

# **Border patrol in the borders in the borderless world: Negotiating intercultural Internet**

**Juliana de Nooy**  
**University of Queensland**

## **Abstract**

Public Internet discussion forums appear to offer limitless opportunities for communication across linguistic, geographical and cultural borders. Closer inspection, however, reveals that cordial intercultural exchanges are far from widespread in this genre. And yet, such forums have a great deal to offer the independent language learner in terms of ease of access, potential for meaningful language practice and feedback, and exposure to different cultural conventions.

This paper explores obstacles to the participation of advanced language learners in public forums of this kind through an examination of the speaking positions most readily available to the non-native speaker. A case study of sustained intercultural interaction on a public discussion thread suggests an alternative to these. Here a core of Francophone and Anglophone participants manage to negotiate an intercultural identity in order to pursue their communicative goals. The paper traces the way in which participants shift footing to regulate insider and outsider status on the forum and draws conclusions regarding the conditions for successful intercultural exchange in this genre.

## **Introduction: The borderless world?**

Public Internet discussion sites range from the very general to the highly specific in topic and target audience. Newspapers such as *The Guardian* and the *New York Times* offer on their websites forums on a vast range of topics from current affairs to crosswords. More specialized sites offer the hobbyist or professional discussion on everything from Fender guitars to giant pumpkin-growing to cardio-thoracic surgery. A similar range of sites can be found in, for example, French, German, and Spanish. Whatever your penchant, Internet discussion offers opportunities for interaction with people from around the world. Indeed it seems to epitomize the vision of the

“borderless world” so often associated with developments in communication technologies.

The metaphor of the borderless world gives the impression of unrestricted access to our cultural others, without the encumbrance of passports, immigration and customs. The comparative rarity of sustained congenial intercultural exchanges, however, suggests that there remain barriers to successful communication. The project of which this study forms part <sup>1</sup> arose from a suspicion that participants in Internet discussion would have trouble getting past “customs” of one kind or another, for as soon as communication occurs, cultural practices are necessarily engaged. Cultural conventions are not, however, the only impediments.

The particular focus of this paper is obstacles to the participation of advanced language learners. Public Internet discussion has much to offer more advanced language learners, particularly in providing opportunities to develop autonomy. Unlike “keypal” exchanges (the online version of pen-pal partnerships) and web-based discussions between classes in different countries (the most widespread uses of the Internet in language learning, cf. O’Dowd, 2006, p. 88; Hanna & de Nooy, 2003, pp. 72-73),<sup>2</sup> the public discussion forum offers learners the opportunity to move beyond the relative shelter of activities designed specifically for them. Here they can engage with native speakers who are actively seeking interaction on topics of mutual interest. Participation is available not only to students working under teacher guidance, but also to independent language enthusiasts honing their skills outside an institutional framework.

We shall see, however, that the speaking positions <sup>3</sup> most readily available to the non-native speaker can discourage and/or limit participation. The case study, on the other hand, – a comparatively rare instance of sustained intercultural engagement on a discussion thread for the general public – offers insights into the conditions for successful participation by language learners.

## **Intercultural exchanges**

Our search for examples of intercultural Internet discussion started with high-profile Francophone and Anglophone discussion sites likely to attract international participation, particularly those of media organizations – such as the *BBC*, *Le Monde*, the *New York Times* – that might be considered logical ports of call for outsiders seeking cross-cultural contact. We concentrated on large and active general interest

forums rather than smaller, narrowly focused sites where idiosyncratic communication patterns might prevail. A team of research assistants regularly monitored a dozen of these sites from 2000-2004.<sup>4</sup> They sifted through contributions looking particularly for exchanges between people of different language backgrounds, identifying these through a combination of indicators such as non-native errors, speaking position, pseudonym and explicit self-identification (see Appendix 1). While none of these indicators is entirely trustworthy alone, a cluster of these clues points to outsider status, even if the precise cultural affiliation may remain unclear (cf. Hanna, 2004). Now it is true that, in the absence of self-identification, an accomplished linguist may go unnoticed as a non-native speaker/writer. However, our case study provides ample evidence that ongoing discussion often leads to disclosure of personal histories and other identifying information.

The monitoring of these sites certainly supplied examples of intercultural interaction, but instances of intercultural discussion – postings and responses constituting an exchange of views – were comparatively few. Although we had approached the myth of borderless communication with some scepticism, even we were surprised at the rarity with which participants from different language backgrounds conducted productive exchanges in the public genre of the Internet forum.

Far more prominent on these sites is the incidence of “flaming” and “ranting” – insults and vitriolic diatribe.<sup>5</sup> Although “verbal brawling” (Dery, 1994, p. 3) may erupt on any subject, such disputes are overwhelmingly present in exchanges referring to other cultures. A cursory consultation of any general interest public discussion site yields countless examples. Virtually any mention of France on an Anglophone site functions as an invitation for French-bashing. US-bashing is even more widespread. Yet these are anodyne compared to discussion boards related to the Middle East, where ranting is at such a level that discussion invariably has to be pre-moderated (that is, postings have to be approved by a moderator before they can appear online). Whilst French and US foreign policy and Middle Eastern politics are certainly contentious topics, this in itself does not explain the degree of ranting on public discussion sites. The material affordances of the genre also play a role.

