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# **Review of *Researching Language and Digital Communication: A Student Guide* by Christian Ilbury, Routledge, 2025, 222 pp., ISBN 9781032457499**

Christian Ilbury's *Researching Language and Digital Communication: A Student Guide* (Routledge, 2025) is a timely contribution to the expanding field of digital communication studies. Written with students in mind, the book introduces key concepts, debates, and methodologies in a way that is both accessible and conceptually rigorous. Its sociolinguistic orientation will be of particular value to students and early-career researchers who wish to explore how language varies and functions in digital contexts.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by situating the volume within sociolinguistic approaches to studying language in digital settings. Ilbury explains that the book's main aim is to introduce and describe sociolinguistic research on interactions and language varieties in digitally mediated settings, with a particular focus on language variation. He presents the book as a student guide to researching digital communication, designed to equip readers with both conceptual tools and methodological resources. Ilbury also notes his preference for the terms "digital communication" and "digitally mediated communication", which he adopts as the book's central designations. The chapter closes with a concise outline of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 defines *digital communication* and relates it to earlier notions such as *computer-mediated communication*. Ilbury then introduces the field of sociolinguistics, outlining its focus on language variation and social context. The chapter goes on to trace how sociolinguistic research on digital activities has developed over time. It starts with early "first-wave" studies that concentrated on orthographic features, non-standard spellings, and abbreviations, often described under labels such as "netspeak" or "text speak". Ilbury critically examines these early

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perspectives, noting their limitations in capturing the complexity of online practices. The discussion then turns to more recent sociolinguistic approaches, which take account of multimodal communication, identity work, and the permeability of online and offline domains.

Chapter 3 examines platform affordances, audience design, and communicative contexts, with particular attention to how these factors intersect in digital interaction. Affordances are divided into *high-level affordances*, such as persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability, which cut across different platforms, and *low-level affordances*, which are specific to a given medium, such as the “like” button on Facebook. The discussion then moves to audience design, understood as the ways in which speakers shape their speech in response to the expectations and norms of actual or anticipated audiences (Bell, 1984). This leads to the concept of the imagined audience, which refers to how users orient their communication towards audiences that may be multiple, overlapping, or only partially knowable. Finally, the chapter addresses the phenomenon of context collapse, whereby different audiences and contexts merge in digital spaces.

Chapter 4 discusses sociolinguistic approaches to identity and extends them to digital contexts. It begins by showing how language use indexes social categories and signals identities. It then turns to theories of online identity. Early perspectives emphasised anonymity and experimentation with alternative selves. These are contrasted with later research on social networking sites, where online and offline identities often converge. The chapter also considers the affordances of anonymity, which can be enabling for minoritised groups but are also linked to less positive practices such as trolling and deception. From there, Ilbury examines online communities, where users establish norms, values, and linguistic practices in participatory cultures. The chapter concludes with internet memes, discussed as instances of collective identity work. Shared humour, language styles, and cultural references serve as markers of community belonging.

Chapter 5 introduces methodological foundations for researching digital communication. It begins with guidance on developing a project idea and formulating research questions, often grounded in everyday online observations. The chapter then turns to research ethics, addressing issues such as the status of the “public domain”, questions of consent, and the researcher’s positionality, especially in relation to minoritised communities. Ilbury next outlines several sociolinguistic approaches to studying digital communication, including variationist, corpus-based, digital ethnographic, and blended offline–online methods. The chapter concludes with practical advice on digital tools and datasets that can support the collection and analysis of online language data.

Chapter 6 introduces big data approaches in sociolinguistics, focusing on the emergence of computational sociolinguistics. These methods draw on large-scale datasets from platforms such as Twitter to study patterns of language variation and change. A key example is Twitter dialectology, illustrated through a case study of regional lexical variation across the UK. Research of this kind shows how geolocated tweets can be used to map dialect features and compare them with results from traditional surveys. The chapter also notes the limitations of big data approaches, including difficulties in inferring user demographics, the influence of platform-specific affordances, and the risk of oversimplifying linguistic practices.

Chapter 7 discusses language and interaction, focusing on small data approaches that analyse digital communication in detail. It begins with language alternation, distinguishing between code-switching, understood as the systematic use of two or more languages, and translanguaging, which treats linguistic resources as part of a single repertoire. The chapter then turns to stylisation, where speakers adopt voices or varieties outside their usual repertoire, often for parody or performance in digital spaces. Ilbury also considers politeness, showing how users manage face-threatening acts in everyday online interactions, and metadiscourse, where participants comment explicitly on language varieties and styles. The chapter concludes by noting the limitations of small data approaches, which capture interactional nuance but offer less generalisability than large-scale studies.

Chapter 8 discusses mixed-method approaches to digital communication. It presents these as a way of combining large-scale and small-scale perspectives, allowing researchers to examine both general patterns and detailed interactional practices. The chapter illustrates this with three case studies: Androutsopoulos (2021) on the “indignation mark” in Reddit posts, Ilbury (2019) on stylised performances of African American Vernacular English on Twitter, and Lopez & Kübler (2025) on hate speech annotation using computational and interactional methods. These examples show how mixed-method approaches can integrate quantitative and qualitative tools in the study of digital communication.

Chapter 9 addresses perspectives on media influence and their relevance for sociolinguistics. It begins with earlier debates about whether media can drive language change, noting the scepticism of sociolinguists such as Trudgill (2014) and Labov (2001). The discussion then turns to the concept of mediatization, which emphasises the embedding of media in everyday life. The chapter concludes with the post-digital turn, where digital technologies are understood as ordinary aspects of interaction rather than as exceptional phenomena.

Overall, *Researching Language and Digital Communication* offers a comprehensive and accessible overview. Its balanced coverage of small- and large-scale methods, coupled with clear explanations of key theoretical concepts, makes it particularly well suited to student audiences. The inclusion of case studies, practical advice on tools and datasets, and reflections on ethics further enhance its value as a teaching resource. Each chapter is supplemented with suggestions for further reading and short activities, which are useful for students who want to develop their own research projects. Given the format, the issues are presented concisely, but the references make it easy to follow up in more detail. Two points, in particular, resonated with my students: first, the reminder that features often described as “Twitter language” have a longer history and need to be situated in context; and second, the way casual observations are reframed as questions that matter for sociolinguists. I used the book with my own BA seminar group, and their responses confirmed its pedagogical usefulness: they found the clear structure, practical examples, and explicit discussion of methods especially helpful for thinking about their own research projects. In this way, the book successfully bridges academic and pedagogical aims, serving both as an introduction to the field and as a resource for operationalising research ideas.

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