

Introduction to the Special Issue

Digital Trends in Language and Literature: Asia and the 21st century

This special issue of *Asiatic*, themed *Digital Trends in Language and Literature: Asia and the 21st century*, was born in the context of International Conference on Language and Literature 2020 (ICLL 2020) organised at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) on 15-17 January 2020. The conference was a collaboration between IIUM and Western Sydney University (WSU), Australia, and was also supported by Jinan University, Guangzhou, China. The event attracted a total of one hundred regular paper submissions, focusing on numerous contemporary and emerging topics related to language and literary digitalisation in Asia. The conference was held, fortunately, just before the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world. From that time until the publication of this issue, the world has undergone a sweeping digital transformation in the way people and institutions interact and operate in their daily lives. In a way, the theme of the conference in January 2020 serves as a harbinger of the shift to online and digital platforms, which are becoming progressively normalised in the wake of the COVID-19 viral attack worldwide.

Even before the pandemic, the increasing availability and accessibility of the Internet in the region have significantly transformed the landscape of language use in innovative ways. Research in language and literature has always been based on relatively stable concepts. However, with the advent of Web 2.0, basic concepts such as text have to be re-defined as people's lives go online (Barton and Lee). Therefore, the focus of this special issue is on the evolution of language and literature in the digital age of 21st century Asia. Authors whose work appears in this issue represent diverse voices from various fields – linguistics, literature, education, and information technology and from different countries such as Australia, Japan, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Their contributions provide a greater understanding of digitalisation in the region through their own research traditions and epistemologies as well as interdisciplinary alliances.

This special issue contains a collection of eight papers. Six papers are from the conference and two, from submissions in response to the call for papers. As guest editors, we picked the papers that most cogently addressed the theme and were, at the same time, relevant to the *Asiatic* scope and readership. After culling papers submitted from the conference and the subsequent call for papers, all selected papers went through a rigorous review and revision process. The papers are finally presented to the readers in the present form. The following paragraphs summarise the articles in this collection.

The first paper by Hart Cohen discusses the work of Barbara Cassin's concept of "untranslatables" and lays bare the requirement of a conceptual re-

framing for the translation of words and ideas. Cohen demonstrates this through an eye-opening case study of the translation of the word for God, *altjira* from the Indigenous Australian language Aranda to English. *Altjira*, when translated into English, was given the attribute of a beneficent deity who resided in heaven and was not involved in human affairs – a concept that is very much influenced by Christian Lutheran theology, which stands rather removed from the original Indigenous term. Cohen further extends the untranslatables into the digital realm by channelling McLuhan's idea of media bias in relation to the early dominance of machine translation by Google Translate. The overall picture, however, is not as bleak as it might appear since Cohen also highlights some innovative ways digital communication contributes to redefining human communications, e.g., through the creation and use of culturally appropriate emojis and novel forms of code-switching in digital phone text.

The second paper, authored by Satomi Kawaguchi, surveys the state of English language education in Asia and the digital classroom practice. The different status of English across Asia brings different opportunities to the learners, and ultimately becomes a major contributing factor in the success of English education. In her paper, the author introduces a well-established, and widely researched second language acquisition theory, the Processability Theory (PT), which is indeed profitably exploited in other papers in this issue. In doing so, Kawaguchi emphasises the importance of the theory-practice-evaluation link, both in classroom practice and digital language learning. The author also illustrates the classroom use of digital language learning technologies, such as E-Tandem learning, Social Networking System (SNS), E-movies and apps such as LexiFun. The author concludes the paper with a positive note: despite the physical restriction posed by COVID-19, the pandemic has substantially demonstrated the usefulness of digital technologies in second language (L2) learning in Asia.

Yuki Itani-Adams' paper titled "Developing Communicative Capability in Foreign Languages through Digital Storytelling" further illuminates the digital classroom practice discussed by Kawaguchi. Her Digital Storytelling (DS) classroom project by intermediate Japanese language learners in Australia is presented in great detail. Itani-Adams aptly illustrates the step-by-step methods employed by the learners in creating their DS productions. Judging from the samples of the learners' productions, it is apparent that through such a project, they were able to deploy multiple skills and devices: linguistic, discourse, visual and, of course, digital, to make their story engaging for the audience. The incorporation of technology-mediated language learning projects such as DS not only promote language acquisition but also provide learners with opportunities to be creative, to expand their knowledge and familiarity with the newest technology, and to develop effective communication skills.

Processability Theory, earlier introduced by Kawaguchi in this current issue, is optimally deployed in Yumiko Yamaguchi's "Comparing Two Approaches for Measuring English as a Second Language." Her study investigates whether learners' proficiency, as measured by the popular Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is actually accounting for second language grammatical development as hypothesised by PT. Interestingly, Yamaguchi found that these two approaches yield similar results only for learners' spoken production. When it comes to the written output, learners at an apparently low proficiency level in CEFR were actually at a higher developmental stage in PT. The author interprets this as an indication that low-level learners in the study may have attempted to use more advanced grammar in their written tasks than in spoken ones. This investigation has shed new light on the relationship between a standard method of testing L2 proficiency such as CEFR and stages of L2 development measured by PT.

