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Príspevky/Papers



Click Here (To Find Out More): E-Escape as an Indexable World*

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Abstract

In the paper I approach the computer display screen as a special electronic 'geosemiotic zone' (e-scape) in which multiple semiotic discourses converge and mutually interact. In this perspective, particular e-scapes emerge as complexes of semiotic aggregations which are shaped by the centripetal and centrifugal forces managing the co-presence of and the interdiscursive dialogicity between multiple discourses. While employing the geosemiotic approach to the study of language use I claim that e-scape represents a unique indexable world where the production of social meaning is heavily dependent on the placement of signs, discourses and human actions within it.

Key words

geosemiotics, e-scape, indexability, interdiscursive dialogicity

1. Introduction

Space belongs among the central notions of the ordinary life which we use to make sense of the environment in which we live and which we act upon. Our intimate experience with the physical space enables us to utilize it as a lens to conceptualize many other domains; hence the spatial metaphor is at the heart of our casual sense-making. The domain of computer-generated electronic cyberspace, which we access via the computer display screen (CDS), has become one such physical environment which we have 'domesticated' relatively quickly and effortlessly once it was made to look and behave like our 'own' environment, i.e. one which we can act upon with relative ease. In the following passages I suggest that cyberspace as accessed by computer users on their CDSs is a special type of a 'geosemiotic zone', or e-scape (on analogy to landscape, cityscape, etc.) which can usefully be approached from the viewpoint of geosemiotics - a research perspective which investigates the usage of the meaning-making systems when placed in the material world. The underlying claim of this approach is that all signs, when used, derive a significant part of their meaning from their placement in the world (hence their 'in-place' meaning, or geosemiotics).

2. Geosemiotics and indexicality

Proposed as a coherent framework by Scollon and Scollon (2003), geosemiotics combines several relatively autonomous approaches, viz. semiotic theory (essentially the Peircean index, icon and symbol triad), sociocultural theory (E. Goffman's interaction order (IO) as a form of social arrangement), the theory of visual (G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, 1993) and place semiotics, and applies them to the investigation of the placement of signs in the material world. Underlying their approach is the basic assumption that, while signs can encode abstract meanings, it is only when they are 'anchored' in concrete circumstances that they acquire concrete social meanings. Hence, indexicality is the essential property of every (including the language) 'sign-in-use', as it turns potential meaning of signs into

their actual social meaning which is grounded in the world. The use of sign systems (codes) has a 'double' indexicality: it indexes both language users and language uses, or discourses. The authors' geosemiotic framework presents a methodology for the analysis of emplaced action by integrating three broad systems of meaning-making, viz. the interaction order, place semiotics and visual semiotics, at whose intersection (or 'nexus' of practice; Scollon and Scollon, 2004) lie all types of recurrent social actions.

The multiplicity of tasks and functions involved in the work on a computer bring about also multiple and often overlapping forms of social practice (or interaction order). By way of illustration (see Figure 1), the basic underlying mode of IO present throughout the entire work on a computer represents a 'with', viz. „two or more individuals who are perceived as being together with each other as the main focus of their attention“ (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 217). The visual semiotics of the situation involves both physical configuration of all elements involved in the work on a computer placed within the user's visual field which are currently 'in play' (i.e. the screen, keyboard and mouse), or which are currently set aside for disattention (objects of the immediate or wider physical environment). Finally, the place semiotics includes meanings related to the placement of the 'with' within the environment (the user's office desk).

At the secondary level (Figure 2), a PC user participates in a variety of different forms of IO. For example, in typing a document, s/he represents a 'single', i.e. „a person who is by himself or herself in a social space among others“ (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 216), in internet chat, s/he occupies the role of a 'with', in watching a video s/he participates in a 'platform event', etc. Accordingly, s/he is indexed as being engaged in the (co-)production of particular discourses (e.g. academic discourse, IRC chat, etc.). Even this example illustrates the fact that IO tends to be complex, since it includes forms within other forms (here a 'single' within a 'with'); hence, the multiple levels of embeddedness can result in a significant degree of complexity.

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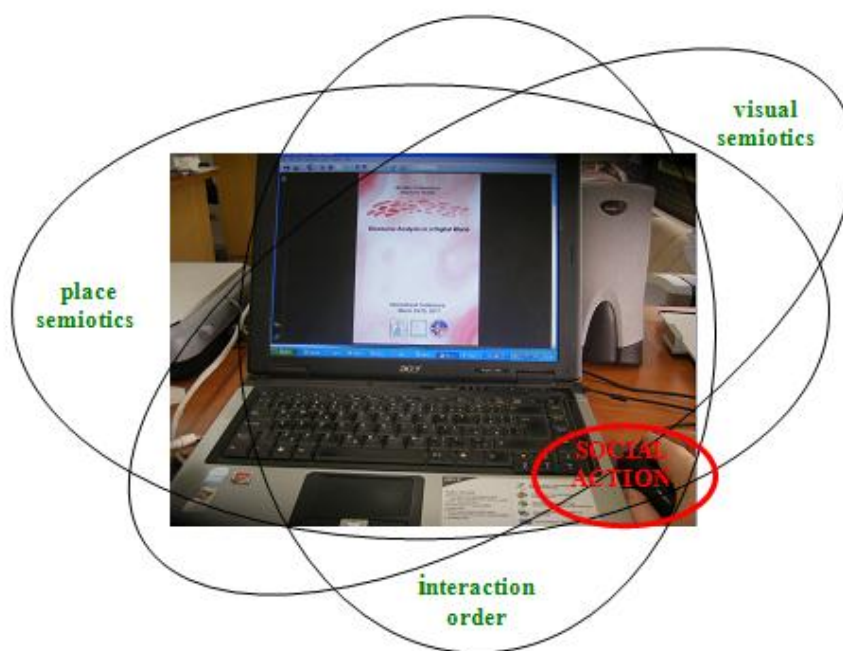


Figure 1. Primary level of IO: a 'with'

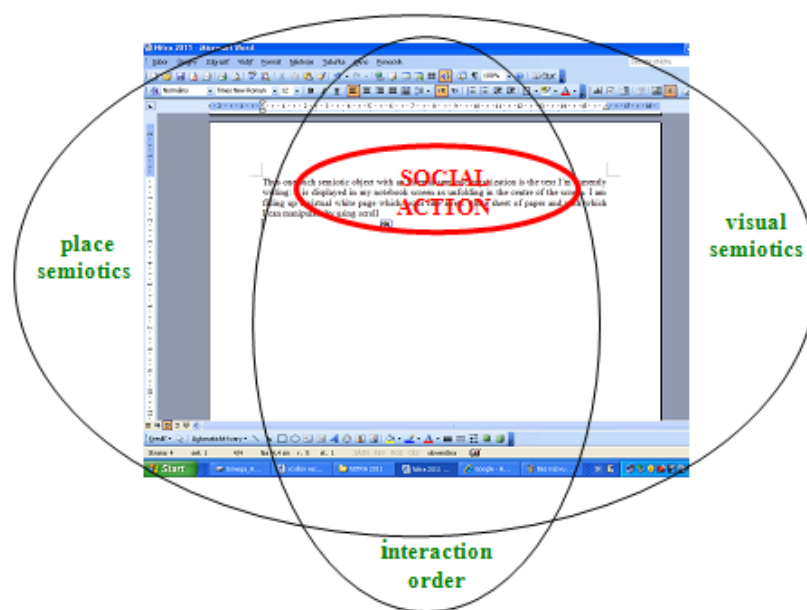


Figure 2. Secondary level of IO: a 'single'

The geosemiotic approach is interested in the examination of how the deployment of semiotic systems indexes both the socio-cultural and socio-political (power) structures in the world. Indexicality as the context-dependency of signs has been thoroughly studied within pragmatics in relation to language, i.e. within spatial and temporal language deixis (pronouns, adverbs, tense, etc.); geosemiotics, however, adopts a wider perspective to indexicality by placing focus on the indexability of the world, i.e. on its capacity to lend itself for the production of meanings via the placement of signs in it. Throughout the present paper my analysis focuses solely on the ways the three sources of semiosis, viz. IO, visual and space semiotics, overlap, and form loci of action in the e-space of a CDS.

3. Geosemiotics: the four elements

The proposed geosemiotic model comprises the four components (viz. an individual social actor, interaction order, visual and place semiotics) „which together form the meanings which we call place“ (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 12). While being fairly complex independent frameworks in their own right, they are seen here as co-participating in the production of composite meaning of a situated discourse, i.e. one which emerges at the nexus of their intersection.

First, it is E. Goffman's notion of interaction order which consists of the „current, ongoing, ratified (but also contested and denied) set of social relationships we take up and try to maintain with the other people“ (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 16). Goffman suggested 11 main forms of IO (such as a 'single', a 'with', a

'platform event', etc.) which are constructed out of the (visual, auditory, olfactory, thermal, haptic, etc.) subsystems of resources available to the members in every society. Second, the visual semiotics system based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) 'grammar of visual design' is included as a tool for the description of the visual aspect of interaction order. Its four subsystems (represented participants, modality, composition and interactive participants) cover with fine precision the multilevel semiotic complexity of the visual mode. Next, place semiotics loosely shelters several semiotic subsystems involved in the placement of sign in the world, such as code preference, inscription, typology of semiotic spaces and semiotic discourses. Finally, there is also a social actor with his/her habitus, i.e. his/her accumulated sociocultural and psychological knowledge and experience, agency and physical body which are brought into any action s/he takes and which are conveyed intentionally or unintentionally on every occasion of interaction. In the paper, we first look at how the three semiotics systems work independently of each other and then we will explore how they interact jointly in producing a particular type of semiotic aggregate, viz. a web-page.

4. E-scape as an indexable world

Our primary interest here is to explore the indexability of e-scape, i.e. the ways in which it lends itself to the assignment of meaning. E-scape projected onto a CDS represents an electronic environment the purpose of which is to allow for the presentation of signs from multiple semiotic systems; hence, it is designed as a semiotic space per se. It is to be noted that other parts of a PC are typically defined as non-semiotic spaces which are not designed for a display of other signs than those from a commercial discourse (such as PC's brand name; this does not, however, prevent a PC user from utilizing his/her PC for a display of other signs, in which case the 'pure' semiotic environment becomes 'non-pure'; cf. also other non-semiotic spaces such as city buildings' walls, natural landscapes, etc. which are often defaced by what is commonly considered as a transgressive discourse, or graffiti). When compared to other physical spaces designed to post signs (such as roadside billboards), e-scape exhibits a characteristic which sets it off as a unique and which is caused by the 'immateriality' of the electronic technology, hence its varying names e-scape, cyberscape, etc. Throughout the paper the term 'e-scape' is used to denote a particular aggregation of semiotic resources (signs and discourses) confined to the physical boundaries of a CDS, the electronic environment available to a PC user to be observed, manipulated with or acted upon which is on par with other types of 'scape', such as landscape, cityscape, townscape, etc.

The production of meaning in e-scape is enabled to a PC user through the deployment of multiple semiotic systems, be it static and dynamic visual codes (graphic design), audial codes, or subsystems (e.g. the 'ideal-real' subcode) including, naturally, language as the principal semiotic system. The aggregation of semiotic systems within e-scape is, however, not haphazard; it is controlled by an overarching system, or semiotic complex, which imposes upon it a particular unifying character through which escapes are recognized as different semiotic aggregations.

4.1 The (forms of) interaction order in e-scape

In the framework of geosemiotics, IO is a semiotic system which indexes the ways social groupings are organized in the world (and which are in turn indexable by reference to it). The four major resources out of which the forms of IO are constructed are 'the sense of time', 'perceptual spaces', 'interpersonal distance' and

'the personal front'. Goffman proposed 11 categories of IO which index social organizations formed by people interacting in the world. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate two such forms (a 'single' and a 'with') and also point out the potential complexity of IO engendered by the possibility of multilevel embeddedness of several forms. At both levels of IO this embeddedness may reach a considerable depth, the more so especially if we consider the affordances of the electronic communication medium. Here only two prominent forms of IO are exemplified, viz. 'platform event' and 'conversational encounter'. By its very nature, e-scape is predisposed to serve as a stage for the presentation of 'platform events', hence, it is by default a platform-event space. A platform event is understood rather flexibly to include all 'performances' which are „a spectacle for others" (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 62); it may be categorized into different 'genres' of electronic communication which emerge as the result of the affordances of the medium (the examples here include three journalistic genres: video news programme, interview and electronic newspaper; see Figure 3a-c).



Figure 3a. Platform event: single



Figure 3b. conversational encounter



Figure 3c. Newspaper home-page

Among the pervasive e-scape forms of IO belong 'conversational encounters' (e.g. e-mail communication) and 'meetings', which cover various electronic communication formats, including on-line internet chat-groups, 'people-processing encounters' (e.g. job application procedure), and 'service-encounters' (e.g. internet shops). Through their capacity of indexing PC users as occupying associated social roles (e.g. viewer, reader, applicant, buyer, etc.), all these forms of IO represent recognizable ways of interacting with others and as such constitute a salient layer of meaning in the indexable environment of the e-scape.

4.2 The visual semiotics of e-scape

Although e-scape potentially represents an environment of extreme visual variability, through the operation of semiotic complexes the utilized semiotic resources form different types of aggregation. For example, the e-scape of Microsoft Windows operation system as the default working environment for a large number of PC users is one such indexable area which is semiotically 'pure', i.e. free of other discourses than the one 'endemic' to it (cf. other 'pure' semiotic spaces, such as a church interior, a university lecture room, a Parliament session hall, in which the type and extent of discourses are severely limited). Also, this space represents a unique configuration of mutually interacting discourses which define it and through which it is recognizable as unique (see Figure 4a.-c. for other recognizable 'scapes': NYC's Times Square, Slovakia's High Tatra mountains).



