

## Plenary 3

Friday 12 September h. 9:00-10:00, Auditorium

### Postdigital intimacies in the Anglosphere: Implications for human connection and English language practices

Caroline Tagg (The Open University, UK) [caroline.tagg@open.ac.uk](mailto:caroline.tagg@open.ac.uk)

#### Abstract

*Charlie, a 40-year-old language teacher, is eating lunch at home watching the winter Olympics when he receives a typically long and chatty WhatsApp message from his former colleague, Abby, and an iMessage from his brother, Seth. He replies immediately to Seth and the two engage in light-hearted banter as Charlie finishes lunch and starts work. After a subsequent trip to the dentist and a football game, it is not until Charlie is in bed that night that he has time to give Abby's message the attention he feels it deserves, and in his response he attends carefully to each of her updates.*

In my talk, I explore the personal, relational and linguistic implications of recent developments in mobile communication practices, with a focus on mobile messaging use in the UK. Like other countries in and beyond the Anglosphere, the UK can be described as a 'postdigital' society; that is, a society transformed by new technologies, in which the digital is no longer experienced as salient or novel but as a mundane part of everyday life (Cramer, 2014) and communication (Bhatt, 2023). The challenge facing English language scholars is how to approach, capture and analyse communication practices that sit at the 'online-offline nexus' (Blommaert, 2019) where digital interaction is coordinated in various ways with physical action (Androutsopoulos, forthcoming). My interest is in how postdigitality shapes, and is shaped by, our human need for intimacy. Intimacy is characterized by deep care, comfort in physical and emotional proximity, and a profound understanding of each other (Berlant, 1998). It is enacted in part through language, and develops in contexts characterised by vulnerability, consent, self-disclosure, reciprocity, safety, appreciation, and acceptance. The notion of 'postdigital intimacies' (Evans & Ringrose, 2025; Tagg & Thompson, forthcoming) is used to critically explore the ways in which human intimacies are shaped by an increasingly networked and mobile society in which relationships are established and maintained across an array of physical and digitally mediated spaces. How do people like Charlie, Seth and Abby achieve human connection when relationships are carried out at-a-distance through mobile-mediated conversations punctuated by other physical and digital activities and encounters?

To address this question, I draw on examples of postdigital interaction collected as part of a British Academy-funded research project called 'Mobile Conversations in Context'. The project positions individual users at the centre of their communicative practices by adopting a 'day-in-the-life' approach (Tagg & Lyons, 2021) which looks across the multiple and often parallel or intertwined communicative encounters in which a networked individual engages during a typical day. It combines interactional messaging data with interviews and time-use diaries collected from twelve UK-based participants aged 35-76, which are analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to understand how postdigital intimacies are expressed and managed through distinct interactional strategies across messaging apps. My analysis of extracts from participants' mobile messaging interactions shows how varying levels of intimacy are co-constructed not only through interlocutors' semiotic choices but also through the rhythms of each exchange, and the ways in which interlocutors synchronise their involvement through reciprocity and affiliation. Analysis also reveals how each mobile conversation shapes and is shaped by the everyday offline and online activities in which interlocutors are simultaneously engaged, showing how postdigital intimacies must be understood in relation to an individual's repertoire across communicative and social practices, and to the immediate concerns, everyday activities and longer-term priorities of those involved.

Overall, the focus on postdigital intimacies highlights how, in an increasingly networked world, humans are adroit at harnessing and exploiting new communication technologies to achieve familiar personal and relational goals, whilst further transforming what it means to be human. I finish by arguing that there are implications for all English language scholars, given the increasing encroachment of digital technologies into all areas of social life, across and beyond the Anglosphere.

#### References

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