As studies by Zickmund, Gottlieb, Dery, Burkhalter and Nakamura show, with their analyses of cyberhate, flame wars and online racial identification, cyberspace is as much a space for spreading hatred as for fostering intercultural understanding. Whilst it can be harnessed to empower marginalized groups (Gottlieb, 2003), simultaneously it facilitates both dissemination of “discriminatory propaganda” (Gottlieb, 2003, p.

200) and recruitment to racist organizations (Zickmund, 2000). Far from the utopia of the borderless world, the Internet offers easy opportunities for fortifying frontiers, for reinforcing stereotypes, for galvanizing racist hostility. This is particularly true of online discussion, which offers opportunities to stage intercultural battles. With its rapid, largely anonymous exchanges, its capacity for real-time faceless interaction between strangers without means of redress, and the dominance of an adversarial communication style in postings (Herring, 1996),<sup>6</sup> Internet discussion lends itself to volatile disputes, and never more so than when race and culture are in question. Burkhalter (1999) draws attention to the racial polarization in Usenet groups, showing how discussions are grounded in and serve to entrench preconceptions about ethnic groups. Zickmund (2000) focuses on "linguistic warfare" – the "pattern of insult and rebuke" (p. 249) – in right-wing newsgroups between white supremacist members and outsiders baiting them, which functions to reaffirm group cohesion through the exclusion of the other. The form (abuse and insult) and function (strengthening of in-group identity) of these clashes, however, are not restricted to neo-nazi bulletin boards but are generalized phenomena on Internet discussion forums to the point where clashes commonly outnumber more measured encounters on questions of culture. This means that cultural/linguistic outsiders such as language learners are often pre-positioned by the polarized nature of Internet discussion as defensive representatives of their culture. The difficulty of this situation is exacerbated if, as O'Dowd (2006) observes, students working online with foreign partners experience a heightened need "to have themselves and their identity represented to the world as they perceive it" (p. 83).

## **Dedicated learner sites**

The degree of intercultural animosity on these sites may lead motivated students to look elsewhere in cyberspace for opportunities to practice their language skills. An accessible alternative is public discussion sites for language learners. The BBC operates two popular forums for learners of English: "Ask a question" invites you to "Ask your questions about the English language here and a teacher will try to answer them as soon as possible"; "Communicate!" enables you to "Share your experiences of learning English with people all over the world". Learners of other languages might turn to Unilang's "Virtual School of Languages". Run by learners for learners, it boasts forums relating to over seventy languages. On the French page, we find contributors of various backgrounds, identified by pseudonym, an icon, current location, and the languages they speak or are learning. Like "Communicate!", it's an active forum,

friendly and enthusiastic, and attracts participants from a vast range of countries. These surely are examples of the borderless world.

And yet, these forums have very firm frontiers, frontiers replicating the classroom walls. This is not only the case for the BBC's teacher-directed "Ask a question" forum. The other forums too are highly restricted in their range and mode of discussion. This is not simply a consequence of strict moderation or of limited language skills (although these do play a role). Rather, a set of limitations is imposed by the way in which participants position themselves primarily as learners. This "default" identity for participants determines the topics and mode of discussion on these sites according to a small number of well-rehearsed patterns.

Encouraged by the forum's definition as a place to share learning experiences, postings to "Communicate!" are most frequently on the keypal model – "Hi, I'm Anna and I want to improve my English..." – such that messages consist largely of exchanges of greetings, and of information about age, location, local customs and hobbies. Whilst this is useful practice for the beginner, it is very limiting for language learners who have passed introductory level: discussion rarely moves beyond the central topic of the self (cf. Hanna & de Nooy, 2003). The only other speaking position that appears to be readily available to a more advanced learner is that of teacher, clearly produced in relation to the default position of learner. Thus Mrushko sets exercises for her fellow participants on phrasal verbs (Feb 22 2006, "Don't let me down!"), while LadyAutumn offers lessons on punctuation (Jan 11 2006, "Practice Your English Here").

Use of the key-pal style of self-presentation to initiate a discussion thread is quite alien to Internet forums addressing the general public. Modelled on practice in the language classroom, it is however ubiquitous on sites for learners, including the Unilang forums. Here there is the added dimension of error correction (largely diverted into the "Ask a Question" forum on the BBC site). Again, a version of the teacher role is readily adopted by other learners, who assiduously correct each error in the messages they read. Threads on Unilang's French forum typically start with participants writing a few lines introducing themselves and then asking other learners to correct their French, or writing a message in English and translating it underneath into French, or writing in English about wanting to practise their French. Thus much of the communication goes on in English (the default language on the Unilang site), about French. Due to both the formulaic nature of the self-presentations and the emphasis on error correction, there is very little uptake of the content of messages,

and new threads often peter out once corrections to the initial message have been exhausted.