Figure 4a. Visual semiotics: e-scape



Figure 4b. Visual semiotics: city-scape



Figure 4c. Visual semiotics: landscape

The incorporation of Kress and Leeuwen's (1996) grammar of visual design as a tool for the analysis of the structure of visual semiotic objects (or 'pictures' in the broadest sense) enhances the explanatory power of geosemiotics, even more so when applied to e-scape, a foremost visual medium. Their complex framework is necessarily reduced here to only three mutually interacting semiotic subsystems, viz. 'represented participants', 'modality' and 'composition'. 'Pictures' in e-scape include multifarious aggregations of signs from iconic (pictures, diagrams, etc.) and symbolic (language) systems as well as of represented participants. The categories of represented participants may either be 'conceptual' or 'narrative', i.e. such that involve some kind of action between participants which is indexable by the direction, size, volume etc. of vectors. For example, Figure 4a represents an instance of 'conceptual' e-scape (the Microsoft Windows operation system 'mainboard') which is indexable by the alignment of categories (individual folders) arranged next to each other and the absence of action between them (no movement vectors present, with every new folder being added from left to right, top to bottom direction). In comparison, Figure 3b presents a narrative e-scape in which participants' mutual engagement is indexed by such vectors as body and gaze alignment, pointing, etc. The 'modality' visual subsystem encodes the degree of validity or credibility of a picture in the sense that (at least in the 'Western' sociocultures) the more faithfully a picture represents the world, the greater the degree of its modality. When applied to the (static or dynamic) iconic pictures present in the e-scape, the highest modality is associated with the 'naturalistic' pictures marked for

the high degree of colour saturation (cf. Figures 5a-c below).

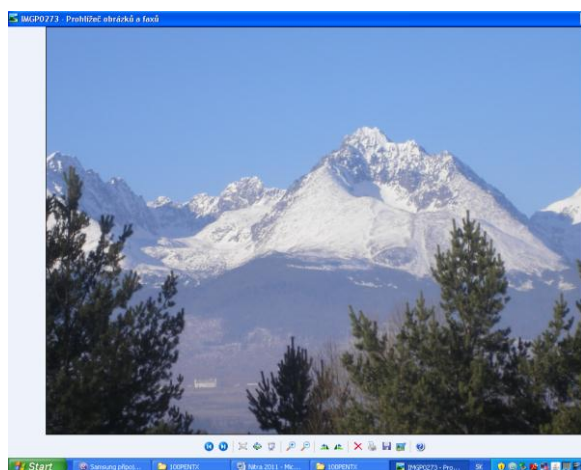


Figure 5a. Visual semiotics: high modality

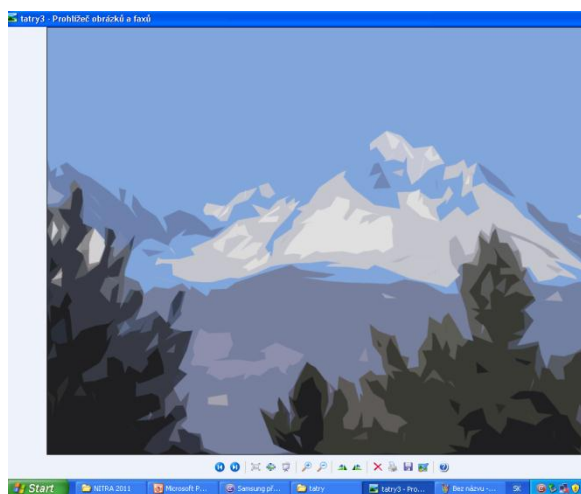


Figure 5b. lower modality

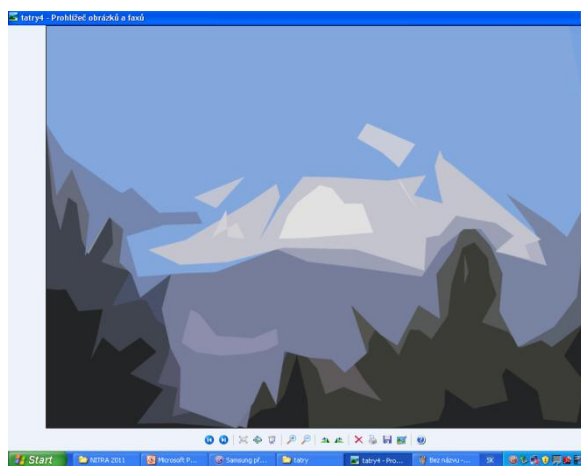


Figure 5c. low modality

Finally, the semiotics of 'composition' of a picture incorporates three orientations: centre vs. periphery/margin, left/given vs. right/new and top/ideal vs. bottom/real and produces a pattern of prominence of semiotic objects in the following way: objects presented on the left are 'given', objects presented on the right are 'new', while objects presented on the top are 'ideal' and objects presented on the bottom are 'real'. The centre/margin distinction

places more essential/prominent objects to the centre and auxiliary ones to the margins.

Despite the fact that, when applied to e-scape, the decontextualized semiotics of visual design interacts with the technicalities of the electronic environment and may even be overridden by it, it is still very robust in its interpretational power. For example, the Microsoft Windows operation system 'mainboard' (cf. Figure 4a) employs a polarized left/right, top bottom visual semiotics to the maximum: 'new' objects are added to the 'given' ones in a left-to-right/top-down manner (with the time/date in the bottom right corner being the most 'new/real' semiotic object).

The situated features of the abstract visual semiotic system in e-scape is also documentable on the mechanics and design of the web-page. The Internet Explorer browser (cf. Figure 6a) causes a web page to be anchored in its upper left-hand corner, which results in its visual design determined by how much of its space, for a given resolution, is accessible instantly after it is displayed on the screen (the rest of the page is accessed with greater additional effort by means of vertical and/or horizontal scrolling). Further, a cursory examination of several web-pages reveals their prevalent orientation to left/right and top/down structuration of layout. This applies to, for example, the compositional system of the Wikipedia web page (cf. Figure 6b): its logo is placed in the upper left-hand corner which is reserved for a 'given/ideal' object, while the 'given' section of the page presents the main navigation pane with folders, the right hand-side of the page is reserved for 'new' information sections as well, along with the main search box. In contrast, a Google home page (a passage semiotic space; cf. Figure 6c) exhibits a centre/margin structural layout, with the address bar as the prominent semiotic object placed in its centre.



Figure 6a. Visual semiotics: anchoring web-page in a browser

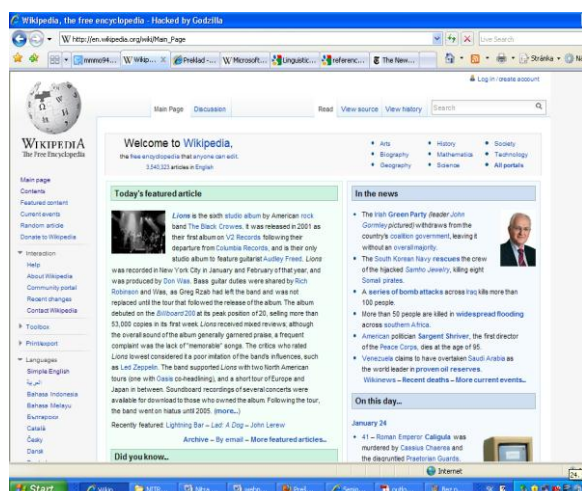


Figure 6b. left/right and top/down structural layout

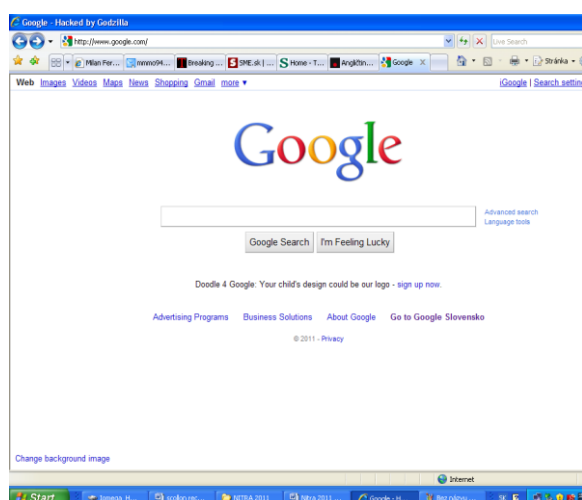


Figure 6c. centre/margin structural layout

4.3 Place semiotics in e-scape: public places

In accordance with the central line of argumentation in geosemiotics, viz. that the meaning of a sign arises to a large extent from its placement in the material world, place semiotics forms the very heart of geosemiotics. The reciprocal sign-world indexical relationship is very intensely present in the 'tight' digital environment of the e-scape, in which each spot is precisely localizable and indexable with different function (cf. different indexability of the 'click here' move in e-scape; Figure 7).



Figure 7. The variability of indexability of the 'click-here' in e-scape.

Place semiotics is an area structured in an extremely complex way in the sense that it covers the typology of e-scape environments, code selection and preference patterns of its placement, inscription types and their layering. It is useful to approach place semiotics by identifying types of semiotic spaces and types of semiotic discourses.

E-scape lends itself to the differentiation of the two basic types of space, viz. frontstage/public and backstage/private, with a continuum rather than a strict demarcation line existing between the two. They are differentiated on the basis of their being open and/or closed to different types of publics. Within these we may find additional spaces which invite different types of activities. Thus, within the frontstage e-scape spaces, which are generally accessible to a wide range of PC users, we may further recognize:

1. passage spaces, which are designed to allow a passage from one space to another. Scollon and Scollon's claim that these spaces „may be the default

public use spaces in the built environment" (2003: 171) may also be applied to e-scape: these spaces may be freely passed through (e.g. Google search engine frontpage; Figure 8a),

2. exhibit-display spaces, which are to be looked at and passed through without altering them (e.g. newspaper homepage; Figure 8b),
3. special-use spaces, which render themselves for special uses (e.g. Microsoft windows text editor; Figure 8c),
4. secure spaces, which are accessible only for authorized users who need a key (password) to enter them (cf. Figure 8d-f). They are on the transition to backstage/private spaces.

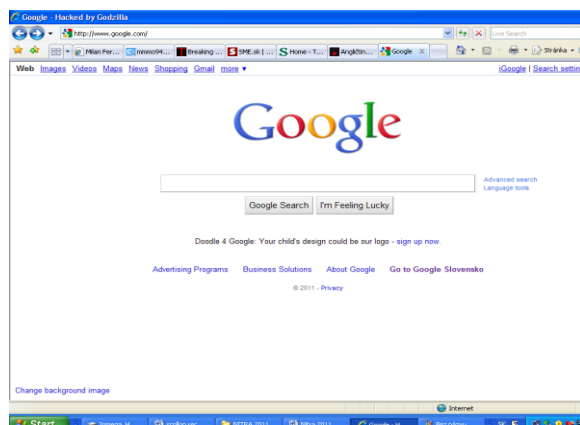


Figure 8a. Frontstage: passage space



Figure 8b. Exhibit/display space

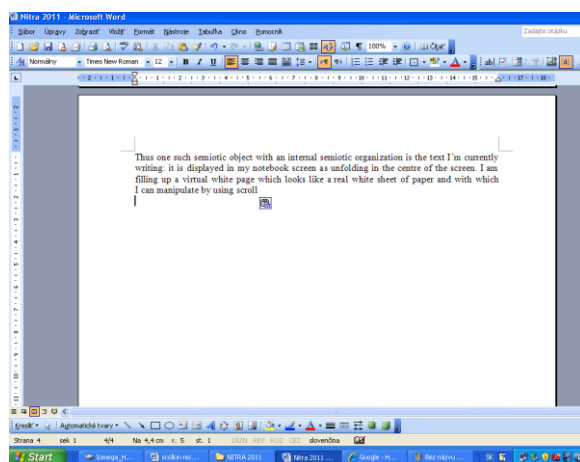


Figure 8c. Special use space



Figure 8d. Secure space (e-mail account)

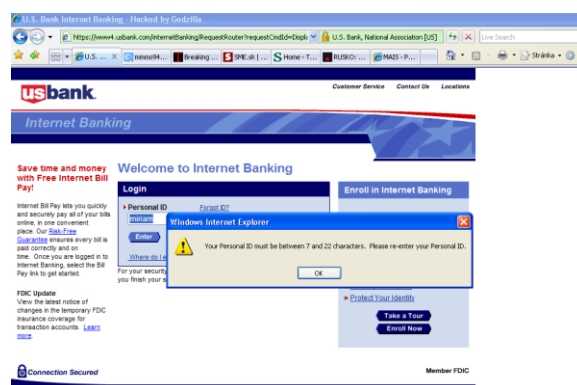


Figure 8e. Secure spaces (internet banking)

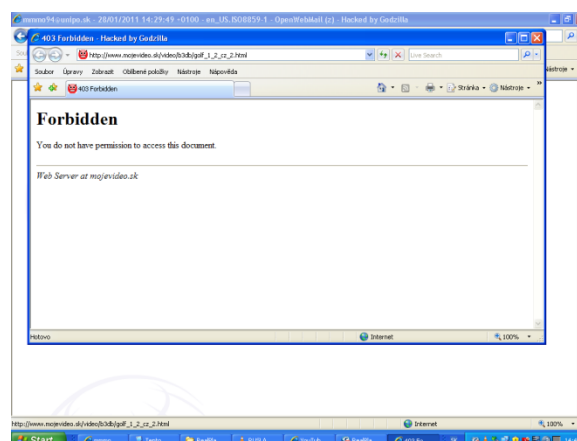


Figure 8f. Secure spaces (video player)

While the major part of e-scape represents primary semiotic space, viz. 'frontstage space', there are also backstage spaces (Figure 9a-c) such as computer software management or service areas, which are entered for the purpose of maintenance to deal with a problem/failure. For example, as I am working on the paper, a box flashes up with a notice (which itself belongs to the infrastructural discourse; see the types of discourse below) indexing the faulty state of my anti-virus system (Figure 9a).

