

Chapter 10

Investigating the Online Interactions of a Team of Test Developers Working in a Wiki Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter reports an investigation of online interactions occurring in the context of the development of a suite of foreign language tests known as the Assessment of Language Competence (ALC) (<http://www.acer.edu.au/alc/>). The interactions took place in a wiki environment from 2007 to 2009. The aim of the investigation was twofold. The first was to identify the features of the organization of online postings in an asynchronous online environment and to compare them with the organization of face-to-face interaction. The second was to examine how expertise is invoked in interactions centered on the vetting of test items. The chapter uses selected findings from Conversation Analysis and applies them to the postings on the wiki. Findings from the analysis include the rarity of self-repair, similarities in the organization of sequence structure and the same orientations to affiliative behavior found in conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Previous research on the features of Computer-Mediated Communication, the bulk of which comes from educational settings, has focused in a very general sense on the differences between written and spoken interaction. Because it is communication in a written mode, but interactive in its delivery even

if this does not occur in real time, traditional ways and forms of communication are being challenged. Indeed Smith (2003), while noting how Computer-Mediated Communication shares similarities with both written and spoken texts, pointed out that it also has characteristics which are unique to it. For example, there is an absence or reduction of paralinguistic and nonverbal features and a greater reliance on the bald written word which can lead

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to communication breakdown and challenges for the participants as they work to understand each other (Smith, 2003). Magnan Sieloff (2008) made reference to its uniqueness when speaking of technology as reconstructing how people go about communicating with each other. Not only is there an exchange in information, but this is co-constructed so that it becomes possible to “create new meaning collaboratively in new ways and at new rhythms” (p.1).

It is this co-construction of meaning which is precisely what is at the heart of spoken interaction from the perspective of Conversation Analysis. As a field of research in its own right, Conversation Analysis has provided both a set of findings and a set of tools for investigating naturally occurring real time interactions as they unfold moment by moment. The focus is on how people take turns and how turns are organized in sequences of talk (see Drew & Heritage, 2006; ten Have, 1999). According to Mazur (2004), online interactions provide conversation analysts with a potentially rich source of naturally occurring data to investigate various forms of communication including in work and instructional contexts. While it has for decades used transcriptions of audio or video recordings as primary sources of data, nowadays, Computer-Mediated Communication logs can be used to shortcut the transcription process, so that online turn-taking and sequence organization can be studied. Though they still need minor formatting to lend themselves to Conversation Analysis, “the text logs themselves contain “naturally occurring” conversant-generated indications of some of the sociolinguistic dimensions evinced in recordings of speech. The use of emoticons . . . are an example of this phenomenon quite prevalent in text-based on-line conversations” (p. 1083).

It is evident that Conversation Analysis lends itself very well to the study of online interaction, both to contexts that are informal and to contexts such as the one in the current study which are institutional in character deriving as they do from the world of work.

FINDINGS FROM CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

The findings from Conversation Analysis that are of relevance to the current analysis are assessments, repair, pursuit of a response, and aspects of sequence organization.

Assessments

In conversation, it has been found that speakers display a bias towards affiliative, and therefore closely connected and supportive actions over their opposite, disaffiliative and unsupportive ones (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Heritage, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984a). Such a bias is made manifest through structural features in conversation associated with preferred and dispreferred “turn shapes”. Commonly referred to as preference organization, an example of a preferred turn is a positive response to an invitation, while a dispreferred turn is a rejection, which will be marked in some way by pauses and dysfluency (see Schegloff, 2007).

Preference organization has been studied in specific sequential contexts. One such context that is relevant to the current study is the assessment. This has been found to be pervasively present in face-to-face interaction (Pomerantz, 1984a) although it is reported as being rare in asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (Tanskanen, 2007). Assessments involve speakers evaluating an activity or event as they converse with one another. Structurally, in conversational terms, on the production of a first assessment, a second assessment becomes a sequentially relevant next action. Pomerantz (1984a) has argued that a preference organization for agreement over disagreement holds for assessment environments. Speakers work to achieve agreement and strive to minimize the occurrence of disagreement. However, it is not possible to always avoid disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984a).

In the current data, the core of the work that occurs involves making assessments of the test

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