We see how the self-positioning as learner limits discussion primarily to oneself, one's immediate environment and one's language deficiencies. Learner identity on these sites is defined in terms of lack of competence. On the Unilang French site, where a seemingly more accessible *lingua franca* – English – is temptingly available, learner incompetence is assumed to the point where learners are not even expected to communicate in French. Thus, to launch a thread about French regional accents and dialects, JackFrost writes:

I think I'll write this in English so everyone (including non-native speakers) can be part of this. But I don't mind if some of you want to speak French.

(JackFrost, Unilang, French, "Ton Français", 14 June 2005, 14:40)

Learner identity is not necessarily related to the level of French, but instead seems quite intransigent, as in the following example, where an advanced student seeks to continue learning through schoolbook strategies rather than venturing towards books published for a Francophone readership:

Désolé si quelqu'un a déjà posé cette question, mais pouvez-vous me recommander un livre pour le vocabulaire français avancé? Merci!

*[Sorry if someone has already posted this question, but could you recommend a book for advanced French vocabulary? Thanks!]*

(Rob P, Unilang, French, Discussion Group, 19 May 2005, 19:58) <sup>2</sup>

The learner's forum is a site where an exchange of views is simulated rather than stimulated, as the following proposal shows:

Je crois que nous devons un sujet débattre ici pour améliorer notre français, pour l'utilise plus des temp.

Est-ce que quelqu'uns avez un idée pour commencer?

*[I think we should debate a subject here to improve our French, to use it more of the time. Does someone have an idea to start with?]*

(Ryder22, Unilang, French, [Discussion Group](#), 21 Nov 2005, 2:13)

The weather being the only suggestion, after four two-line responses on the day's snowfall and temperature, the thread reverts to the correction of grammatical errors. We can see how attractively safe it all is. There is no ranting, but then again there is

very little discussion at all, other than differences of opinion on, for example, the use of “on” as opposed to “l’on” in French.

Just how hard it is to engage discussion can be seen when Parousia – whose level of French is more than equal to the task – tries to discuss student protests in France. Although her 600 word message is comparable in form and purpose to those posted on non-learner sites, the response is not. Her 20 word invitation to correct linguistic errors is taken up at length in the first reply, while her ideas only receive a quick postscript. Two weeks later, after the exchange of seven messages in which JunMing fastidiously corrects the French and Parousia tries to elicit further response on the content, JunMing finally offers a considered response to Parousia’s views. The nine contributions from other participants are exclusively devoted to error correction. Participant roles are polarized into those of teacher and pupil, as Parousia playfully points out to JunMing:

J’espère que vous ne me recalez pas, Monsieur Le Prof de Français!

*[I hope you’re not going to fail me, Mr French Teacher!]*

(Parousia, Unilang, French, “A n’importe qui est là dans la vaste espace cybère” *[To anyone who’s there in vast cyberspace]*, 24 April 2005, 23:17)

Parousia outlines the choices available to her:

Peut-être que je devrai aller sur un vrais forum français pour pratiquer cette langue même si les gens là seraient moins tolérants de mes fautes.

*[Maybe I should go on a real French forum to practise this language, even if the people there would be less tolerant of my errors.]*

(Parousia, Unilang, French, “[A n’importe qui est là dans la vaste espace cybère](#)”, 12 April 2005, 22:35)

She hesitates between participating in a “real” forum with its perceived lack of tolerance and the apparent inauthenticity of communication in the learner forum. Her dilemma is emblematic of the advanced learner, caught between two options that do not lead one to the other. Between ranters on the one hand and learners on the other, it can be difficult to engage in discussion.

On the one hand, on the public Internet discussion site, no inbuilt allowance is made for linguistic/cultural outsiders and the frequently combative mode of interaction discourages the less confident. On the other hand, learner sites, although usually friendlier, are not a stepping stone towards enabling participation on more general

sites. With their reliance on teacher substitutes, their focus on error correction, their lack of engagement with message content, and their emphasis on personal information as a topic, they do not simply host discussion at a different level of language proficiency (from which one could progress towards discussion on the general sites); rather they host a different genre of exchange. Now, although the participants on these sites are taking responsibility for their own learning and making choices with regard to the method of learning (cf. Benson & Voller, 1997), it is hard to see them as developing autonomy.<sup>8</sup> We see that adopting the learner identity most readily available on these sites is a way of remaining firmly within the virtual classroom and the cultural comfort zone of student-student interaction, rather than taking up the opportunity offered by the Internet to engage with the “target culture” in roles other than that of pupil/teacher.