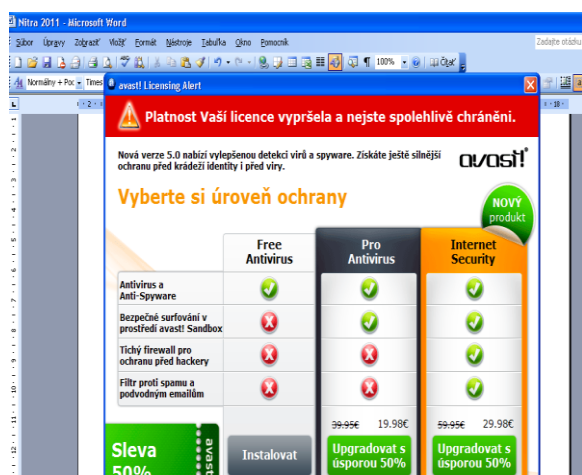


Figure 9a. Backstage space: anti-virus maintenance system

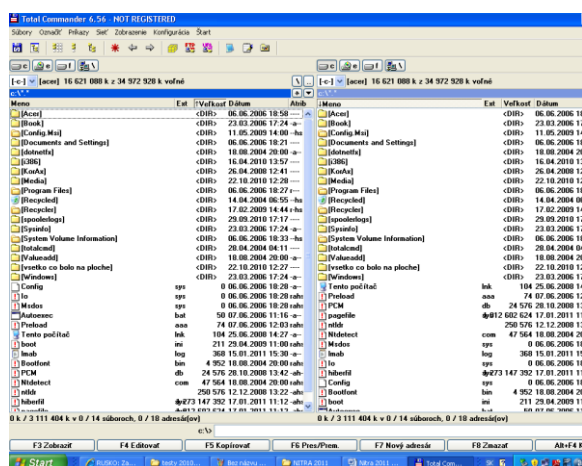


Figure 9b. Total Commander file manager



Figure 9c. Server maintenance break

It is common for a particular instance of e-scape to aggregate different types of spaces, hence, no space is entirely 'pure'; for example, a newspaper homepage aggregates passage space (access from headlines to articles), exhibit space (news articles), and/or special use/secure space (discussion groups following the articles).

4.4 Place semiotics in e-scape: types of discourse

E-scape represents an environment in which different types of discourse converge and interact, and, in a form of an 'interdiscursive dialogicity', co-participate in the

formation of semiotic aggregates. The two basic types of discourse operating in e-scape are (see Figure 10 a-c):

1. infrastructural/functional discourse, which provides information on the underlying organizational structures which facilitate the operation of the system. It is represented by functional labels which carry infrastructural meanings (and which normally fall into a user's disattention unless they signal a change of state of a system; such as the elapsed e-mail session time in Figure 10 a),
2. regulatory discourse, which regulates an action by providing instructions on how to move around e-scape. It is realized verbally (the unmarked is the imperative form of the verb, which represents the 'politic' (Watts 2003) level of the relational work; cf. the 'negative politeness' of the wording of the instruction Sorry, your session appears to have timed out! Please go back and log in in Figure 10a) and non-verbally, via a host of iconic and indexical signs (a type of instruction may be, for example, signalled by a shape of mouse cursor: a steady or flashing vertical bar indicates the point of insertion, an arrow-shaped pointer which changes into a hand with an outstretched index when hovering over a segment of text indicates a hyperlink).

Other types of discourse adding up further semiotic layers of e-scape are transgressive discourse which is interpreted as (deliberately) violating the 'pure' semiotics of a particular e-scape (such as unsolicited mail) and commercial discourse (Figure 10b) which is aimed at promoting commercial products and services (one may consider the latter discourse exemplify the former, as in Figure 10c).



Figure 10a. Infrastructural and regulatory discourse



Figure 10b. Commercial discourse

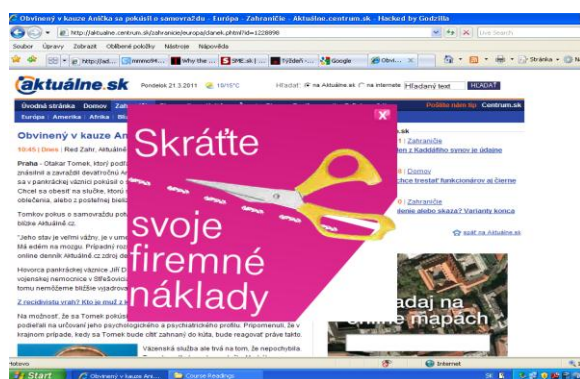


Figure 10c. Transgressive discourse

5. Web-page as a semiotic aggregate

As it has been pointed out, e-scape represents an environment where semiotic aggregates are formed through the operation of centripetal and centrifugal forces which bring multiple types of semiotic (sub)systems and discourses into a 'interdiscursive dialogicity' resulting thus in a composite semiotics of place. As an example of one such semiotic aggregate I offer a description of a BBC web-page (Figure 11a). The page is enclosed within several layers of infrastructural discourse which contain the outside frame (the Windows operating system), with a title bar at the top and a toolbar line at the bottom, and the browser frame (Internet Explorer), which consists of an outside window with several built-in toolbars: an address bar (the address of the current Web page) and links toolbar (for a quick retrieval of a Web page) at the top and a status line at the bottom. The browser reading pane displaying the content of the page is controlled by two scrolling control bars for the page left-to-right (at the bottom) and up-and-down (on the right) movement.

It is to be noted that, first, a web-page has its own internal discursive organization which depends to a large extent on what type of semiotic space it represents, and, second, that the place semiotics interacts with the visual semiotic subsystems within the frame. Hence, the most 'ideal/given' information locates the e-space within the currently operating software system (the system's icon is placed in the top-left-most corner of the screen; for example, the icon for web page within the Internet Explorer browser system, or for a document within the Microsoft Word editor). The most 'ideal/new' information which is a part of the infrastructural discourse and which controls the current document (viz. the minimize, maximize and close icons) is in the top/right corner of the current e-scape. The 'real/given' element of infrastructural discourse located in the left/bottom part of the frame is represented by the Microsoft Windows operating system (the Start button), and the most 'real/new' infrastructural discourse providing the current exact time/date is placed in the bottom/right corner of the e-scape. It appears that the design of this particular web-page (which employs the left-to-write system of writing/reading) follows the given-to-new and ideal-to-real compositionality principle (cf. the reverse patterning of the English and Arabic versions of the Al Jazeera TV homepage in Figures 11b-c).

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Figure 11a. A semiotic aggregate: a BBC web page



Figure 11b. Al Jazeera English version



Figure 11c. Al Jazeera Arabic version

6. Conclusion

In the paper I present an attempt to approach e-scape as a semiotic aggregate as resulting from the interaction of multiple semiotic systems and discourses. Its multi-layered nature is further enhanced by the displayed objects with their own internal semiotic organization, or 'grammar' of meaning. Not all of the semiotic systems and discourses, however, are attended to by the user at a given time; while some are set aside for 'civil disattention' (e.g. infrastructural discourse of the web page), others are actively 'in play'. E-scape represents a special semiotic environment in its own right and as such poses a promising analytical challenge for a variety of approaches on the interface of social semiotics and modern technology.



Closing Sequences in a Synchronous Internet Chatroom

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Abstract

The article first very briefly outlines the significance of closings for conversations and discusses the conditions in a synchronous Internet chatroom, the so called Internet Relay Chat (further IRC). Then, a closer investigation is made of different types of closings, as well as some specific techniques that differentiate synchronous Internet chat conversation from face-to-face interaction. In a real exchange, signals exist indicating that a conversation is ending. For example, Sacks and Schegloff point out that closings are preceded by possible pre-closings. Finally, I discuss what politeness and impoliteness strategies are used and how they are perceived in the IRC environment.

Key words

closings, IRC, (im)politeness, AJS, corpus, appropriateness, adjacency pairs

1. Introduction – theoretical background

Closings like openings form a significant part of any written or spoken interaction. Their significance is quite aptly expressed by Laver (in McLaughlin, 1984, p.170) who claims that

“In the marginal phases of conversation, where the use of such linguistic routines is most dense, participants conduct their social negotiations about respective status and role partly by means of the choice of formulaic phrases, address-term, and type of phatic communication.”

Many studies have dealt with functions that are fulfilled by the particular behaviour carried out before taking leave from face-to-face conversation (Knapp et al, 1973, in McLaughlin, 1984) and at the same time closings in telephone conversations have proven to be of interest to several investigators (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). Three functions in closing a conversation can be observed: (1) signalling that there is a movement towards a state of decreased access; (2) expressing appreciation for the encounter and a desire for future contact; (3) summarizing what the encounter has accomplished (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 176).

Among the verbal behaviours that appear to be typical of closing sections in informal spoken interaction were reinforcement (short agreements such as “O.K.” and “Right”), buffering (short sociocentric sequences like “Uh” and “Well”), appreciation (statement of enjoyment of the preceding conversation), summary statements (summarizes what was said) and well-wishing. It is notable that actually saying “Good bye” or “So long” which seem to be typical of closing was, out of the fourteen verbal behaviours examined, among the least likely to occur (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 176).

Two main goals exist that this article on Internet Relay Chat (further IRC) closings wishes to pursue. One goal is to delineate the strategies that chat participants acquire in order to depart from a chat room conversation. Since I am not aware of any similar investigation on IRC, the research stems from the above-mentioned closing features of spoken conversation. Mainly, the choice of formulaic phrases, types of phatic communication and the use of other closing remarks and responses are considered. The second goal is to analyze markers of (im)politeness in closing sentences and other methods typical of IRC. The question of what is regarded as in/appropriate or even im/polite within the IRC context is still to be determined.

2. Corpus analyzed

I conducted my analysis on the corpus containing 793 IRC messages and taken from the chat provider www.hotmail.com. My choice of collecting a particular number of messages, rather than using the standard method of collecting a particular number of words draws on various studies on IRC that based their research on the number of messages in the corpus rather than the number of words, which is usual for research in oral and written communication (Kwang-Kyu Ko, 1996; Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003; Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003; Ahti and Lähtevänoja, 2004). Panyametheekul and Herring, for example, collected 917 messages for their analysis. In the article, a basic research unit, then, is a message which is defined as instantly communicated, written information sent by one participant of a chat room and delimited by the moment when the text is conveyed to the monitors of other chat participants.

My data are in the form of a transcript of the conversations, the main aim was to capture the speech situation in the chat room as naturally as possible. No correction in terms of grammar and spelling mistakes was made. The original typed conversations were in different colours and fonts, which I modified as these elements were not relevant to my study and they were of inferior quality for reading. I have transformed the original printout into a record using the Microsoft Word programme and numbered the lines/ messages to make the conversational threads easier to follow and clearer to present in Examples. Arranging this corpus, ethical issues were also considered, however, for obvious reasons it was not possible to receive an informed consent from the subjects involved. To respect privacy I decided to change all the nicknames.

3. Analysis

The main concern of this section is to carry out a quantitative and qualitative analysis and examine what type of closing strategies chat participants select and to what extent. From the initial observation, it is obvious that closings appear with less frequency than openings, I can even say with minimum frequency. The initial assumption is that leaving a chat room is less visible and noticed than joining the conversation. In the following paragraphs I outline a few areas of inquiry that I will deal with later in the article. It is also necessary to point out that all examples used in the article are from my own corpus of data. Bearing in mind the above-mentioned findings, I have divided closings into the following groups for further analysis:

1. **Automatic Leaving Signal (further ALS) without any previous contribution** – includes people who left the room without any previous attempt to contribute to the conversation plus the signal that the chat participant “is away”,

2. **ALS without any closing sentence but with previous opening or conversation** – includes people who joined the conversation but left without any closing sentence,

3. **ALS with a pre-closing sentence or an expression** – includes people who joined the conversation and announced their departure from the room by a pre-closing phrase, such as ‘well’, ‘OK’, and so forth,

4. **ALS with a closing sentence** – includes people who joined the conversation and before leaving the room made a closing remark, such as ‘bye everyone’, or used a continuity statement, such as ‘bbl’ standing for ‘*be back later*’ or ‘brb’ that means ‘*be right back*’.

When opening, an Automatic Joining Signal (further AJS) gives a primary signal to the present chat room participants that a new person has entered. Then, the person has a choice between talking and observing. In contrast, it is relatively easy to leave the chat room without being noticed. A person only clicks on the “leave the conversation” button and an automatic leaving signal (ALS) deletes his/her nickname from the screen.

The exceptional conditions on IRC also provide another way of leaving the room, but not entirely. The chat participant clicks on “away” button. This means that he is temporarily out of the conversation but is likely to come back soon. I note seven messages like this in my corpus. The following short extract from the corpus is an excellent illustration of four different types of closings. However, it is necessary to note that it is the only example in the corpus, see table 15 below for further details.

Example 1

777.KingKaosh: well jen and lindsay (**pre-closing**)
 778.KingKaosh: brb i gotta get ready (**closing phrase**)
 779.SpecialED : bye jay (reply to the closing phrase)
 780.KingKaosh: i gotta put my face on
 791. KingKaosh is away. (**temporary departure from the chat room**)

The chat room participant *KingKaosh* is one the most active and popular chatters (first note in line 407). Before *KingKaosh* left the room, s/he wrote a pre-closing sentence and received one response from *SpecialED*, line 779. Nonetheless, according to “netiquette” (Crystal, 2001), it is quite common and not regarded as impolite or offensive not to receive any responses or even not make any closings.

