

# Chapter 5.10

## Linguistics of Computer–Mediated Communication: Approaching the Metaphor

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the embodied metaphor as a means of studying the multifaceted relationship between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and culture. It argues that the embodied metaphor offers a more reliable framework, as opposed to both deterministic and dispositional perspectives, in that it provides a way to understand, explain, and frame the user's adaptive response to CMC. Furthermore, it also argues that culture has the potential to shape interactions by influencing the way metaphors are enacted. The author hopes that the aforementioned approach will provide a new understanding of the interplay between CMC and culture, informing future study design and bridging the existing gap between qualitative and quantitative research through action science.

### INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the study of language has been one of the most fascinating disciplines, combining neurophysiology, anthropology, social psychology, and sociology. In recent years, linguistics has been challenged by the advent of the “new media” whose sensory channel permutations are so high and whose sociological and psychological characteristics are so complicated and intertwined that they stress the very concept of “media discourse.”

With the diffusion of the Internet for civil usage, people who had become familiar with using computers for computational, educational, and leisurely purposes also started engaging in human-to-human interactions *through* machines. Its remarkable simplicity, customization possibility, and flexibility quickly led e-mail to be the killer

application of the Internet all over the world (ITU, 2001; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2003). More recently with the birth of the Web 2.0 paradigm, the blending of old media into “new” hybrid spin-offs accelerated remarkably. Even text-written computer-mediated communication now has its sub-genres.

The spreading of the Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC) also generated interest in computer science and social psychology researchers, who tried to make sense of it. However, in the attempt to provide an explanation, several technical, psychological, and social paradigms blossomed, yet none of them explicitly addressed the increasingly higher proportion of cross-cultural exchanges that had started happening after the Internet spread beyond where it was invented. Despite the diffusion of the Internet and CMC, the raising distributed location of their users, the increasing use of e-mail as a collaborative tool in distributed teams, and the amount of studies and information already collected, laymen and scholars alike neglect the role and weight culture has in shaping e-mail exchanges, and assume unrealistic stands that range from extreme determinism to extreme subjectivism.

The purpose of this chapter is to unfold the relationship between CMC and culture through language by exploring the metaphors behind CMC and how they are enacted in different cultural settings. In doing so, the author openly acknowledges and espouses Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) view of metaphors as cognitive schemes, and relativism as the interplay between subjectivism and objectivism.

In the “Background” section, the literature on CMC, on CMC linguistics, and on cross-cultural studies will spot some reasons of methodological concern. In the “Main Thrust of the Chapter” section, I will explore the metaphors behind CMC and look at them through the lenses of the literature in order to build a model of how culture affects spontaneously occurring computer-mediated exchanges. Finally, in the “Future Trends”

section, I will discuss future scenarios and the limitation of the model, suggesting areas for possible refinement of the model and focus of future research.

## **BACKGROUND**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its linguistics were not specifically investigated with regard to how culture impacts them and their interplay. Therefore, this section is composed of three literature reviews: (a) works on CMC, (b) studies on CMC linguistics, and (c) cross-cultural research.

### **Computer-Mediated Communication**

CMC has been extensively studied from psychological, sociological, and technological perspectives. Quantitative approaches outnumbered qualitative ones (Liu, 2002) and suffered with several methodological issues (Culnan & Markus, 1987; Garton & Wellman, 1995; Lamerichs & Molder, 2003; Walther, 1992, 2002). They focused on short-term interactions in artificially constituted groups whose members participated in the research project due to extrinsic rewards (such as higher course grade, extra-credit, money, etc.) or top-down imposition (such as work-related mandated task, workplace or coursework assignment completion, etc.), therefore the research design often became a confounding factor (Walther, 2002). In many of the aforementioned studies, participants were also asked to evaluate the effects of CMC within *close* categories (Lamerichs & Molder, 2003), pigeon-holing data range, participant experiences, and interpretative schemes in the name of a strong bias in favor of “objectivity.” Often, computer literacy went unaddressed/unassessed, even though it is known to adversely affect interaction outcome (Walther, 2002). Finally, in most quantitative works neither the culture of researchers nor participants was assessed and/or

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