

# **Title: The Computer-Mediated Communication, A New Way of Understanding The Language**

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## **Introduction**

This project (that is in a development stage) is intended to research, from the Discourse Analysis (an area within Linguistics) as theory and method (qualitative), what happens with the "Computer-Mediated Communication" (the communication that takes place between people through the computer) and the language, in order to compare them later on with the traditional forms of communication and linguistic exchange.

The hypothesis assumed is based on the fact that these new forms of communication question the existing theories and characterizations about "the linguistic communication", and about some dichotomies of the language, as the one which establishes the differences between the oral language and the written language. The exchange made possible through Internet, between people that do not share the same social background and come, in many cases, from different cultures, by means of a code, in most instances, unknown, in which the promptness of conversation converts writing into a sham of the oral language, allows us to reconsider communication from a new viewpoint.

When we think about the impact that Internet produced and still produces on our lives, we find a wide range of possibilities accounting for it. One of such possibilities is the fact of considering the social changes produced by our attempt to try new ways of social and cultural interaction, and, consequently, the resulting need to restate political, sociological or cultural questions.

These ways of interaction make the formation of the so-called

virtual communities be possible, which communities allow the existence of relationships which are not so virtual. As Rheingold states: "people in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind".

Now then, these ways of social interaction are basically linguistic ways. Without the existence of the language, most of them would not be possible.

## **Computer-Mediated-Communication**

Computer mediated communication, through the written language and, to a lesser extent, through the oral language, has turned into a tool that makes it possible to construct a new type of social interaction beyond space barriers.

These new forms of communication also make it possible to throw light on some features of language functioning, as a general phenomenon. There are several ways to achieve the CMC and, each, with its own peculiarities, makes it possible to reconsider some features appearing in the traditional forms and ways of communication.

The CMC is the communication established between people through a computer. It is important to make a distinction between the exchanges that take place synchronically (where people make contact simultaneously) as in chats, and those exchanges which occur asynchronously as in the case of the e-mail, or the discussion groups.

These varied types of CMC pose different problems on account of their characteristics. The e-mail is closely linked to the epistolary styles, its structure being similar to that of a letter and, as such, being asynchronous and in written form. Since production time and consumption time are not concurrent, such asynchrony makes it impossible to have control over what has been sent. Neither can we know how the written production has been construed nor is it possible to correct or modify the interpretations of the others. We could say that, unlike the traditional form, it has the advantages and disadvantages of the electronic means. The advantages are that the production and consumption times are shorter; the disadvantages are that certain social customs are dropped. The use of the e-mail is gradually replacing the letter and, particularly if it is used as a personal means of communication, some personal marks which usually accompany the object (e.g. calligraphy) are lost with it.

The discussion groups or lists work in a similar way, only that, in this case, a group is the one that interacts. The epistolary style prevails, but as the type of consumer changes, so does the intimacy with which the communication is established.

This type of group communication contrasts with another that takes place on line: the chats. These are conversations that may take place between two people or among very large groups. They may be informal or not, but what is interesting is the fact that two apparently antagonistic ways converge in such conversations: the purely conversational style and the written form.

The other variations are based on these types of CMC.

This work will only deal with some of the many issues raised as regards this new form of communication. We can mention among them: the linguistic community notion, conversation as a communication event linked to certain ways of production, turn-taking, politeness and the dichotomy between oral and written language.

It must be noted that this work is intended to present just an overview of the above-mentioned problems since on account of their complexity it would be necessary to carry out a greater analysis than what is possible within the framework of the present work.

## **The Community Notion**

One of the most frequent images with which INTERNET is associated is that "millions of people on every continent also participate in the computer-mediated social groups known as virtual communities, and this population is growing fast".(Herring)

The virtual community notion, which is so well defined by Rheingold, has been and is the object of study for the different disciplines. In this case, it will be analysed within the framework of language studies.

The idea that millions of people from different places and cultures are able to communicate through this new means has caused some optimistic reactions and others that are not so optimistic. From this viewpoint, it is important to underline the possibility of communication existing between people whose language and cultural background are not the same.

One of the most discussed problems, not only within the linguistic scope but in psychology, speech ethnography and sociology as well, is the problem concerning the communicative competence.

When we talk about competence we necessarily refer to Chomsky's concept regarding the knowledge of the language that all speakers have. Competence, from this viewpoint, is grammatical and mental. It does not take into account usage and presumes the existence of both a homogeneous community and

an idealized speaker-listener. The competence theory studies ideal and abstract linguistic objects outside their usage contexts. From the Speech Ethnography viewpoint, Hymes contests Chomsky's notion by limiting its exclusivity when the time arrives for explaining communication functioning. According to Hymes, not only should we know our language but we should also have another kind of knowledge as well that may determine, for instance, when we should talk and when we shouldn't, what we should say, to whom, how and in what way. That knowledge being the fruit of the social and cultural experience.