The aforementioned sociological study on behaviour during Internet chatting reveals specific norms of behaviour that are performed by young chat participants. Fifteen-year-old Elizabeth discloses: “I never even told those guys I was getting off the Internet when I did. So I just kinda like, disappeared.” (Jones, 1998, p. 166). In other words, the anonymity of a chat room enables its participants to leave without any closing remarks, like in the following example from my corpus:

Example 2

269.*Hart9779* has JOINED the conversation.
 270.*Hart9779*: Hi room, any females around Norfolk, VA????
 292.james6 : lots of females around norfolk virginia
 322. *Hart9779* has LEFT the conversation.

The participant *Hart9779* made a very short visit to the chat room. His/her only opening attempt – greeting to all and a follow-up opening question in one message – was immediately noticed by one participant *james6* who made a rather brusque response, which could be understood as inappropriate, however, not impolite and made *Hart9779* leave the room without any closing sentence in line 322.

The following example proves that even a very active and ‘talkative’ chat participant just clicks on the “leave the conversation” button without any closing phrase. *FatalisticHomeRun* was taking active part in the conversation between lines 19 and 260, although she was away in line 62 and came back in line 73. Then she kept silent until line 544 where she wrote:

Example 3

544. *FatalisticHomeRun* : the hottest attorney in the world is coming to my office for a meeting
 545.*FatalisticHomeRun* powders her nose

After line 545 *FatalisticHomeRun* did not appear in the chat room again and did not make any closing remark or give any explanation.

On the other hand, I observe quite a rare situation, when a person makes a pre-closing remark and leaves the IRC conversation and only afterwards participants say good-bye to him or her. Example 4 indicates such an event:

Example 4

49. woogywoogywoo : I'm going to leave you bitches now
 50. Belle: everybody needs a booty call
 51. *FatalisticHomeRun* : airborne booty call
 52. Belle: lol
 53. Im Trendy : bye woogy woogy woo
 54. *FatalisticHomeRun* : bye bye
 55. volkswagenracing: ciao
 56. woogywoogywoo has LEFT the conversation.
 57. Belle: bye woogy gooner

From the point of view of coherence of the text and face-to-face interaction, it appears appropriate, using Watts’ terminology (Watts, 2003) that on IRC response to saying goodbye, if any, comes after the person leaves the room. The leaving individual logically does not wait until everyone says goodbye to him/her. The context of a chat room gives this paradoxical situation new dimension. Considering the amount of chat participants present in the chat room, a person leaving would have to wait until all participants gave their responses. In reality, it is not technically feasible. This situation could be compared to the act of addressing or the act of greeting when opening a conversation on IRC; the number of greetings and addresses would flood the computer screen. With a view to the above-mentioned facts, it can be said that such conversation incoherence is unique to IRC and forms a part of the freedom of Internet media. From the point of view of politeness, not using any closing remark and not responding to it is regarded as appropriate, within the boundaries of ‘relational work’ (Watts, 2003).

Table 1 below shows the occurrence rate of ALS and closing phrases found in the chat room. I also included in the table the notable and unique possibility mentioned above to inform other chat participants that somebody is out of the room temporarily by the message “...is away”. It was already mentioned above and it is worth stating again that more than a half of all chat participants, a total of 52 per cent, never contributed to the conversation; they only joined and then left the chat room.

	Corpus
ALS without any previous contribution	84
ALS without any closing sentence but with previous opening/ conversation	16
ALS with pre-closing sentences or expressions (well...)	2
ALS with closing phrase (bye, brb) + (responses to it)	2+(5)
.....is away (automatic signal)	7

Table 1: The occurrence of closings in the corpus

In accordance with this finding, mainly the fact that 84 chat participants do not make any contribution and leave, the question arises as to what purpose synchronous IRC serves, whether its main function is phatic rather than informative. It seems that the anonymous nature of the media, the lack of commitment and easy entry and departure from chat rooms enables people to 'stand off', observe and then choose whether to join the conversation or leave. This phenomenon resembles a big social gathering going on at the same time in different rooms that are crowded with many people. Schegloff (2000, p. 3) describes such situations as 'the multiple conversations simultaneously in progress at parties, yielding the hubbub known as the "cocktail party phenomenon". Newcomers have a possibility to look through the glass door, listen and then enter or leave as they wish repeating it as many times as they wish. The following example from the corpus shows such behaviour with four entries (AJS) and departures (ALS) with no other contribution from *pavinjohn11*. Nevertheless, the most entries and departures are made by a chat participant *I_hate_emos1* with six AJS and six ALS.

Example 5

121. *pavinjohn11* has joined the conversation.
 135. *pavinjohn11* left the conversation.
 147. *pavinjohn11* has joined the conversation
 166. *pavinjohn11* left the conversation.
 479. *pavinjohn11* has joined the conversation.
 488. *pavinjohn11* left the conversation.
 543. *pavinjohn11* has joined the conversation.
 547. *pavinjohn11* left the conversation.

The second largest group of participants (N=16) do not make any closing statements despite their active participation in a chat room. This fact is not unexpected given the overall incoherence of the media, the absence of audio and visual cues, its overlapping character, the scrolling effect of the screen and, moreover, the freedom of choice as to whether to continue or not.

Table 1 further indicates that only 2 chat participants made any pre-closing sentences. These were a rather extraordinary phrase in line 49 *woogywoogywoo: I'm going to leave you bitches now*; and in line 777 *KingKaosh: well jen and lindsay*. It is necessary to note that the unusual closing in line 49 received four replies; one reply came after the chat participant left the room. I discuss seemingly impolite address in chapter 4.1 Address Forms where I assume this type of address is 'mock impoliteness', typical of the cyber context. Placed in another context, they would be regarded as impolite, inappropriate or bizarre.

The example below shows clearly that pre-closings coincide with the category of reinforcement and buffering found in a spoken conversation, such as 'well' and 'ok'. Knapp et al. (In McLaughlin, 1984, p. 177) also found that legitimizers varied according to whether they

invoked an internal ('I think we have finished all the questions') or an external motive for termination ('I have got to go to the gym'). In the case of *KingKaosh*, his/her pre-closing very closely resembles external legitimizers in spoken conversation.

Example 6

777. *KingKaosh*: well jen and lindsay
 778. *KingKaosh*: brb i gotta get ready

In my corpus there are only two closing phrases; a rather peculiar and an unexpected message can be found in line 91 *Im Trendy: on that note buh bye*. *Im Trendy* was conversing mainly with *volkswagenracing* and in line 91 s/he suddenly closed the conversation, at least with a closing phrase. The other is an appropriate closing phrase for this type of medium in line 778 *KingKaosh: brb i gotta get ready* - 'brb' (be right back). To 'be right back' is understood as a marker of the actual absence in a chat room with a possibility of returning. It is also called a 'continuity statement' and points to the continuous character of IRC functioning online 24 hours a day and thus providing a stable and easily accessible environment for further meetings on IRC. By stating 'brb', people view their communication as continuous and postponed rather than broken by saying goodbye.

The above analysis of closings on IRC leads now to the question of what appropriate or even polite closing sequences on IRC look like. Knapp et al. (1973) observed that a typical closing sequence in a spoken conversation in less formal circumstances was as follows: reinforcement, buffering, welfare concern ('Take care of yourself') or continuation ('See you tomorrow'). Obviously IRC conversation shows rather different results. Apart from a very small percentage of closings in the whole corpus as such, I can identify only one example of a closing sequence in my corpus. The rest is typical of the IRC environment, which means individual closing phrases (N=2) and no closings, see Table 1.

The only closing sequence found in the corpus (see example below) appears to be a two-part sequence consisting of

1. a pre-closing, an explanation why the person has to leave or a continuity statement,
2. welfare concern or the hope to see everyone later, see example:

Example 7

781. *KingKaosh*: well jen and lindsay (pre-closing)
 782. *KingKaosh*: brb i gotta get ready (closing phrase)
 783. *SpecialED*: bye jay (reply to the closing phrase)
 784. *KingKaosh*: i gotta put my face on
 791. *KingKaosh*: is away. (temporary departure from the chat room)

Using the theory of Watts to describe polite or impolite behaviour on IRC, I assume that this sequence is polite, that means in excess of what is required by the politeness behaviour of the overall interaction; and no closings are appropriate to the ongoing interaction.

In contrast with the findings in a spoken conversation mentioned earlier (McLaughlin, 1984), 'bye' is the only used closing phrase in the corpus (N=5). According to Watts, leave-taking does not inherently encode politeness and he regards it as EPMs (expressions of procedural meaning). On the other hand, I believe saying good bye on IRC is in excess of what is required by the situation and thus it is considered polite.

I conclude the investigation in closings with the efficiency of IRC closing sequences in the corpus. By efficiency, I mean whether the given closing statement

received any response or not. Table 2 illustrates the connection between the type of responses and its effectiveness.

Types of closings	Gained response
Two-part sequence	1
Saying good-bye (N=1)	0
Cyber-closing (N=1)	4
Total	5

Table 2: The connection between type of responses and its effectiveness

The result from Table 2 is significant when analyzing conversation and strategies that are utilized on IRC. The analysis has confirmed that even if chat participants establish a certain kind of relationship inside a chat room, they do not reaffirm it with continuity statements or pre-closings. Altogether, there are only four closings and five responses to them. Looking at Table 2 in more detail the efficiency seems to be rather imbalanced. Surprisingly, the mocking cyber-closing received the most responses. On the whole, it appears that there is no need for good-byes and the conversation ends with a vague pre-closing topic, a termination section acknowledging with ALS or with no closing at all as in the majority of cases in the corpus.

4. Conclusion

The above analysis has studied various strategies chat participants use to close conversation on IRC. The research has revealed that 86 per cent of chat participants do not utilize any closing at all. The most common closing "technique" appears to be a simple click on the "leave the conversation" function/button. The reason for such behaviour can be found not only in the incoherence of the IRC environment, but also in the lack of commitment and an atmosphere of distance, indicating a lack of familiarity and intimacy, typical of virtual communication. Thus, my initial assumption that

the frequency of closings would be much lower than conversation openings has been verified. However, it does not eliminate its significance in the overall structure of IRC.

The cases of entering or leaving a chat room without any address or greeting may be a partial response to the research question of what is regarded as (im)polite on IRC. As was discussed above, it is not impolite, or rather, it is appropriate to avoid any opening phrase, address or greeting on IRC as it is to come and leave without saying anything. Netiquette manuals even recommend waiting after entering and to watch the conversation flow before participating in conversation. Watts maintains that leave-taking does not inherently encode politeness and regards them as EPMs (expressions of procedural meaning). On the other hand, I am convinced that saying good bye on IRC is in excess of what is required by the situation and thus it is considered polite.

Concerning the most frequent and efficient technique of closing, only one closing sequence has been identified – pre-closing and a welfare concern. Further, it can be observed that an expression like "be right back" creates an impression of togetherness and the atmosphere of sociability and a kind of security for current conversation partners. Continuity statements imply the continuous character of IRC, though break, at the same time, the maxim of quality in that they paradoxically never come back to the same conversation situation and encounter the same conversation partners.

Last but not least, a unique phenomenon possible only on IRC can be observed when a person leaves the room and after that another chat participants says good-bye to him/her.

It was said at the beginning that in a real exchange there are signals indicating a conversation is ending. It is obvious from Tables 1 and 2 that the majority of the conversation on IRC is not firmly embedded in certain rules, behavioural structures and linguistic routines like in spoken conversation.

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The Language and Communication of Chatgroups

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Abstract

The Internet allows its users to engage in a multi-party discussion on-line, either synchronously, in real time, or asynchronously, in postponed time. It is in the synchronous interactions which cause the greatest linguistic innovation, affecting several basic conventions of traditional spoken and written communication. Is it possible to have a successful conversation without keeping the standard conventions of turn-taking, logical sequence, time ordering, and the like? The answer may not be clear; however, the evidence is clear: millions of people are doing that.

Keywords

Internet, chatgroups, linguistic norms, linguistic creativity, linguistic and social behavior, discourse.

Introduction

Chatgroups, "typically involve several people, with message-exchanges often anonymous, continuing indefinitely, and dealing with a wide and unpredictable range of issues". Chatgroups provide a person-to-person interaction that is predominantly social in character. A chatgroup is not a place where to find facts but rather opinions to react to. In chatgroups language can be found in its most primitive state. Chatgroups offer dialogues in their spontaneous, unedited, naked state. Chatgroups provide evidence of the "remarkable linguistic versatility that exists within ordinary people – especially ordinary young people" (Crystal 2006, 176). This paper focuses on some of the lexical, morpho-syntactic, pragmatic and psychological factors playing role in the discourse of chatgroups. The results of this study are partially based on a survey¹ carried out among high school and university students (140 respondents in total) who were asked twelve questions regarding their interaction with others via chatgroups in light of the four factors above. This age group was specifically chosen since it is primarily the young people who seem to find this way of interaction with their peers attractive and engaging.

1. Vocabulary Factors: Survey Questions #2, 4, 8

1.1. The Use of Slang

One of the most typical manifestations of the language of chatgroups is the choice of vocabulary they apply in their discourse. Most young 'chatters' tend to give preference to slang which could be explained by some of the following reasons.

Eric Partidge, a British lexicographer (1894-1979) states 15 reasons for which people use slang (Crystal 2003, 182):

1. "In sheer high spirits, by the young in heart as well as by the young in years; 'just for the fun of the thing'; in playfulness or waggishness."
2. "As an exercise either in wit and ingenuity or in humor."
3. "To be 'different', to be novel."
4. "To be picturesque (either positively or [...] negatively)."
5. "To be unmistakably arresting, even startling."
6. "To escape from clichés, or to be brief and concise. (Actuated by impatience with existing terms.)"
7. "To enrich the language."