The question then becomes how to navigate between these two pitfalls, between entrenched beginner status and verbal combat, how to bridge the gulf between learner sites and general sites and take advantage of the Internet’s potential for broadening cultural and linguistic horizons. And happily there are examples of language enthusiasts taking up this challenge productively, and not only among the interculturally motivated visitors to the Unilang site,<sup>9</sup> but even occasionally on discussion boards for the general public. The following case study analyzes one such example, and asks: what distinguishes the practice of these participants from that of those on learner sites? It teases out the conditions for successful discussion, focussing on the roles participants adopt, and the kinds of engagement and responses enabled by these speaking positions.

### **Case study: The “Indy”**

The “Independent Argument forum” (the “Indy”) was a feature of the website of the British daily newspaper *The Independent* until May 2004, when the resources needed for moderation were deemed too costly to sustain. Existing discussions were however archived on Delphi Forums, and many of the active discussions migrated to this platform (with several thousand Indy participants recreating the “Idle Chit Chat” board, and others resuscitating the forum as “Independent Argument – Redux”), so that the forum continues in a modified form.

Although there were ranters aplenty on the Indy, the forum nonetheless attracted geographically scattered and culturally diverse participants onto a number of threads. Hosted on the site of a British newspaper, Indy discussion was nominally in English,



but threads relating to France attracted a significant number of Francophones, keen to hone their English writing skills and engage in English-language discussion. My case study is a thread in the "World" folder entitled "Are the French Awakening?" (thread 21373) in which discussion occurs in both English and French. Welsh also becomes a language of exchange on a smaller scale, and signoffs and greetings in other languages (Italian, German) commonly occur (although these do not necessarily denote proficiency in those languages). This thread is, then, an example of something approaching ongoing public intercultural discussion that doesn't replicate the classroom, something generally imagined to be commonplace in cyberspace, but in fact comparatively rare.

During the six week period from 3 October until 14 November 2003, this thread attracted 401 postings from 43 contributors, whose cultural affiliation (gleaned through what they revealed in their postings) and language use defied geographical borders.<sup>10</sup> Participants included:

- at least ten Francophones writing in English and occasionally French (providing eleven of the first seventeen messages, and thus outnumbering Anglophone participants at the outset);<sup>11</sup>
- two Anglophones writing extensively in French as well as English, several others using French in passing or learning French, still others with experience of living in France;
- a French-English bilingual and an Anglophone also communicating in Welsh.

Thus a significant proportion of contributors were functional in more than one language, and indeed this group contributed 194 (48.4%) of the 401 postings. Most did not identify as current language students, but nevertheless identified as language enthusiasts or indeed lifelong learners. Cultural identity and intercultural experiences were often foregrounded in support of message content.

Examining the thread, we find that movement between languages is fluid. FDevraie (an Englishwoman living in France) and frogoff (a self-described "Parisian cockney", French-born, English-educated), for example, oscillate between French and English as they negotiate which language will be the primary one for discussing their adaptation from British to French work practices (#129, #133, #135).<sup>12</sup> Welshman DaiSmallcoal's postings are just as likely to be in French as in English (or indeed, more often than not, combine the two, eg. #214). Issues of language and culture are a recurrent topic throughout the thread: the level of French spoken by immigrants in

France; metaphors such as “la gueule de bois”; how and where participants had learnt English or French; the use of acronyms in French. Border crossing is thus both theme and mode of discussion.

The role adopted in many of the postings might be termed an “interculturalist” one: the goal is intercultural exchange of ideas as much as L2 language practice, and participants situate themselves at cultural intersections. The fact that a critical mass of plurilingual participants are active on this thread from its outset makes this position more readily available than usual to participants. However, the interculturalist position, where it is adopted, does not simply displace the other speaking positions outlined earlier, as we shall see.

Firstly, we find that the learner identity has not been abandoned or superseded. Integrated into the discussion is a certain amount of feedback on language use: surprise is expressed that frogoff and frenchval are really French (their English didn’t suggest it); and language errors are corrected. In French, feedback on errors of gender, register, spelling, and adjective agreement is offered and appreciated (#223, #230-234, #271, #300, #303). Correction of Welsh also occurs (#300, #302, #363). These corrections are just as detailed as those on the language learners’ sites; the difference is that they have not become an end in themselves; rather they are interspersed with discussion. Participants are not only garnering useful linguistic feedback but having a genuine conversation. In addition, feedback on linguistic inaccuracy is often mutual and functions as a gesture of inclusion; having your language errors corrected becomes a mark of insider status.

Secondly, we find that this thread, which thus far might seem exemplary in its congenial cohabitation of languages and cultures, started with an invitation to rant, and still comprises a certain amount of ranting. An American with Cajun connections – fdday2 – starts the thread with some French-baiting:

It seems there is a new willingness in France to look in the mirror & reevaluate what they see--

<http://www.iht.com/articles/112118.html>

Debate is interesting, but, will they change?