J. Gumperz, from this same discipline, reviews the concept of communicative competence and relates it to the ability to contextualize, to make sense of what is said with respect to what we know. The fact of knowing how to ask a question, how to greet a person or how to say good-bye to somebody as well as the fact of knowing how to talk in a particular situation or to a certain person is a knowledge not given by the language but by a series of sociocultural conventions. The failure to know such conventions more often than not frustrates linguistic exchanges. These conventions may be recognized in the language since, in some cases, they consist of words and, in other cases, they are represented by the intonation or accent. Gumperz calls them "contextualization keys" which work as indicators of the way the utterance must be interpreted. "In the course of social interaction, participants continuously offer each other cues as to how to interpret what follows or what is being communicated"(Gumperz).

A linguistic community is defined based on the competence notions. The fact of sharing the linguistic competence and the communicative competence makes a group be considered as a linguistic community.

Since the CMC is a communication based on texts, it fails to have, unlike the communication face-to-face, non-verbal indicators (gestures, expressions, looks, intonation, accent, etc.)

that usually occur when all participants are present in the same physical environment. One palliative for this absence of non-verbal indicators is the "electronic paralanguage" which provides interlocutors with the so-called "emoticons" (which try to reproduce feelings, emotions, laughter, etc. through the combination of symbols). But, in fact, it is just a palliative and, the communication, specially if it is synchronic (on line), bears the advantage of being interactive while the absence of a physical environment and the impossibility of taking place face-to-face constitute its disadvantages.

In spite of the absence of such indicators, the communication between people of different cultures may be achieved as well in this way as in the case of the communication that takes place face-to-face. Some studies prove this fact by assigning the CMC a lesser degree of cultural context influence on the communication due to the absence of visual/social cues and since no common physical place is shared. "Those from different cultures engaging in computer-mediated conversations do not occupy a common physical place, so they are not bound by any particular set of cultural rules".(Ringo Ma)

The idea of a freer and egalitarian communication, with no prejudices, is quite recurrent and tempting. But it must be borne in mind that though the people who participate in this type of exchanges may come from different cultural backgrounds, they share other "keys": the knowledge or handling of the way how to "chat" (knowledge of the medium), a language established as the "Internet language" (English) and the conventions set for this type of conversation. As Gumperz states: "Such conventions are created through prolonged interactive experience in family, friendship, occupational, or similar networks relationships. Typically, they affect the signalling of contextual and inter-utterance relationships through formulaic expressions, phrasing or chunking, focusing, anaphora, deixis or other grammatical cohesive mechanisms" (Gumperz).

The CMC, as an interactive experience, progressively creates its

keys. Not everybody can chat, he needs to know how to use a computer, he needs access to Internet, he needs to know the features of the software he will use therefor, he needs a basic knowledge of English and will have to learn the conventions of the medium (the "emoticons" and the "netiquette").

We could think of that virtual community as a linguistic community since it shares such knowledge of the language and such communicative competence. On-line communities take shape, generate norms of interaction (for example, rules of network etiquette or netiquette) and conflict resolution procedures (...) Virtual communities, like communities "in real life", must protect the interests of their members, and ethical dilemmas result when individual and group needs come into conflict, as well as certain groups dominate in defining the terms of the discourse. The question of "access" in the broader socio-political sense has barely begun to be addressed, yet ultimately, it will determine the ends to which the potential of the global networks is put" (Herring).

We cannot help saying that such community is not so egalitarian or accessible to all. Access to Internet is not a concrete possibility to all, this reality being particularly usual and more pronounced in third world countries. In Argentina, the access charges and phone rates are high, only a few academic institutions provide the service for free. These difficulties greatly increase if we leave aside Buenos Aires and think of the rest of the country where Internet practically does not exist.

This community, upon adopting English as "its" language, is gradually converting it into "the" lingua franca of those participating in Internet. This has considerable cultural consequences since a kind of linguistic imperialism is established over the other languages which are losing ground day after day. This situation extends beyond the linguistic problem. Language plays a vital role in what is known as "the social construction of the reality" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The linguistic forms are not isolated from the community using

them, they are not neutral. They are the means by which the society forms and penetrates the conscience of individuals. This increasing expansion of the English language through Internet also means the expansion and imposition, to a certain extent in an unconscious manner, of the values of a culture.

## **Conversation**

Conversation is the prototypical manner of using the language, being the way by which we are exposed to the language and the means through which we acquire such language.