8. "To lend an air of solidity, concreteness, to the abstract; of earthiness to the idealistic; of immediacy and appositeness to the remote. (In the cultured the effort is usually premeditated, while in the uncultured it is almost always unconscious when it is not rather subconscious.)"
- 9a) "To lessen the sting of, or on the other hand to give additional point to, a refusal, a rejection, a recantation;
- 9b) To reduce, perhaps also to disperse, the solemnity, the pomposity, the excessive seriousness of a conversation (or of a piece of writing);
- 9c) To soften the tragedy, to lighten or to 'prettify' the inevitability of death or madness, or to mask the ugliness or the pity of profound turpitude (e.g. treachery, ingratitude); and/or thus to enable the speaker or his auditor or both to endure, to 'carry on'."
10. "To speak or write down to an inferior, or to amuse a superior public; or merely to be on a colloquial level with either one's audience or one's subject matter."
11. "For ease of social intercourse."
12. "To induce either friendliness or intimacy of a deep or a durable kind."
13. "To show that one belongs to a certain school, trade or profession, artistic or intellectual set, or social class; in brief, to be 'in the swim' or to establish contact."

In reaction to one of The Wall Street Journal's articles on March 5, 2011 *Oil Shocked? Five Ways to Save on Gas*², the author of the following message expressed that he IS 'in the swim' in the following way:

I was getting absolutely sick of paying over \$3 at the pump. I decided to do some serious Googling in my quest for lower prices, I came across this unique buying club called MyGasDiscount.info, I immediately joined them (it doesn't cost anything to join) and then when I fill up, I keep the receipt and mail it in to get a 50% rebate on the amount I spent for gas. However, there is an upper limit that you can do each month I think it is \$200 or something like that — but believe me an extra couple of hundred bucks a month gives my family our weekly trip to the movies again... or you can always buy more gas.. LOL.

¹ See Appendix for Survey Questions and Results

² Available from <http://blogs.wsj.com/drivers-seat/2011/03/05/oil-shocked-five-ways-to-save-on-gas/>

14. "Hence, to show or prove that someone is not 'in the swim'."
15. "To be secret – not understood by those around me. (Children, students, lovers, members of political secret societies, and criminals in or out of prison, innocent persons in prisons, are the chief exponents.)"

The answers to Question #8 on the survey "Do you use more expressive language when communicating on-line, e.g. expressions that you would be embarrassed to use in everyday situations?" show that the majority of the respondents claim not to use this type of language expression. See Survey Question #8.

The sample chats used in this paper are mostly taken from a public ICQ chatroom in which the users of ICQ 6.5 with Extraz (a new ICQ product) express their complaints about the dysfunctional operation of this program.

Let us consider the following example:

Sample Chat 1³

American idiots. all you can get by changes like this is loose your users. 6.5 is peace of shit and i'll never use it. All you can get is kill icq like usefull and usual communicating protocol. Now i'll install Jabber, Skype, Gmail and other to my computers. NO F[...]ING⁴ ICQ IN MY LIFE, grasping mother-f[...]ers⁵ from f[...]ing country of fat dolls

What can be drawn from this sample chat is that its author is very angry and expresses this by the offensive language he/she applies. The factual message of this chat is quite simple and could be expressed by a short statement, e.g. something like 'ICQ 6.5 with Extraz is not working properly' and possibly add 'and that makes me angry'. However, the author of the message seems to enjoy the liberty to let all of his/her frustration and rage out by a series of 'juicy' statements.

The conclusion of this chat is: if it is not about transmitting information, it is about expressing feelings, opinions and attitudes.

A similar idea is being expressed in a more polite and sophisticated way by another author in the following chat.

Sample Chat 2⁷

I am another long time icq user who will be removing icq after posting this message. After downloading the newest version, I cannot send messages to my contacts, and I don't show as being on line to them, consequently they cannot message me. I see from this forum that I am not the only one this is happening to, and I believe that icq is headed down the tube. There are other messaging programs that DO work and have not been "improved" until they no longer do work. Goodbye ICQ!

The author of this message is clearly a more educated and polite person who expresses his/her concern about the dysfunctional operation of the ICQ 6.5 with Open Xtraz Internet product in a more sophisticated language and style. The one slang expression he/she uses is *icq is headed down the tube* which means that it is in a state of failure and the user intends to stop using it.

The following two messages taken from the same chatroom seem to have the same objectives as the first chat: to express emotion and anger and give opinion.

Sample Chat 3⁸

How much time you want to fuck me with your endless "new fucking version"? I have no unlimited traffic and unlimited privat time. Put your icq in your asses, please. NO MORE THIS SHIT! No more fucking icq! You program is not single means of talking.

Sample Chat 4⁹

To the Present owners of ICQ I say.... " Thank you very much... You have successfully SCREWED up a bloody good chat programme"....

1.2. Vocabulary Simplification

"If we think – at least some of the time – in language, then presumably the language we speak must influence the way we think about the world and perhaps even the way we perceive it. The idea that language has such influence and thus importance is called the Whorf hypothesis after the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf" (Algeo 2010, 15).

In one of the efforts to test this hypothesis, people who spoke quite different languages were given a large number of chips, each of a different color. Those tested were asked to sort the chips into piles so that each pile contained chips of similar color. Each person was permitted to make any number of piles. The number of piled tended to correspond to the number of basic colors in the language of the sorter. English has eleven basic color terms: red, pink, orange, brown, yellow, green, blue, purple, black, gray, and white. Therefore, English speakers tend to sort color chips into eleven piles. If a language has only seven basic color terms (e.g. white, black, red, yellow, blue, green, and brown), speakers of that language will tend to sort color chips into those seven piles. Thus, "how we think about and respond to colors is a function of how our language classifies them" (Algeo 2010, 16).

In the on-line discourse, we are concerned about the possible damage this kind of communication has on the development of vocabulary and style of its, especially young users. According to our survey, most respondents believe that their vocabulary has not become more limited due to this kind of communication. See Survey Question #2.

The question is whether the fact that the limited vocabulary spectrum often found in the discourse of chatgroups will consequently also result in narrowing the persons' perception of diverse phenomena, such as, e.g. the range of colors as mentioned in the example above.

On the one hand, chatgroups have developed their own linguistic norms which include a certain vocabulary, especially slang and internetisms as well as style and

³ Available from
http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=2

⁴ Letters omitted

⁵ Letters omitted

⁶ Letters omitted

⁷ Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=14

⁸ Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=2

⁹ Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=3

most users adopt them in order to feel accepted into the group. On the other hand, does this new linguistic law allow the users to nourish and develop their language skills or do these persons rather diminish their vocabulary in order to be 'in'? This seems to be a contradictory question especially having in mind the fact that the language of chatgroups in many ways IS innovative and highly creative.

An interesting example of how the simplification of their message content and form allows chatgroup participants to achieve comprehensibility is demonstrated in the usage of general and sometimes vague words, such as *account* or *thing*. The meaning of such lexemes is denoted by the statement: "You shall know a word by the company it keeps", which appears in the writing of the British linguist J.R. Firth (1890-1960) who tries to draw attention to "the crucial role of the lexical context which surrounds a lexeme, when we analyze its meaning" (Crystal 2003, 160). According to the Longman Lancaster Corpus, the lexeme *staple* acquires various meanings when examined in collocations: *staple* is used to describe (1) the basic goods that a nation makes or trades in, (2) a basic main food that a community eats, and (3) a basic item of household food. From this corpus it appears that particularly important collocations are *diet*, *food*, *industry*, and *product* (C.f. Crystal 2003, 160).

- a) Maize is more important as a *staple* among the ethnic groups in the southern savanna...
- b) ...thing about the groups is that many of them form a *staple* diet for Aboriginal people...
- c) That claret was considered a part of the *staple* diet, even of the ordinary man...
- d) Where it becomes a *staple* diet it is important that the whole grain is eaten...
- e) There was no real labour aristocracy in the *staple* export trades – coal and the main branches...
- f) ...while for some distance south of it rice is not the *staple* food of the inhabitants.
- g) Both white and red grain varieties occur. It is a *staple* food in an area...
- h) Hunting and fishing must have provided *staple* foods.

In the discourse of chatgroups, as manifested in the contexts below, the words *thing* and *account* can acquire different and yet precise meanings.

“THING”

- a) ...cant even uninstall the darn *thing* and causing all kinds of other problems....
- b) Ok, I must say I have never had any problems whatsoever with ICQ until the new version... If I type something and hit enter, what I typed does not show in the upper screen either. I am having to close the window each time and wait for it to pop open with the new message to see the history of what was typed... Any idea before I trash the whole *thing*?
- c) I had same issue and even in xp it did the same *thing*.
- d) Hi I need help this tech support *thing* sucks.
- e) I am STILL getting IE script errors with the new ICQ.... I turned off the script debugging *thing* in IE already but am still getting the stupid error messages.
- In these collocations, *thing* is used as (1) an entity, an idea, or a quality perceived, known, or thought to have its own existence and (2) something referred to by a word, a symbol, a sign, or an idea; a referent. In other words, in this context *thing* refers to (1) the ICQ 6.5 with Open Xtraz Internet product (in a and b), (2) a certain activity (in c), (3) a service (in d) and d) a tool (in e).

“ACCOUNT”

- I'm trying to sign up for icq with a new *account* and everytime I try to launch it tells me my *account* is suspended or that my password doesn't match my *account* name.
- Cool...but my *account* is blocked...=(for what?
- Please unblock my *account* 233119557
- Please unlock my account 407295582
- ICQ is completely worthless until you're able to restore my hacked account!

Account in these collocations is used specifically for service accounts with the ICQ 6.5 with Open Xtraz Internet product.

2. Grammar Factors: Survey Questions # 2, 3

Spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure seem to be some of the corner stones of deviation from standard grammar in which chatgroup participants seem to delight in. Whether simply for the lack of time and to ensure rapid exchange of messages or for the sake of being 'different' and 'innovative' or to 'be in the language of chatgroups shows an endless number of spelling, punctuation and different kinds of deviation that make a linguist wonder whether the chatgroups participants have a command of two orthographies and grammars: one – the normative and another one – the 'chatgroup' one which would make them 'bi-grammatical' as a person who speaks two languages is 'bilingual'. If so, is their command of both the grammatical forms and their a-grammatical forms on the same level? Research shows that a bilingual person rarely has the same command of both languages in all linguistic areas, depending on various factors, e.g. which is the language that the person speaks at home with their parents (which would make this particular language on the colloquial or informal level more dominant than the other) or which is the language the person did their formal studies in (which would make that particular language more dominant in the areas of sciences, humanities, etc.). This hypothesis leads to the question what grammar is the more dominant one of the person who uses both types: the standard, normative and the non-standard one? If we presume that the user may only have one dominant grammar, which one is it? And how would we measure that? On the basis of what fraction of time, e.g. per day they spend chatting on-line and how much time they spend in real face-to-face communication? For the results of the survey see Survey Questions #2 and #3.

Sample Chat 5¹⁰

well thanks for the forum but the rest STINKSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS cant even uninstall the darn thing and causing all kinds of other problems.....no clue how to get hold of anyone for help!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! what a scammmmmmmmmm

In this text, the writer is apparently frustrated with the installation of a program and he or she chooses to express this frustration by using several slang words. The verb *stink* in this context is used as a slang word and as such acquires the following meanings: to have something to an extreme or offensive degree, to be of an extremely low or bad quality, or to have the appearance of dishonesty or corruption.¹¹ Furthermore, the writer uses the adjective *darn* as a euphemistic

¹⁰ Available from http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=2

¹¹ Available from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/stink>

word for *damn*. At last, with the slang noun *scam* - meaning a stratagem for gain; a swindle - the author expresses his or her fear of having been swindled or cheated. The writer also makes use of graphic symbols to highlight the main ideas of the message as well as the helplessness, annoyance and anger in which the person finds himself/herself (e.g. the multiplication of consonant letters in *stinks* and *scam* and the multiplication of exclamation marks).

The author of this message breaks the rules of the English regular sentence structure which by omitting the subject and sometimes even the verb in his/her sentences: *cant even uninstall...and ...no clue how to get hold of anyone...*

Still another factor is that English, being the dominant language of the Internet, may cause a great deal of frustration for those who do not have a superior command of this language and some of morphological, syntactic and even lexical errors caused by those of poor command of English may result in serious deterioration of language and often comical situations.

Sample Chat 6¹²

lol

doesnt functions properly. looking on my other question in this forum.

no supporting in german, no answers of my question founds. no answers from contacting support.

im very angry [.]

nothing functions right.

The author of this text starts with the internetism "Laughing out loud" in the acronym form. The person does not start his or her sentences with a capital letter and in one instance does not close his or her sentence with a period. English grammar is not applied correctly in some of the instances, e.g. the use of the wrong prepositions ("at my other question" in stead of "on my other question" or "no answers to my question" rather than "no answers of my question"), the erroneous use of verbs (e.g. "doesn't function" in stead of "doesnt functions"), the use of present participle when the subject form should be used ("no support" in stead of "no supporting"), the incorrect use of the third person singular of the simple present tense when the past participle should be used ("...my question found" in stead of "...my question founds"), elimination of apostrophes ("doesnt", "im").

Deviations from standard grammar, orthographic errors, and lexical errors can be seen in the following two chats written by non-native speakers of English. It is important to note that regardless these deviations, the messages are still understandable.

Sample Chat 7¹³

Why I don't install the ICQ 6.5 ?? I have the ICQ 6. When I can instal the ICQ 6.5, it's say error ?? Why.. Please, we sorry me, mz english are verz horrible...

Sample Chat 8¹⁴

hi!

¹² Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1

¹³ Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=2

¹⁴ Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=10

i'm trying to send an IM by icq2go but i ge an error message (number 602 and 400).

what do i suppose to do to solve thse errors.

i tried to restart my computer but i still get those messages.

Sample Chat 9¹⁵

I am from Russia Excuse me!, i am bad speak english

Sample Chat 10¹⁶

i have a problem with the open xtraz because my english sn't so good that i can understand what to do for open xtraz! where can i get open xtraz in german??