In another paper theoretically framed within PT, Ahmad Sabri et al. used the theory not only to analyse learners' language development but also as a tool to shape pedagogical practice. To this end, the authors introduced a new L2 programme, the Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form (DMFonF) instruction, as an intervention programme to teach English grammatical constructions to Malaysian children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). DMFonF, an instructional approach proposed by Di Biase, combines Processability Theory developmental stages and Focus on Form feedback. After sixteen weeks of DMFonF instruction, the results show that children with ASD participating in the study acquired the grammatical structures taught in the programme, in their case, English plural structures, faster than typically developing children in past research.

The lexicon stored in our mind is the driving force of language development (Kaplan and Bresnan). Motivated by this notion, Ho and Kawaguchi investigate the acquisition of English receptive vocabulary on Vietnamese ESL learners. The authors compared the efficacy of two methods, one traditional and one digital, used for vocabulary acquisition. The digital method used in this classroom-based experiment is Quizlet and the traditional method, paper flashcards. The methodology used in this study is particularly interesting. Learners were divided into two groups; one group was assigned learning English vocabulary through Quizlet while the other group was given paper flashcards. After two weeks, the learning tool was swapped between the two groups. Overall, the findings indicate that both Quizlet and paper flashcards help promote learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge. However, detailed analyses show that when learners used Quizlet, they made more significant vocabulary gains. This, the authors explained, is attributable to the multimodal environments created by Quizlet, which includes auditory and visual inputs, while paper flashcards only include visual input. The multimodal environments in

Quizlet helped ‘spread’ information processing via two different channels, which ultimately reduce cognitive load and assist memorisation.

Related to memory and cognition is the decision making process, a fascinating topic tackled by Salehuddin and Ahmad Bokhari. Their paper explores how language plays a crucial role in decision making. Using an eye tracking machine to measure fixation and eye movement, the authors examined decision making in bilingual Malay-English speakers when they had to make a decision respectively in Malay and in English. Results indicate that the participants’ eye movement patterns differed depending on the names and the language used in the stimuli. The learners’ proficiency in the language used in the stimuli (Malay or English) also contributes to the decision-making process. The main takeaways from this study are: (a) data analysis via eye tracking instruments may further advance our understanding of what happens in cognition as a decision is being made, and (b) bilinguals make decisions differently, contingent upon the language activated.

The last paper in this collection by Ramlan and Abdul Kadir is an exploration of the position of Asian Australian writing in three national literature anthologies: *The Oxford Anthology of Australian Literature* (1985), *The Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature* (1990), and *Macquarie PEN The Anthology of Australian Literature* (2010). Through tracing works by writers of Asian descent in the anthologies, the authors found that only the Macquarie PEN includes an appropriate and diverse selection of works by Asian Australian writers while the earlier anthologies (Oxford and Macmillan), despite Australia’s claim of being a melting pot of multiculturalism at the time they were compiled, appear to be largely monocultural. The findings in the paper paint a picture of the evolving politics of identity and representations in the Australian literary canon in the 21st century.

The various topics in this issue reflect not only the digitalisation components central to the theme but also the expanding diversity and inclusivity in research, i.e., the investigations of those often considered on the ‘periphery’ such as the Indigenous languages, children on the autism spectrum and Asian writing in Australia. This is congruous with one of the tenets in “Asian century” vision outlined by Kohli, Sharma, and Sood: growth and inclusion. Asia’s march to prosperity, according to Kohli et al., can only be achieved if all the nations in the region assign much higher priority to inclusion and to the reduction of inequalities in its various aspects, i.e., not just addressing poverty but also the inclusion of vulnerable populations in the various facets of daily living.

This issue is the first collaborative issue between the Department of English Language and Literature, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, IIUM and the School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University, Australia. International partnerships and collaborative initiatives are the future of academic research – they embody a great

potential to boost capacity building in research, which ultimately leads to advancing the impact of policies and diverse practices generated from the research findings (Barrett, Crossley, and Dachi). Our hope is that this collection will help pave the way to more academic collaborations between IIUM and WSU. We also hope that the contributions in this issue help push further the frontiers of research in linguistics and literature in the region.

To conclude, we wish to thank all the authors for their willingness, cooperation, and tremendous efforts to improve the papers for the publication of this issue. We also would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the reviewers for their insightful suggestions and guidance in helping the authors improve the quality of their papers. Our special thanks are to the Editor-in-Chief of the journal, Md. Mahmudul Hasan, for his continuous support from the initial stage to the completion of this special issue, particularly for his feedback on the manuscripts we prepared for publication. Finally, we hope that readers will enjoy and benefit from these studies as much as we enjoyed and benefited from putting this special issue together.

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