(fdday2, “Are the French Awakening?” #1, 3 Oct 2003, 03:44)

The dig at the French means the thread could have quickly become polarized. The reason it doesn’t is that the initial exchanges are mostly between Francophones writing in English, doubtless attracted to the mention of “the French” in the subject

line. A half a dozen multilingual posters gradually become the kernel of messageboard activity. They position their identities as bicultural, correct each other's French and Welsh, and exchange views on moving country, home renovations, and rugby. When fdday2 later attempts to pursue his anti-French agenda, he is excluded by this group as a "dishonest debater" cum ranter (#316). However, in parallel with the intercultural discussion on this thread is an ongoing slanging match between American provocateur Sean1980 and anyone who will rise to her anti-French taunts ... which at one point or another includes most of the bilingual group.

What at first seemed like borderless communication might more properly be understood as a realignment of borders. And in this revised geography, use of two languages becomes a mark of inclusion. The interculturalists, sympathetic to the use of French and English and seeking out cross-cultural contact, see themselves as engaging in "reasoned discussion" (#216), and the line is drawn against francophobes. Thus we find the explicit exclusion of fdday2 by four of the interculturalists (#345, #354-356, #362, #373), while fdday2 tries in vain to reassert ownership rights and asks the plurilingual contributors to move across to the Sports folder for their Rugby talk (#359). In fact, this is not the first example of collective shunning by the group: AHM47, who attempts to ban the use of French is also repeatedly excluded (#248-249, #263, #270). And in both these cases, the gesture of exclusion becomes a marker of inclusion in the interculturalist group. We could even say that inclusion depends to some extent on exclusion, on defining limits to acceptability and designating what exceeds these borders, or as Kuhnheim (1998) succinctly puts it, "Boundaries are inherent to the definition of subject positions, and a border identity is no exception" (p. 25).

A form of unofficial moderation by participants thus occurs whereby the use of a foreign language regulates insider and outsider status. On the one hand, comprehension of French fosters complicity and conversation among the bilinguals; on the other hand, it implicitly excludes monolinguals when significant content of messages is in French (eg. #302). Furthermore, French is even used aggressively to expel francophobes. AHM47's exhortation to "Get lost....There is no place in this forum for Fu....g frog language" (#246) is countered with expletives in French from the various bilinguals (#248, 249, 263, 270), including an elaborate tirade of colourful abuse (#263), destined for appreciation, not by AHM47, but by other readers of French:

Ce qui est sympa quand on a affaire a des avortons intellectuels c'est qu'on peut les traiter d'enculé de leur mère suceurs de bite de chien malodorantes sans que le systeme censure le post ni que le pauvre cretin ne comprennes quoique ce que ce soit.

*[What's nice when you're dealing with intellectual midgets, is that you can call them [intricate obscenities] without the system censoring the post and without the poor idiot understanding anything at all.]*

Ydon't you agree ?

that what you get when you are too mentally lazy to learn other people language.

I enjoy English language, but my mental horizon is not limited to it.

(frenchval, "Are the French Awakening?" #263, 8 Nov 2003, 09:53)

It is noteworthy that the exclusion of ranters does not eliminate ranting, Indeed the exclusion itself takes the form of ranting, albeit elaborate ranting in French to bypass the automatic censor. And interestingly, these rants expelling anti-French participants give rise to further French lessons, with messages discussing the spelling of "bite" (vulgar term for penis), the adjectival agreement of "malodorantes" (foul-smelling), and whether "chien" (dog) should be in the plural or not (#300 #303, cf. #271).

In this thread, then, we see that not only are the identities of interculturalist and ranter not clearly opposed or separate, but neither are those of discussant and learner, or indeed ranter and learner.

The lack of separation between these speaking positions is particularly obvious in a paradoxical participant. SickofRosbif is a curious case: although his level of English is not advanced, SickofRosbif does not identify with the kind of learner position seen on the Unilang and BBC boards, but launches into debate, hovering between the other roles we have discussed: on the one hand, his pseudonym is a mix of English and French, suggesting an interculturalist attitude, but on the other hand it positions him as anti-English – *rosbif* (roast beef) is a French epithet for the English – suggesting a propensity to rant. Further combining the contradictory profiles of language enthusiast and monocultural ranter, he rails at the Anglophones in their own language, or at least his approximation of it, using rant as a vehicle for language practice (#146, #147, #202, #228). Although no-one attempts to correct the obvious deficiencies in his English, his points are taken up patiently by interculturalists FDevraie (#155) and sarahg26 (#229). The interculturalist aspect of his identity is reinforced when he, in turn, corrects sarahg26's language error in a flirtatious French lesson on gender (#230). Rather than predetermined by skills and mindsets,

SickofRosbif's position is forged through ongoing participation, illustrating Burkhalter's argument that – online as elsewhere – “Identity is interactionally negotiated” (Burkhalter, 1999, p. 66).