Even though the examples above demonstrate how the erroneous use of the English grammar and vocabulary can cause a great deal of frustration in the on-line communication, in most cases above caused by the non-native speakers of English, it is an astonishing fact that the participants of the particular chatgroup discussions still understand each other and maintain communication in progress.

3. Pragmatic Factors: Survey Questions #5, 6, 9, 10

Crystal (2006, 176) has come to the conclusion that chatgroup participants have developed a "strong sense of speech community, in attracting people of like mind or interest ready to speak in the same way, and ready to criticize or exclude newcomers who do not accept their group's linguistic norms." They have adapted the Gricean parameters and have given them default values and they lead 'metadiscussions' about what counts as acceptable linguistic (and social) behavior and observe the group's own linguistic conventions. (C.f. Crystal 2006, 176).

The Gricean parameters in chatgroups are the following:

- The maxim of quality*: Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- The maxim of relevance*: Make your contributions relevant.
- The maxim of quantity*: Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- The maxim of manner*: Be perspicuous, and specifically: Avoid obscurity. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief. Be orderly. (Crystal 2006, 52-53)

Whether these parameters are truly applied in chatgroup discussions cannot be proven. In light of the next section (Psychological factors), the participants have the freedom to invent lies and have control over reality in the virtual world which would mean a fraud of the maxims above.

In contrast to the Gricean parameters, various forms and manifestations of disinhibition (a) You Don't Know Me (anonymity); b) You Can't See Me (invisibility); c) Delayed Reactions (asynchronicity); d) It's All in My Head (solipsistic introjection); and e) Leveling the Playing Field (neutralizing of status)) play an important role in the chatgroup discourse. The loss of scruples

¹⁵ Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=13

¹⁶ Available from

http://groups.icq.com/groups/index.php?act=view_topic&group_id=10084&topic_id=198678&forum_page=1&page=11

and the excessive spontaneity often become anomalous. It is easy for the participants of the discourse to exchange false messages or make an abuse of the often anonymous interaction, e.g. when disrespectful style applied or false information transmitted.

The results of the survey show that the young respondents tend to believe on-line communication is not as effective as communication in person. See Survey Question #5.

65.8% of the respondents strongly believe that there is a greater chance of creating misunderstanding in on-line communication than in communication in person or over the telephone. See Survey Question #6.

Most of the respondents find the internet a great tool for interacting with other people. See Survey Question #9.

According to the survey, it appears that young people engaged in on-line interactions with other people are not aware of one of the crucial factors of on-line communication, which is to have certain control over reality, e.g. to make the participants say certain things or adopt certain attitudes. See Survey Question #10.

4. Psychological Factors: Survey Questions #1, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12

The purpose of the first question of the survey was to find out how much time the respondents spend chatting on-line and whether the pointers might show a possible addiction to on-line communication. In one of the articles in *netaddiction.com*¹⁷, "Dr. Kimberly Young has likened Internet addiction to addictive syndromes similar to impulse-control disorders on the Axis I Scale of the DSM. She developed the Internet Addiction Diagnostic Questionnaire (IADQ) to diagnose the disorder. Meeting five of the following symptoms were considered necessary to be diagnosed.

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session)?
2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
5. Do you stay online longer than originally intended?
6. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
7. Have you lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
8. Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?

Other Symptoms Include:

Failed attempts to control behavior
Heightened sense of euphoria while involved in computer and Internet activities
Neglecting friends and family
Neglecting sleep to stay online
Being dishonest with others
Feeling guilty, ashamed, anxious, or depressed as a result of online behavior
Physical changes such as weight gain or loss, backaches, headaches, carpal tunnel syndrome
Withdrawing from other pleasurable activities."¹⁸

Interestingly enough, the results of the survey show that the university students involved in the study tend to spend less time on-line than the high school students: See Survey Question #1.

Even though the professional working team at *netaddiction.com* does not provide information on how many hours a week spent in on-line communication may cause internet-addiction, it is clearly stated that the urge to increase the amount of time spent on-line is one of the alarming signs of internet addiction.

Questions # 7 on the survey "Do you feel more open to express your true feelings and ideas when communicating on-line?" and #8 Do you use more expressive language when communicating on-line, e.g. expressions that you would be embarrassed to use in everyday situations? were asked to demonstrate whether the participants of chatgroup discussions have more liberty to express their feelings, whether positive or negative, excitement, joy, anger, annoyance, or frustration in a more open and expressive way, which they would be unable to do in a face-to-face communication.

The results of the survey show the following: See Survey Questions #7 and #8.

Question #10 on the survey "Do you believe it is easier to have control over reality in on-line communication, e.g. to make the participants say certain things or adopt certain attitudes?" Disinhibition plays a crucial role in this respect which according to John Suler (2003), is caused primarily by these factors: a) You Don't Know Me (anonymity); b) You Can't See Me (invisibility); c) Delayed Reactions (asynchronicity); d) It's All in My Head (solipsistic introjection); e) Leveling the Playing Field (neutralizing of status); and f) Interaction Effects (C.f. Hornackova-Klapicova 2010) In light of the factors above, the participants of chatgroup discussions are provided with the liberty not to reveal the truth about themselves (e.g. their real name, age, even gender, beliefs, ideas, etc.) and create a false image in the minds of the other participants of communication and manipulate them. For the results of the survey see Survey Question #10.

Questions #11 and 12 on the survey "Have you ever met a person on-line?" and "Do you communicate with people you met on-line?" only support the fact that chatgroup participants meeting other people and communicating with them on-line stay in the virtual world and such is the reality they live in: also virtual. For the results of the survey see Survey Questions #11 and #12.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Slang, taboo words, generally informal and highly expressive language are preferred to be used in chatgroup discourse.

Conclusion 2: The primary purpose of message exchange is not so much to present facts but rather to express feelings and give opinions.

Conclusion 3: Vocabulary simplification, orthographic errors and other morpho-syntactic and lexical deviations do not hinder communication and understanding.

Conclusion 4: Chatgroup discourse appears to be progressive rather than regressive, no matter how many linguistic anomalies are found.

Conclusion 5: Even though some chatgroup participants demonstrate frustration with English as being the dominant language of on-line communication, most users consider this a very effective tool for communication.

¹⁷ Founded in 1995, the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery offers assessment and treatment for those who suffer from Internet addiction.

¹⁸ Available from <http://www.netaddiction.com/>

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Intercultural Computer-Mediated Discourse. Evidence from the "EIL in Poland and Spain" Blog

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Abstract

It is now quite widely held that language, rather than accurately reflect an outside reality, largely 'constructs and constitutes' it (Barker and Galasinski 2001: 1). Such an assumption is all the more interesting in foreign language contexts. Taking the increasing relevance of the concept of 'English as an International Language' (EIL) as our starting point (Llurda 2004), this paper focuses on discourse produced within the progressively common context of online communication between non-native English speakers. More specifically, it analyses contributions to the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog. This online tool has been set up to enable 'third-space' intercultural computer-mediated communication (Bretag 2006; Fayard and DeSanctis 2010) between two groups of secondary school students of English, in Bendinat (Majorca, Spain) and Opole (Poland), benefiting from largely parallel intercultural foreign language teaching methodologies at their respective educational centres. The initiative has spurred a wealth of activities and materials ultimately resulting in blog posts and online communication between both groups of students. The main aim of the presentation will be to study the participants' self-perception and their awareness of each other's cultures with a view to analysing the role of cultural elements in the teaching approach implemented, a key issue in EIL contexts (McKee 2003; Ives 2009; Byram 2010; Byrnes 2010), and providing insights into intercultural communication through EIL, whose role in today's globalised world is yet to be fully assessed (Ives 2010).

Keywords

Blog, computer-mediated communication, EIL, intercultural discourse

1. Introduction

It is now quite widely held that language, rather than accurately reflect an outside reality, largely 'constructs and constitutes' it (Barker and Galasiński 2001: 1). Within the particular field of applied linguistics, this assumption largely draws on Foucault's concept of discourse (see Foucault 1984 and 1989) perhaps most visibly through critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough 1992; Wodak et al. 1999).

Such an assumption is all the more interesting in foreign language contexts. This has led the Modern Language Association to encourage practitioners and scholars to explore the cultural dimension of language(s) within the foreign language classroom, with a common objective: the training of students with a view to attaining effective 'translingual and transcultural competence' (MLA 2007: 2).

Culture-integrative approaches to language teaching, however, have also been contested since the notion of English as an International Language (EIL)²⁰ has come to

the fore as the international community comes to terms with the fact that the status of English as a language of communication on the international scene derives not quite from the size of its native speaker population but from what Brutt-Griffler terms 'macroacquisition' (McKee 2003: 2), i.e. the ever-growing number of people all across the world that speak it as a second language, which has quadrupled in the last half-century alone (Ives 2010: 516). This has resulted in a scholarly trend stating the case for a distinct EIL teaching methodology. In turn, this should result from the equally distinct aims of EIL speakers, which tend to be different from those of people requiring English to live in an English-speaking country, and which may crucially involve their wish 'to learn English in order to share [...] information about their own [non-English-speaking] countries' (McKee 2003: 4). This has led to the questioning of the use of 'target culture' materials in the classroom, which –it has been suggested– might be replaced by 'an international target culture' (McKee 2003: 10-11), which would also include exploring the learner's own language and culture (Llurda 2004: 317). In other words, what representatives of this scholarly trend are introducing is a new linguistic entity, EIL, which –they insist– already exists even if its role in today's globalised world is yet to be fully assessed (Ives 2010). For them, EIL is (and should therefore be taught as) devoid of any cultural association with any particular English-speaking country, so that it could enable its users to freely discuss and describe their own culture. The role of culture in the foreign language classroom is, therefore, quite dramatically reshaped, now aiming at developing 'intercultural skills' in learners (Bretag 2006: 982).

languages and identities, as clearly seen in Ives (2009; see Llurda 2004: 315-316 for a fuller discussion).

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²⁰ EIL is the most widely used label today to refer to the global dimension of English in the current world. Alternatives include 'world English', 'global English' and 'English as a lingua franca', although these are generally understood to carry a significant ideological burden in that they may connote an imperialistic attitude to the expansion of English at the cost of local

In the particular context of this article, references to EIL are all the more appropriate in that it will focus on discourse produced within the progressively common context of online communication between non-native speakers of English. Indeed, the Internet and its new uses has forever changed 'mediated communication and communication flow' (Junghyun and Haridakis 2009: 988), to such an extent that experts simply refer to the 'embeddedness [of computer-mediated communication (CMC)] in our lives today' (D'Urso 2009: 710). Particularly relevant new forms of CMC in the era of the characteristically interactive, co-creative new Internet or 'Web 2.0' (Courtois et al. 2009: 109) are social networking (see Utz 2010) and blogging (Kenix 2009: 791-792), on which we shall concentrate here.

Preliminary research has already pointed to 'enhance[d] psychological well-being' among Internet users (Junghyun and Haridakis 2009: 988), and their interactive nature and subsequent empowering effects may be behind the proliferation of blogs. At any rate, online communication is already widely perceived to be different from face-to-face communication. Thus, Feng, Lazar and Preece tentatively suggest that 'the level of trust might change, when people move from communicating with others in a face-to-face environment, to communicating in an online environment' (2004: 104). This may be related to 'swift trust', a term coined by Meyerson, Weick and Kramer in 1996 to refer to 'a willingness to suspend doubt about whether others, who are strangers, can be counted on' in the context of 'temporary teams whose existence is formed around a clear purpose and common task with a finite life span' (Feng, Lazar and Preece 2004: 98), which might well be applicable to online environments.

Feng, Lazar and Preece add that 'swift trust is also important in instructor-student interaction in online communities' (2004: 99), which in turn goes a long way in explaining why CMC is also increasingly common in learning environments (see e.g. Tu and Corry 2003) and, within these, foreign language learning. According to constructivist theory, the teacher's traditional role as 'provider', as well as the student's rather passive one as a mere 'learner' should be re-examined so that the former becomes a 'facilitator to engage students in [active] learning'. In turn, this learning should be viewed as 'a social and collaborative activity', which may well benefit from CMC. Thus, several studies have shown that CMC fosters inter-peer participation from otherwise shy students, teamwork and 'cooperative learning', becoming a potentially valuable aid in 'help[ing] students construct new knowledge and reconstruct existing knowledge' (Santhiveeran 2005: 44-45). Needless to say, all such potential benefits are all the more evident in contexts in which 'learners [...] are separated in time and space' (Fung 2004: 136).

Thus, Bretag, drawing inspiration from cultural critic Bhabha (1994), argues that CMC provides a 'third space' enabling 'the possibility for a negotiated re-imagining of cultural identity' and 'a re-imagining of the teacher-student relationship' (Bretag 2006: 982), although this latter statement may also arguably be extended to cover the relationships among students themselves. Thus, Fayard and DeSanctis (2010) provide evidence that online forums may contribute to erasing perceived individual difference and so to building a common identity, 'a sense of we-ness', thus creating an ideal space for intercultural communication.

In the light of the above, this article will analyse contributions to the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog (see Section 2 below), focusing on three main research questions:

RQ1 Swift trust in the context of the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog: is this conducive to active and cooperative learning as measured by inter-peer participation?

RQ2 Does this CMC experience help to construct new knowledge and/or reconstruct existing knowledge?

RQ3 Does this blog provide Bretag's 'third space' for a 'negotiated re-imagining of cultural identity', thus fostering among culturally-diverse students a sense of we-ness beyond particular cultural identities?

2. The 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog project

The 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog is an online tool that has been set up to enable that 'third-space' intercultural CMC referred to above. More specifically, it is used by English language learners from two secondary schools, one in Opole (Poland) and one in Bendinat (Spain), benefiting from largely parallel intercultural foreign language teaching methodologies at their respective educational centres.