Conversation, as a linguistic phenomenon, was, during a long time, left aside for considering it as chaotic and informal, with no organization. Nevertheless, it was the object of other types of studies, such as rhetorical studies. At the beginning of the 70s, this situation reverted and conversation turned to be the object of different disciplines. Among these disciplines, the ethnomethodology can be mentioned, which tries to give a description of its organization and working. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson carry out a systematic description of conversation and characterize it as being organized on the basis of the alternation of turn-talking. They consider that the briefness principle ruling conversation lies in this synchronized articulation based on turn-talking which are respected by speakers and which prevent the existence of overlaps.

This shifts taking arrangement, assumed to be universal, was questioned by other studies which proved the contrary. It varies from culture to culture.

Chats in CMC are conceived as conversations. In some cases, they consist in dialogues between two people and in other cases, groups are multitudinous. This electronic conversation bears another characteristic: turn-talking are fixed by the channel.



Turn-talking administration is not handled by the speakers. Nevertheless, this is not the only form of conversation in which the assignment of turn-talking is not established by participants therein and as already shown, this fact neither represents an excluding feature incidental to conversation exchanges nor is unique for all societies (Pomeranz).

What can be certainly observed in chats are the so-called adjacency pairs. In oral communication, adjacency pairs respond to statements made as sequences, for instance the relationship established between question-answer, greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance, etc. These adjacency pairs perform a double function in the chats where many individuals take part: they enable the identification of who is speaking with who and give coherence to the speech. On many occasions, the simultaneous abundance of participations hinders understanding. That is the reason why an answer connected with a former question directs participants in the course of their interaction.

As regards CMC, another feature of the face-to-face communication can be also found together with adjacency pairs: interaction control. In daily conversations, the speaker monitors the effects of its participation upon other people and has the possibility to correct it, if necessary, in case of misunderstanding. Chats do not count on paralinguistic features (such as gestures, looks, laughs, etc.) found in face-to-face conversation or prosodic features such as intonation either, present in phone conversations, but they use other means to control misunderstandings and ambiguities: the synchrony, statements and emotions the other participants may answer with. Speakers may record the effects of their participation and restate it as the case may be even though they participate in writing and do not share physical environment.

This leads us to another subject, namely the relationship developed among certain styles and their forms of production. Conversation is an style which has been traditionally linked to oral language and face-to-face communication. Up to now, the

exception was phone conversation, which is nevertheless oral. In CMC, conversation conjugates apparently antagonistic styles and forms. Conversation may take place without oral language and face-to-face communication. CMC links conversation to written language, producing a categorical change which affects not only the notion of what the conversation is but the speaking-writing dichotomy as well. Chats are spontaneous conversations carried out in writing. There are no paralinguistic signals present or interlocutor's physical attendance, although chats evidence oral language dynamics, the framework and structure of a conversation and the control of speakers over interaction. The chat is written, but due to exchange immediateness, it cannot proceed with the correction and new correction process preceding the statement thereof, as it happens with another kind of written text. In this kind of exchange, the writer is assumed as speaker and the rules of the game adjust to those of an ordinary conversation.

## **Speech Acts and Politeness**

As we already said, the duration of turn-talking in the CMC is not controlled by the speakers. Many times this situation affects the coherence of the above-mentioned texts. However, they express speech acts such as questioning, affirming, greeting, etc. The Speech Acts theory may perhaps better account for interaction because it takes language as a way of action.

The Speech Acts theory, basically based upon the work developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975), poses language in terms of communication acts. In every linguistic production, one can recognize not only the expression of a certain content but what the speaker is doing with that expression as well: for example, whether such content deals with a question or a request. These speech acts would be the basic units of human communication.

These acts are often difficult to recognize for different reasons, politeness being included. Politeness notion goes beyond the so-called "netiquette" and aims at Brown's and Levinson's proposal. In very few words, politeness transmits the intentional and strategic behaviour which responds to the need of not damaging self-image and that of others. When a person interacts with another, both of them try to introduce and maintain a public image of themselves. This is called image. According to Brown and Levinson, the maintenance of this image is the essential motivation of human interaction. Image has got two dimensions: a positive face, intended for the positive recognition of the others, aiming at the positive appraisal of their wishes, actions, acquisitions and beliefs. Positive politeness is articulated either around the appraisal of other people's wishes or around the expression that our own desires coincide with those of the rest. The most common strategies involve reciprocity and optimism demonstrations or sharing of the same viewpoint. There is also a negative image earmarked for the right to non-imposition, the preservation of a certain degree of autonomy and freedom of action. Negative politeness is articulated around what could be called a respectful behaviour, for its function is to minimize the risks entailed by any action which implies an advance over the other person's territory (e.g., a request). The most common strategies include the offer of options to the other to reject the proposal if so desired or pessimism demonstrations.

