INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN HERRING, COMPUTATIONAL SCIENCE AND LINGUISTICS PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF INDIANA, USA

Interviewed by **Flávio Souza**
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Susan C. Herring is a Professor at the School of Library and Information Science and an Adjunct Professor at the Linguistics Department at Indiana University, USA. Her first intellectual passion was for foreign languages. In 1991, Herring got her PhD in Linguistics from the University of Berkeley, California, whose research object was the study of Tamil, a South Dravidian language. During the 90s, her research interests shifted from traditional linguistics towards computer-mediated communication (CMC). Herring was one of the first researchers to apply discourse analysis methods to CMC, initially with a focus on gender issues. She consolidated discourse analysis methods in CMC in respect to interactional coherence and changes in CMC along the years. Her current interests are online multimodal discourse analysis methods and other kinds of communication mediated by technologies such as textual communication, videoconference, and communication mediated by robots and avatars. We are grateful to Professor Herring for her kindness and interest to tell us, in this edition of Palimpsesto, whose topic is Language and Digital Communication, about her new projects, gender issues, social and political movements, cultural variety, and methodological issues in the context of CMC.

Palimpsesto

Are you more into telepresence robots these days? Are you changing the course of your research? Do you feel you have exhausted CMDA topics? Tell us about the projects you and your center are working on.

Herring

I got interested in telepresence robots when I was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Research in the Social and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford three years ago. There are several companies in the San Francisco Bay area working on the cutting edge of telepresence robotics, and I took the opportunity while I was there to educate myself. I ended up buying a telepresence robot for my personal use (I now have two). Once I started using the robot, though, I became curious about communication involving a person using such a robot (which is basically video conferencing system on wheels that can be controlled by someone from a distance through a web interface) --what I call robot-mediated communication – and I'm starting to research this. But I haven't abandoned CMC at all. Recently I created an interdisciplinary CMC research center at Indiana University that hosted two symposia this past spring. And I'm about to start work on a book about multimodal CMDA. Multimodality is currently a big issue in computer-mediated discourse methodologically and theoretically, but nobody is really tying together all the aspects of the problem yet. That's what I want to do – propose methods for analyzing multimodal discourse online, present some analyses, and develop a broad theory of multimodal CMC that includes robot-mediated communication alongside other technologically-mediated types such as textual CMC, videoconferencing, and avatar-mediated communication.

Palimpsesto

You have claimed that CMDA differs from other forms of discourse analysis in that its descriptive and interpretive apparatus crucially takes into account the technological affordances of CMC systems. However, it does not look as if what is happening within CMC is only a matter of verbal interaction through electronic means. Could you elaborate on this?

Herring

That is absolutely correct, and that is why my attention is currently focused on multimodal CMC. Over the years, I've made a couple of attempts to expand the CMDA

paradigm to include multimodal content, but with limited success. CMDA is grounded in a linguistic approach to analyzing verbal language, but CMC these days includes nonverbal elements such as memes, emoji, and animated GIFs. The perspective I'm currently developing takes a step back from typed text, considering it to be one among several channels through which people "converse" through digital media. The new approach incorporates methodological insights from semiotics and content analysis, as well as discourse analysis.

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You've discussed the gender gap in technology jobs. What about in CMC – is the gender gap also widening there? If so, in what respects?

Herring

The gender gap in technology jobs is not actually widening, but it is persistent, which is troubling. It has also been attracting more media attention in recent years, which may give the impression that the gap is worsening. I think it's fair to say that the gap is worsening relative to society's expectations, since more people nowadays expect that women can and should work in the technology sector. As for CMC, the situation is also somewhat complex. On the one hand, women and men use CMC about equally these days -- the number of female users has grown greatly since the early days of the Web, and women outnumber men on some social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. On the other hand, and perhaps relatedly, online harassment of women has gotten worse. In the early days of the Internet, I analyzed several cases of men harassing and silencing women who expressed their views online, especially as regards gender issues. Since then, online harassment of women has become commonplace, with verbal abuse taking the form of rape threats and death threats. Some commentators are calling this "gender terrorism." I see it is the logical outcome of the Libertarian value system of the early hackers and developers of the Internet, a system that values absolute free speech and limited accountability. I have always argued that this value system favors (white, male) bullies at the expense of more vulnerable populations, including women, minorities, and LGBTQ individuals. Recent extended harassment episodes such as

#gamergate illustrate how truly dysfunctional an online culture based on this value system can be.