## Conditions for successful participation

The constant shifting between speaking positions in the Indy discussion thread suggests that what distinguishes successful intercultural Internet discussion is more complex than participants adopting a particular role or attitude. Comparing the various discussion sites, one is initially tempted to wonder how language learners might be weaned from seeing themselves above all as learners to seeing themselves as practitioners of a language, able to engage in discussion. And one might also ask how they might be encouraged away from ranting and towards an intercultural perspective. Analysis of the case study, however, suggests that these are the wrong questions, that the various kinds of participation cannot be understood in terms of a linear progression, whereby unproductive speaking positions are supplanted by more effective ones. The active participation in multilingual discussion of the various Indy contributors does not mean that they have ceased to see themselves as language learners. In fact they take advantage of any opportunity that presents itself for practising and improving their language skills: frenchval (who writes explicitly of this strategy) in English (#306), DaiSmallcoal in French (#222), and frogoff in Welsh (#265). And they are not above the finicky language corrections that preoccupy the learner boards to the exclusion of all else. Rather than progressing beyond the learner role, they move between the positions of learner and discussant: their identity as a learner flickers in and out of focus.

Similarly, the path from ranter to “interculturalist” is not a one-way journey of enlightenment, but a well-trodden track in both directions. Participants find that in order to pursue bilingual discussion, they need to draw the line and do a little ranting from time to time to assert their values. The structural similarity between ranting and the expulsion of ranters means that the same participants are engaged in both intercultural discussion and the exchange of insults, displaying both the best and the worst of intercultural communication: frogoff (#17), frenchval (#193), DaiSmallcoal (#270) and sarahg26 (#373) all lose patience and stoop to name-calling to ward off anti-French postings. Clearly we should not confuse cultural openness with “niceness”: displays of intolerance may be just as fundamental to elaborating and defending an interculturalist identity as displays of tolerance (cf. Rosello, 1998, on the

need to “decline” stereotypes). But even committed interculturalists themselves are not immune to the occasional xenophobic outburst: FDevraie’s insights into the French mindset tip into a critical “rant” about French hypocrisy (#41), as she herself recognizes (#45). And conversely, even confirmed ranter fdday2 is drawn into measured discussion with HijodePuta of the difficulties of living abroad (#120-127). This means that eradicating culture-bashing and abuse from civilized debate is not simply a question of excluding narrow-minded participants. Despite the overall impression, ranters and interculturalists are not stable identities, and are not separate groups of people.

Thus, successful intercultural Internet discussion depends not on participants progressing from one role or identity to a better one, but rather, on their capacity to shift between a repertoire of positions, even contradictory positions. Here it is useful to adapt Goffman’s concept of “footing” (1981, p. 128) to the text-based genre of public Internet discussion: contributors establish a footing – a stance or an alignment – with other participants through their projection of a self in their message, and then need to shift footing to manage and to respond to the evolution of the exchange. Although shifts of footing are common in various “forms of talk”, the need for footing to be renegotiated is constant in public Internet discussion, due to the complexity of the participation framework, which is far greater than that of key-pal exchanges and rivals that of the conversation in public discussed by Goffman. This is because, in Internet discussion, “bystanders” (messageboard readers) can legitimately take the floor at any time and become “ratified participants” (Goffman, 1981, p. 132) by contributing a message. Although one may direct one’s message to a particular participant, the addressee is effectively multiple, ever-changing, and may indeed consist of “anyone who’s there in vast cyberspace” as Parousia puts it. The requirement to align oneself anew and manage disruptions is incessant.

We see from the case study that the interculturalists are adept at changes of footing. It is by avoiding becoming entrenched in a single stance (whether learner or combatant) that they can check details of grammar, gather tips on repairing window shutters, and chastise those who object to the direction in which they’re taking the thread, while they discuss American justice and French attitudes to change. The border-crossing engaged in here is as much between speaking positions as between languages and cultures.

The implication for language learners is that “learner” needs to be considered as only one possible footing among many available to them in a second language. It need not

be the entry point to an exchange unless it lends weight to the discussion underway,<sup>13</sup> but can become a salient facet of their identity when a particular opportunity for learning arises. Through experimenting with a range of speaking positions highlighting aspects of the self other than their foreignness and lack of native language competence, students can learn to position themselves so as to assert their experience and knowledge and participate as equals in intercultural Internet discussion on topics of shared interest.

Adopting a particular role is not, however, sufficient to guarantee a successful intercultural exchange. Footing cannot be decided unilaterally; it is relational and must be negotiated through interaction. Aligning oneself as an interculturalist, keen to exchange cultural perceptions, is one thing; having that role acknowledged and confirmed in responses such that the discussion can continue down that path is another. It is thus important, not only to be able to participate in discussion in roles other than those of learner and polemicist, but also to be able to shift footing in response to the various uptakes of one's messages, and to find or create opportunities for one's footing to be recognized and responded to by others.

Parousia's thread on the Unilang French forum provides an example of a determined attempt to adjust frame and shift footing. Self-identifying as both an American seeking to understand cultural difference and as a language enthusiast, Parousia is repeatedly positioned by her respondents as first and foremost a language learner. She responds in learner mode, graciously accepting and commenting on all corrections, but refuses to accept this as her only speaking position. Shifting her footing, she unfailingly relaunches questions of culture designed to tempt JunMing into a response that goes beyond the language lesson, until her intercultural overtures are finally rewarded.