The use of politeness strategies varies from culture to culture, since the content of image depends on image itself, being assumed that both the mutual knowledge of the public self-image of the members of every community and the social need to be oriented thereto through interaction are deemed universal factors.

It is interesting to observe how politeness works when confronting with a chat corpus. The use of different kinds of politeness can be obviously detected, i.e. positive politeness and negative politeness. But unlike other conversations, when we are dealing with large groups and talks are carried out without a

very clear purpose, acts directly threatening image (on record) are frequently found. These acts suspend strategies. Generally, in face-to-face conversations, they are associated with situations whose characteristics justify that course of action. For example, in a critical situation, a direct command is not understood as a threat due to the urgency of the moment. This would be otherwise construed under relaxed conditions. This confirms once more Levinson's hypothesis, which joins these acts to contexts where the risks of threats related with participants' image are lower.

In chats carried out within CMC, there are other reasons which minimize the risk of image threatening, particularly as regards self-image. They include lack of physical context, anonymity, and number of participants in the interaction process. Interacting individuals do not employ strategies to attenuate their action. In those cases, they do not respect "netiquette rules" either.

## **Oral Language and Written Language**

This dichotomy has been a subject hardly debated from a multiplicity of approaches. During a long time, the boundaries separating oral language from written language were firmly delimited and it seemed that these furthered or were associated with certain lines of thought. For example, Ong has associated written language with the possibility of analytical thought. This dichotomy is established on the grounds of apparent differences which consider that: oral language is less structured than written language, the forms of production and consumption differ, speech is produced "on the fly" and seeks to be consumed, listened to applying the same dynamics, written language is static as far as it is produced in the time provided for by the writer and that it may be consumed and read in the time set by the reader. As we already said, oral language is synchronic as far as it is produced and consumed at the same time. Written

language is asynchronous while there is a temporal difference between its production and consumption. About this point, it could be added that speech counts on the possibilities given to it by the physical environment, paralinguistic and prosodic features as well as the interlocutor's presence, thus exerting a more important control on the interpretation of what has been said. Written language, instead, offers the advantages of the control on what is being said but not on what is construed in connection therewith. The absence of this context, of the participants, of paralinguistic and prosodic features, and asynchrony do not enable the writer to control what the reader shall construe.

John Gumperz's, Wallace Chafe's and Deborah Tannen's works, without taking into account electronic language cases, already restate this dichotomy as relative and in some cases unnecessary. One of the conclusions reached by them contemplates the existence of certain strategies linked both to oral language and written language, but there are cases in which strategies typically related to written languages are applied to oral language and viceversa. "Hoping to eschew a dichotomous view of speaking and writing in favor of the view both can display a variety of features depending on the communicative situation, goal, genre, and so on" (Tannen). We can find a non-spontaneous oral speech and a spontaneous written speech, as we do, for example, in the computer-mediated-communication.

It is this "framework" Tannen is talking of, in this case that of conversation, which predisposes the participant to speak even though it has to do it through writing. This writing becomes spontaneous, non-planned, monitored by participants and synchronic. More than one dichotomy, they appear to be the two faces of the same phenomenon. It could be thought that the speech producer, speaker-writer, in this switch between one way and the other, moves itself and chooses the options which better conform to the means available for exchange purposes. The strategies and resources of both forms are not different. What differs is the materiality of the medium, exchange purposes and

other sociocultural reasons. The CMC drives this possibility to the extreme, endowing writing with the most characteristic features of the oral language.

Ong says in one of his texts that "reading a text means turning it into sounds, whether in a loud voice or in imagination, syllable by syllable when reading at a slow pace or in broad outlines when reading fast (...). Speaking or oral expression are capable of existing and have almost always existed without any writing at all, but there has never been writing without speaking". CMC drives this possibility to the extreme, endowing writing with the most characteristic features of speaking. We can paraphrase Ong and answer him that "chat speaking" means to turn sounds into writing, reproducing therein the features of that speech. And in these forms of communication, speaking does not exist without writing.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, we may say that when it is time to communicate, this powerful tool we have, language, displays its multiple forms and adapts its resources to the new media introduced by technological progress (formerly the print, now Internet) and the goals established by its participants. CMC tests the theories concerned with language. That is why it is important not to consider it an exceptional phenomenon but another form we can resort to communicate among one another. This kind of community which is slowly increasing, speaks clearly about the globalization process which defines and delimits their participants. This process affects all of us, but not all of us take part therein. To think about networked communication as a more democratic way to encourage democratic participation means to ignore the social trimming which globalization operates on the world.

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