language output such as national accent and perceived male/femaleness.

In our experiment, we first recorded our students reading a short text in Second Life using their real voices and female avatars. We then used voice-morphing (a tool which allows the voice of the speaker to be distorted so that a male speaker can sound more feminine and vice versa) and male avatars and recordings were then made of the same students reading the same texts. These were then sent out to outside judges (approximately 50 for each recording) who were asked to evaluate the avatars the following characteristics using a scale of 1-7: hardworking, intelligent, ambitious, confident, trustworthy, considerate, kind, honest, caring, likeable and funny. Our hypothesis was that male avatars would be evaluated higher on characteristics such as intelligence, confidence, hardworking etc, while female avatars would be evaluated higher on ‘softer’ values such as likeability, considerate, caring etc. Our hypothesis did not hold. Overall, all the female avatars were evaluated higher on all characteristics although these differences were only significantly different (t-test p = 0.05) for one avatar for a few characteristics (confident, intelligent and kind). The most feasible explanation for these results was that the quality of the female-to-male voice-morphs was of quite poor quality (male to female morphs sounded much more authentic) and that it was the artificial quality of the ‘male’ voices that influenced the ‘judges’.

2.2. Collaborative Discussions

In the collaborative discussions we connected our students with participants from various parts of the world in order to discuss gender and language issues. The aims of this part of this activity was three-fold:

- To get students to discuss gender and language issues with other participants from a different cultural background.
- To provide students with an opportunity to observe natural conversations and analyse them using the theoretical tools we had covered in the course.
- To allow those who wanted to, to explore what it was like to enter a different gender identity and how this affected the way others approached them.

The activity consisted of two discussions, the first being teacher-led and the second without teacher presence. The reason for this was that we wanted to allow students to observe gendered linguistic behaviour in natural conversations without outside interference from the teacher. In the second discussion we thus divided the students into two groups, where one group acted observers while the others were active participants and vice versa.

The collaborative discussions were a partial success. On the one hand, the students did have some very meaningful exchanges with their international counter-parts and enjoyed the experience, especially during the initial teacher-led discussions. “There were some interesting discussions, and it was great that it was possible to include people from different parts of the world”, as one student put it. On the other hand, the idea of letting students monitor their own discussion did not work. The conversations were ‘painful’ and full of embarrassing silence. The students were simply not ready to support each other in a conversational situation in this type of complex environment. The non-teacher led session was, however, necessary in order to provide students with observational data, but retrospectively this could perhaps have been done in a different way.

Getting the students to observe gendered behaviour in the conversations was difficult. Firstly there was only one male present (a very silent male it may be added) and one morphed female whose voice-
morph was far from convincing (see below). We do however think that the students did get an insight into how conversations in this type of environment differ from real life conversations.

The final aim, to allow students to enter conversations using a different gender identity, was a failure overall. While the male-female voice-morphs were reasonably convincing, the female-male voice-morphs were not. Perhaps as a result of this, only one student of the 10 participating in this session decided to use the voice-morph, which leaves us with few general conclusions. However, the student in question experienced the activity as extremely socially liberating, but also very psychologically disturbing, so much so that we had to end the activity. This highlights a real ethical dilemma in this type of set-up.

3. Discussion

There can be little doubt that the affordances of Second Life should have the potential of illustrating the social-constructivist view of gender. Since participants both construct the shape of their avatars and can choose how to interact with other people in a pseudo-anonymous way, the construction part of form an identity is obvious. Few students trained in sociolinguistics could fail to notice that gender is performance.

However, our study shows that, at the present time, the technology of voice-morphing is not sophisticated enough to support the kind of identity switch we wanted to expose our students to. The poor quality of the artificial male voice very probably contaminated our match-guise experiment. The same shortcoming (female-to-male voice morphing) was the main factor for only one student choosing to explore a gender identity change during the collaborative activities. This decision of our students, of course, reduced the value of the second task design.

Apart from voice-morphing problems, the instability and unpredictability of SL as a teaching arena was most disturbing. Regions were shut down with very short notice and new updates which changed prerequisites were launched unannounced. For the sustainability of SL as an alternative setting for pedagogical activities such as the ones described here, the reliability of the system has to be improved.

That Second Life has a potential for intercultural activity has previously been noticed (see Deutschmann 2011, for example) and the collaborative seminars in this study were successful in this respect. Students found it very rewarding to talk about cultural differences in relation to gender and language. However, in terms design for sociolinguistic observation, the collaborative assignment was not optimal. As pointed out above, students’ task of observing their peers and at the same time be involved in collaborative activities created a difficult situation for them and the conversations were occasionally very slow. This was particularly obvious in the second workshop when the teacher (the facilitator) was absent. Another possible factor could be the relative lack of social initiation, an important factor in all collaborative learning (see Salmon 2004, for example).

In sum, with all its potential for illustrating gender construction, SL is at the present point in time not enough to lend itself to advanced experiments with constructions. In future designs we envision the students to adopt more traditional roles, whereas teachers could perform the roles of construction.

4. Conclusions

As stated in the introduction, this study presents the pilot stage of the project. In future scenarios we are going to involve greater number of students in activities (classes of up to 40 students) and thus the lessons learnt from the pilot are of great importance. One of the main things we learnt was the fact that the voice-morph tool present in Second Life was really only convincing for male-to-female morphing. As male teachers we could easily convince the students we were female (we tried this during the final debriefing session in Second Life), but unfortunately the female students did not experience the same. With this in mind, as well as the ethical aspects involved, we are exposing students to voice-morphed male teachers (incognito) instead of letting them voice-morph themselves in future experiments. Further we will pay even more attention to technical and social initiation in order to allow students more time to familiarise themselves with the tools as well as each other. One problem here is of course the limited time available in a normal university course. As far as the technical unreliability of Second Life there is little we can do but we are beginning to explore the setting up of our own Open Sims environment.

5. Acknowledgements

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6. References
Cavallaro F., Ng Bee Chin (2009). Between Status and Solidarity in Singapore. World Englishes, 28(2), 143-159.


Details concerning this referencing style can also be found at http://humanities.byu.edu/linguistics/Henrichsen/APA/APA01.html.

List: References should be arranged first alphabetically and then further sorted chronologically if necessary. More than one reference from the same author(s) in the same year must be identified by the letters “a”, “b”, “c”, etc., placed after the year of publication.

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