Chapter 5.9

Situating Social Identity through Language Convergence in Online Groups

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ABSTRACT

According to social identity theory, individuals create and maintain their social identity through group membership. During face-to-face interactions within a group, people assess various verbal and nonverbal cues to influence the perceptions of themselves by others. However, in the context of online communication these cues are not as readily available. A screen name can be viewed as part of an individual's "social identity creation": a message that members of online discussion boards interpret and react to while trying to situate themselves within the group. This chapter explores how language convergence can function as a cue that facilitates situating social identity within online in-groups. Results of a content analysis of 400 screen names suggest that the screen names of discussion board members serve as an organizing variable for participants to situate themselves socially within the context of online interaction.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of original visions for the Internet, it has moved beyond the constraints of impersonal and task-oriented interactions. Scholarly research has acknowledged a trend in increasing interpersonal elements within computer-mediated communication (e.g., Pena-Shaff, Martin, & Gay, 2001; Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & Haar, 2002; Tanis & Postmes, 2003; Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Walther, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994; Walther & Tidwell, 1995). Within face-to-face interactions, individuals rely upon nonverbal "cues" and interpersonal rules to guide interaction. However, computer-mediated communication (CMC) does not allow for immediate or visual assessment often relied upon to reduce uncertainty and form impressions in face-to-face settings. Yet, according to Walther and Tidwell (1995), "CMC is not bereft of the cues needed to make varied social judgments" (p. 372). The researchers contend that previous approaches limited the scope of cues to body language and tonality, failing to recognize cues that are inherent within CMC. Giles and Coupland (1991) define language convergence as a "strategy

whereby individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of linguistic/prosodic/non-vocal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze and so on" (p. 63). The present study explored how language convergence can function as a cue within computer-mediated communication that facilitates creating and situating social identity within online in-groups.

BACKGROUND

The Internet is a truly powerful technology that enables numerous opportunities for identity construction. It allows us to think about our identity, and if desired, change ourselves to who we want to be (Chandler, 1998) and construct images of ourselves through various types of self disclosure. Research has argued that the Internet technology is limited to impersonal and task-oriented interactions. Referring to a "cues-filtered out model", Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) state: "In traditional forms of communication, head nods, smiles, eye contact, distance, tone of voice, and other nonverbal behavior give speakers and listeners information they can use to regulate, modify, and control exchanges" (p. 1125). Such a "reduced cues" perspective suggests that CMC lacks nonverbal cues necessary to substantiate interpersonal communication amongst CMC interactants (Connolly, Jessup, & Valacich, 1990; Hiltz, 1975, 1981; Hiltz, Johnson, & Agle, 1978; Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986; Hiltz, Turoff, Johnson, 1989). Within this perspective, CMC is viewed as somewhat inadequate, with the capacity to harm and to keep people from "real" relationships (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). This stands in contrast to the optimistic claims that the Internet can foster new relationships across social and geographical boundaries and create friendships and communities rooted in common interest and concerns (Thurlow et. al., 2004).

Reactions to the "reduced cues" perspective lead to a diverse body of research exploring interpersonal relationships created, maintained, and utilized in cyberspace (Soukup, 2000). This research attempts to identify the social dimensions of interactions mediated through computers (Amaral & Monteiro, 2002; Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Douglas & McGarty, 2001; Kleinman, 2000; Muramatsu & Ackerman, 1998; Pena-Shaff, Martin, & Gay, 2001; Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002; Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & Haar, 2002; Tanis & Postmes, 2003; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Walther, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994; Walther & Tidwell, 1995). As such, it is apparent that communication on the Internet has moved beyond the constraints of impersonal and task-oriented interactions into interpersonal interactions. The cues by which individuals are assessed within CMC may vary. Zhou, Burgoon, Twitchell, Qin, and Nunamaker (2004), contend that we evaluate language choices and make attributions about another's social status, background and education. Despite the surmounting research within this trend, there is a lack of known socially contextual cues within CMC interactions (Tanis & Postmes, 2003). According to Spears et. al. (2002), the exact nature of the interpersonal implications of CMC is still under debate and not well understood.

Situating Social Identity

Our identity is in continuous flux from the time we are cognizant of social realities throughout the remainder of our lives (Hall, 1990). According to social identity theory it is these social realities that shape and form our social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It is through our membership into various social groups that we discover and experiment with social identities in the hope of creating an image of ourselves that is acceptable to the social realities we are invested in (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Furthermore, it is assumed that

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