

# Chapter 10

## Discourse Features in Nigerian Online Discussion Forums

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter investigates discourse features in asynchronous Nigerian discussion forums, which is now becoming a popular medium for discussing issues of interest to many Nigerians. The sample was based on extracts from CONCOMED, a corpus of Nigerian Computer-mediated English Discourse compiled by this researcher between 2006 and 2009. Four threads, one for each year were subjected to analysis based on Herring's (2004) Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) framework. Analysis focused on interaction features of turn-taking, topic focus and coherence. Turn-taking process in the threads was a complex phenomenon characterized by non-sequential turns and adjacency disruptions. Interactants typically self-selected and used Quoting as turn tracking device. Global topics often split into sub-topics to address details. Despite the limitations of messaging systems on sequential turn-taking and referencing, interactional and topical coherence was established in the threads, as participants were able to logically connect their ideas in this complex virtual conversational context through Quoting, Addressivity and topic focus.*

### INTRODUCTION

Connecting people across distance and time has always been the goal of communication. In contemporary times the emergence of social interactive technologies like the Internet, which serve as mediators between people has greatly increased the number

of people that can be reached as fast as possible at a time. Since the Internet is a forum for disseminating various kinds of information, several discursive activities, such as electronic mailing, chats, discussions, blogging, social networking, and so on are its regular features. Chayko (2002: 40) describes the cyberspace as a socio-mental space where almost all we do in face-to-face contact, such as meeting, dating, chatting, counseling, teaching and so forth

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-827-2.ch010

can be done. Emerging activities on the Internet and communicative forms in computer-mediated communication in recent times have been major focus of scholars in linguistics, communication studies, sociology, computer science, psychology and other related disciplines.

This chapter focuses on one of such activities, which is one of the most popular on the Internet – discussion forum. Discussion forum is sometimes referred to as message board, Internet forum, Web forums, newsgroups, discussion boards, (electronic) discussion groups and bulletin boards. In this chapter, discussion forum will be used interchangeably with Internet forum. Internet forums emerged to meet the need of humans to share their views with a wider audience within the cyberspace. An Internet forum is a website developed for people to share ideas or opinions about various topics. Internet forums have become very popular online media for individuals, corporate bodies and interest groups. It developed from the Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), which were the first type of online discussion groups developed from the 1970s. The BBS is a system used in the early years of computing. A user with a personal computer could dial up to a computer that hosted a BBS and leave a message for any other users. Later in the 1980s, the Usenet, a network of newsgroup emerged in which each newsgroup functions like an Internet message board covering different topics. According to Edwards (2005), the format is similar to e-mail, but rather than a message being transmitted from a single user to another user, such a message is posted to many users. In the 1990s, the Usenet and bulletin board system merged to give us the Internet forums we have today.

An Internet forum is an asynchronous online medium usually created for specific community of online users and managed by an administrator who is responsible for the technical details and maintenance of the forum. The administrator also defines the kinds of topics that users can post and

the appropriate conduct of users on the forum. Topics in Internet forums are posted in what is generally described as ‘threads.’ Each thread contains an original message and responses to that message. In some forums, users need to register before they can participate in discussion, while in many others, users do not require any prior registration to participate.

The concern of this chapter is to examine some discourse features in two selected Nigerian Internet forums – *Nairaland* and *Nigerian Village Square*. These forums are considered Nigerian because the topics discussed are Nigerian issues. They were chosen because of their relative popularity among internet users in Nigeria and Nigerians in the Diaspora. Topics discussed include the economic, political, religious and social situations in the country. Other specific topics include investment, information technology, automobiles, tourism, and so forth.

## **DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA**

Unlike in advanced economies, Nigerians did not start getting actively involved in digital communication until the late 1990s. The government of Nigeria, having recognized the crucial role Information and Communication Technologies could play in the socio-economic development of the nation in a rapidly changing global environment approved a National Policy for Information Technology for the nation in March 2001. In addition, later in the year, the government deregulated the telecommunication sector and introduced the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM). Prior to this time there were only a few dial-up e-mail and Internet service providers in the country and digital communication was characterized by slow internet links, poor services and high cost due to the federal government owned Nigerian Telecommunications Limited’s (NITEL)

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