FDevraie on the "Indy" board, on the other hand, adopts a less resolute, but equally fruitful approach: she takes up an invitation to shift footing provided by another participant. Although FDevraie's first posting is a lengthy grumble about the French (#41), frogoff responds to the evidence of her language skills by sending her a message in French about her cultural origins (#42). This is the only aspect of her identity – indeed of her posting – that frogoff takes up and she adjusts her footing to meet it, recasting herself as an expatriate with split allegiances, which leads to a prolonged intercultural exchange about adapting to life across the Channel.

Frogoff's message shows that a strategic intervention can open a space for intercultural exchange. For while individual participants may be unable to determine the uptake of their own messages in public cyberspace, they can select both the correspondents to whom they reply and the aspects of those correspondents' identities that they affirm in their response. Frogoff identifies a speaker of French and English like himself and creates an opportunity for FDevraie to realign herself by filling the speaking position he opens for her. In parallel fashion, sarahg26 presents herself to SickofRosbif as wounded by French-bashing (highlighting what they have in common) and signs off with Viva le France (*sic*, #229). This prompts SickofRosbif to shift footing, cease his tirade against Anglo-hegemony, and in turn confirm Sarah's alignment as a language and culture enthusiast by picking up her French gender error and using it as the basis for a conciliatory lesson in Franco-American relations (#230).

## Conclusion

"Vive le global-bled!" says ALAINRUDAZ of the discussion board ("Are the French Awakening?" #104), substituting "bled" – an isolated backwater – for "village". Yes, the forum has global access, but it is nonetheless often a place of entrenched positions, marked distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and small town pettiness. Although it offers unparalleled opportunities for cross-border exchanges, taking advantage of these is not necessarily easy or self-evident. For the outsider, communicating in this environment requires practice in aligning oneself in relation to other participants and continually adjusting one's position in the light of multiple and diverse responses. And the key to thriving is to open up spaces for others to affirm and mirror one's stance while deflecting attempts to close down those spaces. Rather than borderless communication, the public Internet discussion forum is characterized by shifting borders, but with adroit footwork, language learners can patrol these to their advantage.

## Appendix 1

Indicators used to identify intercultural exchanges include:

- *explicit self-identification as a cultural outsider*: apologies for linguistic errors; questions as to the eligibility of foreigners as participants; expressions of ignorance of cultural practices;



- *implicit self-identification*: speaking position, use of 'us' and 'them'
- *linguistic behaviour*: atypical language errors; use of non-standard language; use of a foreign language; comments on linguistic accuracy
- *cultural labelling by other participants* e.g. 'Typical Parisian!' 'Clearly you're no Brit.'
- *names, pseudonym*
- *knowledge of current affairs and cultural practices*
- *cultural allusions*: repertoires of assumed cultural knowledge

## References

- Benson, P. (2002) Rethinking the relationship of self-access and autonomy. *Self-Access Language Learning* (5), 4-10, <http://lc.ust.hk/HASALD/newsletter/newsletterSept02.pdf> (30 June 2006).
- Benson, P., & Voller, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London; New York: Longman.
- Burkhalter, B. (1999). Reading race online: Discovering racial identity in Usenet discussions. In M. A. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in Cyberspace* (pp. 60-75). London: Routledge. **Dery,**
- M. (ed.) (1994). *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Gottlieb, N. (2003). Language, representation and power: Burakumin and the Internet. In N. Gottlieb & M. McLelland (Eds.), *Japanese Cybercultures* (pp. 191-204). London ; New York: Routledge.
- Hanna, B.E. (2002). *Plus ça change...: Social change and new cultural practices: The case of French Internet fora*. Proceedings of the 2002 Social Change in the 21st Century Conference, QUT, 22nd November 2002, [http://www.socialchange.qut.edu.au/conferences/socialchange/docs/conf\\_paper\\_s2002/HannaBarbara.pdf](http://www.socialchange.qut.edu.au/conferences/socialchange/docs/conf_paper_s2002/HannaBarbara.pdf)(30 June 2006).
- Hanna, B. E. (2004). Face off: Identity in French on-line debate. *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41(3), 102-114.

Hanna, B. E., & de Nooy, J. (2003). A funny thing happened on the way to the forum: Electronic discussion and foreign language learning. *Language Learning and Technology*, 7(1), 71-85, <http://ilt.msu.edu/vol7num1/hanna/default.html>.

Hanna, B. E., & de Nooy, J. (2004). Negotiating cross-cultural difference in electronic discussion. *Multilingua*, 23(3), 257-281.

Herring, S. (1996). Posting in a different voice: Gender and ethics in computer-mediated communication. In C. Ess (Ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication* (pp. 115-145). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections (IECC). <http://www.iecc.org/> (30 June 2006).