Palimpsesto

How do you see the proliferation of social and political movements (Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and The Coffee Party) in relation to the affordances of digital media?

Herring

The networked affordances of digital media enable people who are geographically dispersed to organize and come together (often anonymously) around a common cause. This allows members of groups who share an agenda to lobby more effectively for their rights, exchange information, organize political action, and so forth, as in the case of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Coffee Party. Not all such movements are pro-social, though – hate groups and terrorist groups also mobilize supporters online, leveraging formal and informal networks to disseminate propaganda and recruit followers. ISIS is a case in point. Even though ISIS propaganda videos are banned from major social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter for their violent content, including beheadings, ISIS uploads its videos to sites like Liveleaks and the Internet Archive, where users are allowed to upload information anonymously. These videos are then shared through social media networks by ISIS supporters. On Twitter alone, by the end of last year there were over 45,000 ISIS-supporting accounts.[1] Moreover, the online spread of ISIS propaganda is effective -- ISIS has recruited tens of thousands of foreign militants through social media. I don't believe any pro-social movement has had quite as much impact from social media use, although the available affordances are the same.

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[1](Berger & Morgan, 2015).

Palimpsesto

How do you feel cultural variance is reflected through the Internet? Is it possible that a dominant culture, such as that of the U.S., is enforcing cultural homogeneity in cyberspace?

Herring

The English language and Western (especially US) culture have had an enormous impact on the Internet, since the Internet originated in, and spread from, the US. Other cultures and languages have had to adapt to Western norms inherent in the Internet from its inception. However, it would be incorrect to say that Western culture is currently enforcing cultural homogeneity in cyberspace. Other cultures are increasingly using the Internet for national and local communication, including in their native languages, although English is used as well, especially to communicate with the wider world. That is, a kind of global diglossia is emerging, with English as the international lingua franca and national and local languages used for intranational communication.

Palimpsesto

What gaps can you point out in CMC research and what are the main challenges for the field of Linguistics? What are the major themes that need to be researched in terms of language? Is there anyone researching digital bullying linguistically, for example?

Herring

There are several kinds of gaps. Broadly speaking, any online behavior could be analyzed as computer-mediated discourse from a linguistic perspective; online bullying is a potentially rewarding example of this, or online social movements, or crowdsourcing…. Language use in newer CMC modes also need to be analyzed; not much linguistic analysis has been carried out yet on social media such as Snapchat and WhatsApp, or multimodal CMC in general. Also, certain linguistic phenomena have yet to receive much attention, even in textual

CMC research. These include presupposition, inferencing, implicature, and deixis (especially important in graphical/visual environments) in the domain of pragmatics, and ideology from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. Syntactic characteristics of CMC (as compared to those of traditional speaking and writing) have also been understudied.

Palimpsesto

What discourse analysis methodological tools have proven insufficient to account for CMC?

Herring

I haven't yet encountered a discourse analysis method that wasn't useful in some way for analyzing CMC. Each method can be considered a different lens through which to view online language and communication. Each method provides a particular perspective and analytical tools, and suggests certain questions to explore. Some methods do require adaptations, however. Examples of adaptations include the introduction of 'message' or 'post' as a unit of analysis in CMC research; complexification of the notion of the conversational 'turn;' theoretical and analytical means to address the non-adjacency of 'turns' in multiparticipant CMC; reliance on gender (and age, etc.) identifiers other than self-report and physical cues; the introduction of new categories to describe new CMC phenomena; and the need for the analyst to consider the affordances and constraints of the technological medium. I could list many others. The last two adaptations are the most general and the most important for computer-mediated discourse analysis overall.

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What advice would you give to young CMC researchers, especially linguists, and how can they improve research methodologies?

Herring

My advice to those researchers would be: Borrow from tried-and-true language-focused methodologies; take what is useful from them. At the same time, don't be overly reverential toward them; feel free to modify existing methods as needed to address new phenomena, or innovate new methods. Sometimes you need to let your methods emerge from the data. You may not feel comfortable doing this at first, but with time and experience, greater confidence will come.