As part of their English classes at school, the participants in the study post various projects that they have worked on. They additionally comment on each other's contributions to the blog, whether by participants from their own school or a different one. In order to set interaction going among the participants, the blog administrator is in charge of posting tasks for them to do and spurring debate. The four English teachers in the three schools involved in the project also participate in the blog on occasion and contribute to encouraging their students' participation. The principal aim of the site is to foster the use of EIL so as to broaden the learners' cultural awareness and their knowledge about other world communities.

The main aim of the present article will be to study the participants' self-perception and their awareness of each other's cultures, ultimately providing insights into intercultural communication through EIL. In particular, three blog sections will be analysed: (a) the section covering Unit 1 in the students' syllabus (see below); (b) the 'Cultural snippets' section; and (c) the area called 'Do you want to know something about me?' These three sections are presented next.

Unit 1, entitled 'Stereotypes', is devoted to the discussion of cultural identity, taking as a starting point a reflection on national stereotypes. Throughout the unit, students discuss such questions as: How do we define our national identities? What makes us the same or different from others? How do other cultural groups see us? How do we see other cultural groups? All participants in the project, whether in Poland or Spain, have worked on this unit in a similar fashion following a common plan agreed upon by their instructors.

Towards the end of Unit 1 students visit the computer lab and start writing their comments on the blog on the three main questions that run through this unit (see section 3.3). In addition to the session conducted in class, teachers provide learners with a period of time to post comments on each others' remarks.

In the 'Cultural snippets' section, students have the opportunity of presenting their peers with small pieces of information about a cultural aspect of their choice. In the time span we have analysed, students' contributions mostly focused on their musical preferences and Valentine's Day.

Finally, in the section entitled 'Do you want to know something about me?', learners are asked to provide information about their life (e.g. family, likes and dislikes) with a view to introducing themselves to students in the two other participant schools.

As mentioned, blog contributors are two groups of secondary school students of EIL in Bendinat (Majorca, Spain) and Opole (Poland). A total of 78 students participate in this educational experience. On the one

hand, the students in Bendinat (N=35), aged 14/15, attend IES Bendinat, a state secondary school. They are all taking part in a content-and-language-integrated (CLIL) programme, which means that they study social sciences in English. The work connected to this project, however, was conducted in their English language class with the help of their English teacher. A special characteristic of this group is that it is multilingual and culturally diverse as the school is situated in a tourist resort and in a bilingual community, with Catalan, the autochthonous language, and Spanish coexisting and being taught as mandatory school subjects and additionally used to convey other content subjects. Thus, all of the participants from IES Bendinat are bilingual Spanish/Catalan and study English at school. A large part of them (43%), furthermore, have been exposed to other languages (e.g. German and Dutch) in their households as they have at least one parent from a different nationality and cultural background. Among those, we find seven students (20%) who have one (N=5) or two (N=2) English-speaking parents. On the other hand, the students in Poland attend two different schools in Opole. The students at TAK (N=15), a private school, are aged 14/15, while the participants in VPLO (N=28), a state-run school, are slightly older, 15/16.²¹ In both cases, work on the project was also initiated in the English language class with the teachers' collaboration. Overall, there were more female (F) than male (M) participants (69% v. 31%).

3. Analysis of contributions to the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog

In this section, findings are presented in relation to the three research questions that guided our study.

3.1. Swift trust in the context of the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog: is this conducive to active and cooperative learning as measured by inter-peer participation?

We have examined the three blog sections selected to see the evidence of learner participation and interaction they present. Table 1 summarises this information. A total count of learner entries is given. Additionally, a breakdown of entries into postings and comments is provided. A distinction has also been made between individual and multi-author postings by Polish and Spanish participants. With a view to distinguishing inter- and intranational communication, comments to the postings by other learners, which are always individual in the sections analysed, have been classified according to the country of origin of both addresser and addressee (with four possible combinations: Spanish to Spanish, Spanish to Polish, Polish to Polish, or Polish to Spanish). In addition, learner comments are sometimes directed to their teachers or to the blog moderator.

	Do you want to know something about me?	Stereotypes	Cultural snippets	TOTAL
ENTRIES	126	55	19	200
Postings	46	39	9	94
Sp/Pl	29/17	19/20	4/5	52/42
Sp IN/CA	29/0	19/0	4/0	52/0
Pl IN/CA	13/4	10/10	1/4	24/18
Comments	80	16	10	106
Sp to Sp	36	7	3	46

²¹ Mention should be made of the fact that learners contribute to the blog on a voluntary basis. They are encouraged to do so by their teachers, who actually give them credit for their contributions. However, there are a few students in each of the three schools have not contributed to the blog yet.

Sp to Pl	23	3	5	31
Pl to Pl	5	0	0	5
Pl to Sp	14	1	0	15
Sp to T/M	2	5	2	9
Pl to T/M	0	0	0	0

Table 1: Learner participation and interaction in the three blog sections analysed

Note: Sp (Spanish); Pl (Polish); IN (individual message); MA (co-authored message); T (teacher); M (Moderator)

All in all, 200 learner entries have been analysed. The section that has registered more entries (N=126) is 'Do you want to know something about me?', followed at a considerable distance by 'Stereotypes' (N=55) and 'Cultural snippets' (N=19). 'Do you want to know something about me?' has been the most popular section both in the number of postings (N=46) and in the amount of comments they have given rise to (N=80). Overall, Spanish students have participated more actively on the blog than Polish students have, both in terms of the postings and the comments produced. Unlike the Polish, Spanish students' postings are always individual, never co-authored. As regards comments, Spanish students addressed their classmates at first, since Polish students took longer to start posting. However, once they started doing so, international interaction began to flourish. Interaction with the teachers or the moderator has been scanty in the case of the Spanish participants and non-existent for the Polish students.

In answer to the first research question, it can be seen that the blog studied appears to promote active and cooperative learning as it creates the necessary conditions for authentic inter-peer CMC. Students are presented with the opportunity to interact with other students from a different cultural setting through EIL. In so doing, Spanish and Polish participants find out that there are differences between them, but at the same time considerable shared ground (see also section 3.3). Both Spanish and Polish students seem to be at ease with the other group from the start. The fluidity that their communicative exchanges perspire is no doubt facilitated by the fact that all of them are already proficient in CMC, which contains many characteristic elements used on a global scale (e.g. emoticons, explored in 3.3).

The facility with which students in Spain and Poland relate to each other is illustrated by the following exchange:

Excerpt 1

1 daria5/ania2694/martau: [...] Our hobbies:
Ania – listen to music, scrawl in the notebook, watch anime.
Daria – cooking and reading books
Marta – cooking and listening to music
We would like to know you and learn how your living in Spain looks like ☺
Love ☺²²

Daria, Marta & Ania

2 lamu: I love all things you like to doo! Specially cooking, music, reading and ANIME haha it's great to know about you ☺

3 saiz: i also like cooking hahaha! you are really good at english! ☺

3.2. Does this CMC experience help to construct new knowledge and/or reconstruct existing knowledge?

We have looked at all the blog entries in the three blog sections under scrutiny to see if we could find any episodes of construction of new knowledge [CNK]

²² The emphasis –through underlining– is ours.

and/or reconstruction of existing knowledge [REK].²³ Although the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog might hold potential for the appearance of REK episodes, no instances have been documented in the sections analysed. As regards CNK, we have been able to find a total of 9 episodes in which blog interaction appears to have been conducive to the generation of new knowledge for some of the participants involved. These episodes are not evenly distributed across the three sections. They mostly concentrate in the 'Do you want to know something about me?' section (N=7), while the other two sections register one episode each. Most CNK instances are actually language-related episodes. In Excerpt 2, for instance, three Polish participants try to teach some Polish words to their Spanish counterparts. They do not find a very positive attitude on the side of one of the Spanish students – djulio – so the topic is not pursued further. However, it can be seen that the Spanish student has noticed a characteristic of the Polish language, namely the abundance of consonants in some words, which strikes him as an extremely difficult linguistic trait.

Excerpt 2

1 karola05/kamil10071994/mariusz1234567890: We are learning really fast, and now we'd like to teach you quickly some words in polish:

1. przystojny - handsome - guapo
2. seksowna - sexy - sexy
3. chrząszcz - beetle - escarabajo
4. tańczyć - dance - danza
5. szkoła - school - la escuela
6. Konstantynopolitańczykowieczka²⁴ - Constantinople - Constantinopla

2 djulio: O_O! I thought Deustch was difficult but this is hard as hell! How am I supposed to pronounce "chrzaszcz"!? T_T.

Normally, CNK language-related episodes take place between the learners. There is one instance, however, in which the blog administrator –Karen Jacob– benefits from a student's expertise to find out what a 'long' is. Thus, in Excerpt 3, the learner –edca– is empowered in the course of interaction by taking on the role of new knowledge provider while the teacher assumes a learning position, hence reversing the typical student-teacher roles.

Excerpt 3

1 edca: Hi, i'm Edu, from IES Bendinat, well... I just wanted to do a little introduction about me.

I have blonde hair, I'm not very tall... brown eyes, and I like longboarding, but I'm just starting.

2 Karen Jacob: Hi, Edu – I know this may seem a silly question but what is long boarding? I think I'm really out of touch with these new sports – must be my age!

3 edca: It's like skateboarding but in hills (descense). It's with boards that are long (that's why the name longboarding). It was created by some surfers that wanted to do like surf when it was cold. Normally it's high speed... but I'm starting so i don't go very fast. [CNK]

²³ The term 'episode' is used to refer to the series of interrelated blog entries that appear to give rise to the creation or restructuring of knowledge.

²⁴ This is a hoax, as acknowledged by the entry's author himself soon afterwards (the Polish name would be much simpler: Konstantynopol). Needless to say, this instance of humour is very good evidence of the fluidity of communication on the blog.

Other than language-related CNK episodes, there are some cases in which cultural aspects of life in Poland and Spain are discussed by blog participants. In excerpt 4, for instance, a Spanish student learns about Pope John Paul II being Polish thanks to a posting by two Polish students.

Excerpt 4

1 aguupeczeniuk/edytamazur: Jan Paweł II. The Venerable Pope John Paul II (Latin: Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Italian: Giovanni Paolo II, Polish: Jan Paweł II), born Karol Józef Wojtyła (18 May 1920 – 2 April 2005), reigned as Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church and Sovereign of Vatican City from 16 October 1978 until his death on 2 April 2005.

2 lamu: I didn't know the last pope was polish :O

In reply to the second research question, our findings indicate that the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog can contribute to the creation of new knowledge through the interaction among learners from different cultural backgrounds. The learning episodes reported will probably increase if measures are taken to emphasise interaction among the participants. This, in turn, might lead to the appearance of reconstruction-of-existing-knowledge episodes.

3.3. Does this blog provide Bretag's 'third space' for a 'negotiated re-imagining of cultural identity', thus fostering among culturally-diverse students a sense of we-ness beyond particular cultural identities?

Identity in general, a key issue in cultural studies (Barker 1999: 2), and cultural or national identity in particular, is widely regarded in the literature as a construct, a 'discursive formation' (Foucault 1984 and 1989; Hall 1996b: 613), which results in the creation of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991: 4) assumed to share 'similar beliefs or opinions' (the 'we-group') but also in the construction of a constitutive outside [...] of abjected and marginalized subjects' (Hall 1996a: 15), that is 'outgroups distinguished from the [...] "we-group"' (Wodak et al. 1999: 28).

Hence the relevance of Unit 1 on cultural stereotypes in the syllabus of the participants in this study, as well as its related posts on the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog. In order to delve into the participants' notion of national or cultural identity, a fitting start may well be their answers to the three questions set as Unit 1-related Christmas homework. These read as follows:

Q1: Are cultural stereotypes a good way to learn about people from other nations or do you think they cause prejudices and can be harmful?

Q2: Do cultural stereotypes about a country motivate or put you off wanting to visit or learn the language spoken there?

Q3: Were there any differences between the lists made by the students and by the parents concerning cultural symbols of Poland and Spain?

The first aspect which is worth mentioning here is that there are very few true comments on the part of Spanish students on the answers by Polish bloggers. This is most probably related to the fact that most Polish participants made their contributions at a much later stage than their Spanish counterparts, which points to the Polish schools running behind schedule. Additionally, this exercise, involving as it does the verbalisation of highly complex, abstract concepts which, although clearly internalised, are rarely consciously analysed, entails a high degree of difficulty (explicitly acknowledged by Participant djulio) which is logically enough reflected in the results.

Thus, most answers are short, fragmentary and not always completely coherent. As far as Q1 is concerned, except for a few exceptional cases (curiously enough

only among the Spanish students: victorappelqvist, paulita96, valentinahuelm), most participants seem to be aware of the potentially damaging power of, and inaccurate imaging provided by the stereotyping which results from all national / cultural identity discourses, especially as far as Other imagined communities are concerned, as Excerpt 5 illustrates:

Excerpt 5

Aleksandra P., Kinya P., Mirela G.: We think cultural stereotypes are not a good way to learn about people from other nations, because they are usually not close to reality. [...] [I]t causes serious issues between other nations .

The implications of this answer take us directly to Q2. As hinted above, many Spanish bloggers see themselves as completely impervious to the Othering power of existing national discourses. Excerpt 6 below is representative of this:

Excerpt 6

Iamu: Is not like if cultural stereotypes motivate me or put me off wanting to visit or learn the language. I'd be equal if I wasn't working in this project. [...] It's going to be useful because I'm going to talk with people from Poland, and I'd like them to teach me some Polish, but cultural stereotypes didn't change my mind about it, I'm just like I was last year and the other years.