Kuhnheim, J. S. (1998). The Economy of Performance: Gómez-peña's New World Border. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44(1), 24-35.

Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

O'Dowd, R. (2006). *Telecollaboration and the Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Munich: Langenscheidt

Rosello, M. (1998). *Declining the Stereotype*. Hanover, NH; London: University Press of New England.

Thurlow, C., Lengel, L., & Tomic, A. (2004). *Computer Mediated Communication: Social interaction and the Internet*. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

Woodward, K. (1997). Concepts of identity and difference. In K. Woodward (Ed.), *Identity and Difference*(pp. 8-29). London: Sage.

Zickmund, S. (2000). Approaching the radical other: the discursive culture of cyberhate. In D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy (Eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (pp. 237-253). London; New York: Routledge.

#### **Public Internet Forums cited**

BBC Messageboards <http://www.bbc.co.uk/messageboards/> (30 June 2006).

BBC Learning English Messageboards <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/mble> (30 June 2006).

BigPumpkins.com Message Board <http://www.bigpumpkins.com/msgboard/> (30 June 2006).

The Cardiothoracic Surgery

Network <http://www.ctsnet.org/sections/newsandviews/discussions/> (30 June 2006).

Delphi Forums <http://www.delphiforums.com/> (30 June 2006).

"Idle Chit Chat" board (under Current

Events) <http://forums.delphiforums.com/Indiechatters> (30 June 2006).

Independent Argument forums (archived) <http://forums.delphiforums.com/id-argument/> (30 June 2006).

"Are the French awakening" (archived) <http://forums.delphiforums.com/id-argument/messages/?msg=21373.1> (30 June 2006).

Independent Argument - Redux <http://forums.delphiforums.com/2004election> (30 June 2006).

Fender Discussion Page <http://www.fenderforum.com/> (30 June 2006).

Guardian Unlimited: The Talk <http://talk.guardian.co.uk/> (30 June 2006).

The Independent Online Edition <http://www.independent.co.uk/> (30 June 2006).

*New York*

*Times* Forums <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/readersopinions/index.html> (30 June 2006).

Unilang <http://home.unilang.org/main/forum/> (30 June 2006).

"A n'importe qui est là dans la vaste espace

cybère" <http://home.unilang.org/main/forum/viewtopic.php?t=5476> (30 June 2006).

## Notes

1- This paper stems from research undertaken for a larger project, *Negotiating Cultural Difference in Internet Discussion*, conducted jointly with Barbara E. Hanna, on public web-based discussion in French and English, in which we have studied

cultural patterns in online discussion and the negotiation of mismatches in cultural expectations (see Hanna 2002, 2004; Hanna & de Nooy 2003, 2004).

2- "Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections" claims on its website to have distributed over 28,000 requests from teachers for e-mail partner classes since its creation in 1992.

3- I use "speaking position" (and, more loosely, "identity") to refer to a role ready for a subject to occupy within a discourse. This reflects an understanding of identity in terms of a discursive practice negotiated in situ, as opposed to a more traditional view of identity as the expression of a stable, authentic self (cf. Woodward, 1997, and Thurlow et al, 2004).

4- My thanks to research assistants Lara Cain, Peter Cowley, Diana Jones, Wendy Ward, Carol Wical, Sonia Wilson, and Emma Woodley for monitoring the Internet sites for this project.

5- The distinction Dery makes between "flaming" ("Exchanging insults electronically", 1994, p. 322) and "rant" ("On-line demagoguery in which users give themselves over to inspired hyperbole and wild, zany capitalization and punctuation", p. 324) is principally one of length, and in this paper I use "rant" to refer generally to online verbal abuse.

6- Herring's discussion refers to English-language forums. Examination of the codes of conduct of forums based in a variety of cultures and languages, however, suggests that the inflammatory nature of public Internet discussion is a widespread issue, not restricted to Anglophone cultures.

7- Quotations appear as originally posted, with no corrections to spelling and grammar. Italicized translations within square brackets are mine.

8- See Benson (2002) on the distinction between autonomy and self-access.

9- Unilang also offers five general discussion forums, separate from the "Virtual School of Languages", but only in English. These "non-language forums" include "Politics" and "Cultures", and although intercultural discussions certainly occur here, the propensity to rant is once again a factor, with prominent warnings about behaviour and the exclusion of users who breach the guidelines.

10- After a lull in activity, the thread was twice revived (11 December 2003-8 January 2004, 137 messages; 12 February-8 April 2004, 48 messages) before being archived 6 May 2004.

11- In fact, Francophones furnished 147 (36.7%) of the 401 messages, however 88 of these were by "frogoff," a Frenchman educated in England and seemingly equally at ease in both languages.

12- Numbers prefaced by # refer to individual messages within the thread.

13- Hanna (2004) gives examples of self-presentation online where a particular aspect of a contributor's identity is foregrounded in order to advance an argument (p. 114).