

Chapter LXVI

Solidarity and Rapport in Social Interaction*

Jung-ran Park

Drexel University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the way online language users enhance social interaction and group collaboration through the computer mediated communication (CMC) channel. For this, discourse analysis based on the linguistic politeness theoretical framework is applied to the transcripts of a real time online chat. Analysis of the data shows that online participants employ a variety of creative devices to signal nonverbal communication cues that serve to build interpersonal solidarity and rapport, as well as by seeking common ground and by expressing agreement online participants increase mutual understanding and harmonious social interaction. This sets the tone of positive interpersonal relationships and decreases the social distance among participants. In turn, this engenders solidarity and proximity, which enhances social interaction through the CMC channel.

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the face-to-face setting, text-based computer mediated communication (CMC) modes impose conversational constraints to language users owing to lack of the contextual cues that are richly available in the face-to-face communication setting (Potter, 2004; Rice & Love, 1987; Witmer, 1998). That is, the CMC modes lack certain face-to-face communication features that facilitate an efficient process for encoding and decoding linguistic and paralinguistic communication among participants (Barnes, 2003; Baron, 1998;

Herring, 1999; Potter, 2004). Paralinguistic features are supra-linguistic features that are added to linguistic elements. Prosodic features, a type of paralinguistic feature, such as high pitch, intonation, pause, tone of voice and accent enable speakers to convey a variety of socio-cognitive as well as emotional meanings.

In addition, the keyboarding required in the CMC channel demands more effort and time than speaking, thus delaying the transference of the communicator's message. Typing also does not deliver nonverbal signals such as gesture and facial expressions that convey interpersonal and

affective stances as well as modifying semantic meanings delivered by the linguistic elements deliver to the hearer. The text-based CMC modes do not afford communication participants use of any of these critical paralinguistic and nonverbal features.

The lack of contextual cues tends to create miscommunication and linguistic ambiguity vis-à-vis face-to-face communication. For example, misinterpretation of messages commonly occurs or constructive criticism can be misunderstood as sarcasm or insult. Thus, information seeking and sharing through the online communication mode frequently involves face threatening acts (FTA). Face threatening acts (FTA) are utterances or actions that threaten a person's public self-image, that is, *face*.

The goal of this chapter is to present the mechanisms by which online language users overcome communicational constraints imposed by the computer mediated communication channel. This chapter also aims to present the manner in which online language users promote active interaction and collaboration for successful information seeking and sharing during group discussion. For this, discourse analysis based on a linguistic politeness theoretical framework is utilized. This chapter closely relates to the communication and social interactional patterns of the various forms of the CMC genre, even though the study deals with a synchronous chat forum.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Linguistic politeness can be seen ultimately as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Lakoff, 1973), as indicated by its principal definitional characteristic as a so-called strategic device for reducing social friction by smoothing social interactions and by avoiding conflict during social encounters. As such, it is encoded within linguistic systems through filtering of given social and cultural attributes. Such linguistic realization can be conspicu-

ously observed in lexicon and conventionalized linguistic elements.

One of these conventionalized lexical elements is "face," a cornerstone in theoretical frameworks of linguistic politeness. Goffman (1967) delineates the concept of face in the following way: "... the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact." Face-work encompasses all verbal and nonverbal expressions and rituals that speech participants abide to maintain and enhance each other's face.

Thus, we observe frequent indirect and ambiguous communication among speech participants in everyday language use. For instance, people tend to be indirect when they disagree with or request something through employment of various verbal and nonverbal expressions, such as the use of hint, humor or lengthy explanation using various lexical and syntactic hedges prior to expressing a disagreement to the previous turn. Such linguistic behavior underscores face-management of speech participants and accordingly underlies the interpersonal and interactive function of language use during social interaction.

Face is paradoxical in that two Janus-like aspects (i.e., *involvement* and *independence*) operate in communication, with differences in degree dependent on the setting and context of communication. The *involvement* aspect of *face* reflects the human need to be involved and connected with others; it concerns a person's needs to be considered as a supporting and approachable member of society. On the other hand, the *independence* aspect of *face* concerns the individuality of participants, reflecting the individual's autonomy and freedom from imposition.

Put another way, regarding these two opposite but interconnected *face* values, human beings have both the innate desire or longing for freedom from connection toward dissociation, independence, avoidance and distance, that is, the *independence/negative face*, as well as the longing for connection, association, interdependence, proximity

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