For their part, and with only a few exceptions, Polish students seem to present a more realistic attitude. Whilst being perfectly aware that cultural stereotypes should not be trusted, they also acknowledge that their choices in life may sometimes be led by them.²⁵ And at this point we reach Q3, whose interest lies in that it encourages participants to analyse not quite so much the possible effect of stereotypical images of Other communities but the image they may have of their own imagined community, as well as to consider whether this image has remained stable in time. This is only apparently an easier task. In fact, the first striking find in this regard is that Spanish bloggers tend to avoid Q3 by either not answering it or simply answering it with little more than a monosyllabic 'YES', thus pointing to a generational cultural gap which they either do not wish or simply cannot address. On the other hand, even if Q2 is sometimes also left unanswered, Polish students do approach it. Answers available invariably refer to a different selection of national symbols by the students and their parents or grandparents, which in turn points to different conceptions of the Polish imagined community. What we find striking is the far more specific nature of the symbols mentioned. Excerpt 7 is a good case in point:

Excerpt 7

Jwona C., Marysia K., Patrycja S.: Symbols of Poland for my parents are Jan Paweł II, Lech Wałęsa, God, honour, native land, Fryderyk Chopin, Józef Piłsudski, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Mikołaj Kopernik. We think that symbols of Poland are Jan Paweł II, Kraków. Young people like eat polish dishes for example: bigos, pierogi, pancakes. This difference are because of gap of generations.

²⁵ It should be mentioned that, among those who claim to be impervious to the power of stereotypes, some crucially point to past experiences abroad. However, probably because such experiences have not been made available to most students in our Polish sample, the opposite view prevails among them.

This stands in stark contrast to the almost total dearth of national symbols mentioned by Spanish students to refer to their imagined community. National identity issues aside, evidence from the blog seems to point to a crucial finding: the building of an overarching identity, a wider sense of 'we-ness', inclusive of both Polish and Spanish students beyond their respective national identities. This is best seen in the blog sections which seem to give them free rein to express themselves without constraints –the 'Cultural snippets' and 'Do you want to know something about me' sections.

Indeed, and in spite of the not exactly ideal degree of inter-peer participation achieved so far (see research question1 above), there is evidence that Polish and Spanish students alike have made this blog space their own, very much leaving behind constructs like Polishness and Spanishness, and therefore bringing themselves closer to one another. This may be seen in three main areas: (1) the language style used; (2) the use of increasingly CMC-standard non-verbal semiotic codes; and (3) the references to similar youth subcultures.

There is little doubt that the fairly homogeneous language style or register almost universally used throughout the blog, and most especially the 'Cultural snippets' and 'Do you want to know something about me' sections, visibly contributes to pulling down whatever kind of obstacles might have hampered intercultural communication among participants.

This is interesting in its own right since language variation (see O'Donnell and Todd 1991: 40ff) has been widely reported in different degrees according to (1) education, socio-economic group and ethnic group – and participants in this study may be quite safely assumed to come from at least two substantially different socio-cultural backgrounds; (2) medium, written communication generally being more explicit and presenting a more careful, elegant style; and (3) the speakers' attitude to each other: the closer speakers feel to each other emotionally, the more informal their language style tends to be.

All this is to be taken into consideration since language as used on the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog is surprisingly homogeneous in its informality, in spite of not only the participants' diverse cultural backgrounds but also the mostly written nature of the blogging phenomenon. Perhaps because CMC in general, and blogging in particular, provides a sense of immediacy which was completely absent from traditional written communication, participants provide plentiful evidence of the somewhat sloppy nature of characteristically informal English. This in turn points to the perception of emotional proximity among them.

Indeed, most students ostensibly draw on colloquial, oral English features, as can be seen in the informal greetings they resort to throughout, often coupled with equally informal vocatives –'Hi everybody!' (djulio), 'Hi people!' (aina96)– or other words to that effect. Other informal features that bring this blog's discourse closer to the emotional proximity of oral speech is the systematic appearance of exclamation marks as well as the insertion of onomatopoeic spellings, including the expressive lengthening of words, to suggest the way these would sound in emotional, face-to-face conversations: 'Hahahaha' (saiz, Iamu, carla96, valentinahuelmo, I27u5c0a7), 'Barcelooooonaaaaaa!' (sofia96), 'SALLY I LOVE YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOU!' (alexanderhof).

Equally representative is the use of clearly and surprisingly informal features, both in the fields of lexis ('He [Michael Jackson]'s just too awesome', djulio, Bendinat); 'Hang[ing] out with friends', kathyhomer96, Bendinat) and morphosyntax (by way of

examples, occurrences have been found of '-ish' suffixation in adjectives as in 'longish' (valentinahuelmo and kathyhorner96, Bendinat) or informal ergative constructions, as in '[something] sucks' (sofia96, carla96, and sallizquierdo, Bendinat). The use of increasingly CMC-standardised non-verbal semiotic codes should also be highlighted as yet another element which plays a significant role in the building of a sense of 'we-ness' on the blog. Indeed, the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' does provide examples of communication techniques which Gajadhar and Green (2003: 11) report on as widespread in CMC. Among these, our blog provides instances of abbreviations or shorthand ('Hello m8s!', maciek665); emphatic capitalisation ('I LOOOOOOOOOOOVE music 😊', Maite3010); and, in connection with the visual power of this latter resource, the widespread use of orthographic pictures or emoticons. There exists evidence that certain patterns might be identified regarding the use of such elements in both regular postings and comments on such postings, which seems to point to the building of visually emotional circles, although this needs to be further researched.

All this may be taken as evidence that both subgroups of students are members of what might be referred to as a subcultural group, namely that of 'digital natives' (Courtois et al. 2009: 112; see Lee 2009 for a full discussion on the use of the Internet by teenagers). And the link between them, which therefore reinforces this subcultural identity, is no other than their command of CMC semiotics. In this regard, the relevant number of explicit references to computer skills in posts by both Polish and Spanish students seems to bear out this latter statement.

Subcultural affiliations, however, do not end here. Indeed, as can be seen in the 'Cultural snippets' and 'Do you want to know something about me' blog sections, participants introduce themselves not quite so much in terms of their national background but by describing, sometimes in a surprisingly detailed way, where they stand within today's consumerist culture. Among these, two groups of references stand out as being especially representative, regardless of gender or nationality.

One is the subgroup of sports references, especially football –Spanish football clubs such as Real Madrid or Barcelona seem to be supported by both male and female, Spanish and Polish bloggers alike. Interestingly, references can also be found to other sports-related activities which are clearly related to urban subcultures, such as wakeboarding and watersports in general, skateboarding and longboarding (this latter being the main feature chosen by one participant to define himself on up to three different occasions).

Above all, however, almost every participant chooses to define him/herself in terms of their musical tastes. And relevantly, it is mostly through music that most bonding attempts are made between participants. References abound not quite so much to mainstream popular music but to non-mainstream performers, genres and subgenres (e.g. emo, heavy and symphonic metal, punk, screamo...), most of which are neither Polish or Spanish but have clear subcultural connotations. Thus seen, a majority of bloggers in the study may be quite easily categorised as members of subcultural 'brand communities' (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Jensen Schau and Muñiz 2002).

Discussion

Existing research on computer-mediated discourse in L2 learning has generally drawn on data derived from the application of Web 1.0 technologies, while studies on the role of Web 2.0 tools—including blogs—in

language learning contexts are still scanty (Lee 2009). The present paper tries to make a contribution, however small, in this respect. The data presented in response to our first research question give proof that learners involved in the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog project participated meaningfully in the exchange of experiences and ideas proposed in the three different blog sections analysed. One section in particular—'Do you want to know something about me?'—was more successful in terms of stimulating inter-peer participation, possibly as it was an easier subject for secondary school students to discuss than the topics in the other two sections, namely stereotypes and cultural snippets. In their study on blogging, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) also find the more personal topics to be particularly engaging. Learner involvement, especially if it is extended over a lengthier period time,²⁶ may contribute to enhancing overall linguistic competence and literacy skills in particular (Belz and Thorne 2006), although this has not been our focus of attention, as well as the development of intercultural communication competence (Ware and Kramsch 2005). Given that a blog involves asynchronous CMC, care should be taken that the time lapse between postings is not so big that interest in making comments on peer contributions is lost. Thus, in the section on stereotypes, it was found that Spanish participants generally posted their contributions long before the Polish groups did, resulting in reduced inter-peer participation in that case. All in all, however, the blog experience presented shows potential for engaging, dynamic and collaborative learning with 'swift trust' among the participants taking place (Meyerson, Weick and Kramer 1996).

As regards the second research question, scholars have underlined the learning potential of collaborative online environments (e.g. Hauck and Youngs). Our findings provide evidence of the opportunities the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog affords for learners to find authentic information and expand their knowledge. The number of construction-of-new-knowledge episodes reported (N=9) is not very high, but it points to the educational possibilities of this interactive tool. As mentioned in relation to the first research question, the section entitled 'Do you want to know something about me?' was the most propitious one for social networking and hence for the construction of new learner knowledge. There was one instance in which the beneficiary of new knowledge provided by a learner was actually the blog administrator, reversing the traditional student and teacher roles as knowledge recipient and provider respectively and indicating that blogging can foster learner empowerment and independence (see Pinkman 2005). The absence of reconstruction-of-existing-knowledge episodes may be due to the fact that the process of knowledge reconstruction implies a deeper analysis of the cultural elements involved in the notions of self-ness and other-ness than these students were ready to embark on at the time data were collected. Such episodes might appear, however, later on in the project as participants develop their inter-cultural awareness further.

As for our third research question, evidence has been found that participants have become aware of the existence and power of national identity discourses (even if not all of them are willing to discuss them

²⁶ The experience presented here is part of an ongoing project, which will be carried out at least over the course of an entire academic year. The findings reported in this paper correspond to the first term of implementation of the project.

directly), both as regards their self-image and the creation and circulation of images of Other imagined communities. Participants generally acknowledge that such discourses may well influence them, although some see themselves as largely impervious to them. These are mostly found among the Spanish students and could be related to the multicultural atmosphere of IES Bendinat, located in the Majorcan municipality of Calvià, and which is well known as a residential area for citizens of a good number of countries, especially the UK. Thus, 16 of the 42 Bendinat students who participate in this project have a mixed or completely foreign background.

As seen above, Polish and Spanish participants present a substantially different pattern when they are asked to reflect upon their respective imagined communities. Briefly put, Polish postings abound in 'icons of affinity', that is true 'national deities', the demise of whom 'has always been a key mechanism for reinforcing [national] affinity' (Ward 2001: 14; see Prieto-Arranz 2006). This clearly points to the strongly Catholic-based sense of national identity that the newly independent Polish state fostered in the aftermath of the First World War (Sadkowski 2000: 175; see also Fedorowicz 2007). On the other hand, the almost total dearth of national symbols mentioned by Spanish students may be taken as a good indicator of the sore issues that lie at the core of identity issues in contemporary Spain. This in turn points to the erstwhile hegemonic discourses that placed 'Castilian-ness' at the core of a wider notion of Spanishness being contested by peripheral counterdiscourses, especially in the aftermath of the Franco regime (Jensen 1997; Prieto-Arranz in press). What is worth highlighting is that evidence has been found that the blog enables participants to create an overarching sense of 'we-ness' capable of pulling down perceived national borders. This may be argued in the light of:

- (1) The surprisingly homogeneous informal style almost universally used on the blog, which points to emotional proximity being perceived by and among participants.
- (2) The use of increasingly CMC-standard non-verbal semiotic codes. Seen in the light of Gajadhar and Green's pioneering work in the field (2003, 2005), blog participants somehow seem to have made up for the mediated nature of their communication by resorting to increasingly standardised strategies which seem to provide CMC with at least some of the immediacy of face-to-face conversations. Among such strategies, orthographic pictures or emoticons clearly enrich verbal postings, help create visually emotional structures, and contribute to the building of an overarching sense of 'we-ness' since they invariably express positive emotions and feelings that students would otherwise find difficult to put down in words.
- (3) The references to similar youth subcultures. Participants in the study, true 'digital natives', overwhelmingly present themselves in terms of subcultural affiliations which are transnational in nature, and, as such, equally applicable to Polish and Spanish participants alike. In the light of the data

gathered in this study, participants express their rebellious attitude to the adult world by appropriating the external signs of previously existing, far more specific, cultural subgroups, only to endow them with a fresh new meaning. This is a highly complex instance of 'bricolage' (Walton 2008: 156) which, although in need of further research, has one clear effect: the creation of a semiotic code that makes youth a meaningful and, crucially, crosscultural experience which, in the case of the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog, clearly serves to bring Polish and Spanish participants together through EIL.

Conclusion

The use of blogs, one type of second-generation web tool, opens new paths for communication on a global scale and for the development of cross-cultural awareness that need to be further researched. To that end, this article has investigated the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' blog, set up to foster knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate among Polish and Spanish secondary school learners with a view to developing their intercultural awareness while enhancing the use of EIL.

Overall, we have found this blog project to be beneficial to the students. Firstly, it allows inter-peer participation in a trusting environment where learners experiment with EIL and express themselves in informal and creative ways that are uncommon in the foreign language classroom. Furthermore, the blog opens a window into cultural realities that the participants are not familiar with, thus creating a meaningful reason for cross-national communication. The more personal topics are the ones that appear to engage students the most. Secondly, with regard to the learning potential of the blog, the results of the study suggest that blogging can contribute to the construction of new knowledge. No evidence of reconstruction of new knowledge, however, has been found. Thirdly, in the light of the data analysed, a sense of we-ness, of a shared Polish-Spanish community beyond national identity, is seen to emerge. This common ground among the participants is basically anchored to their affiliation to highly similar youth subcultures as well as to their use of standard CMC non-verbal semiotic codes and of a surprisingly homogeneous informal language style.

In future research it might be interesting to explore how Spaniards and Poles see one another. Accordingly, tasks could be proposed for Poles to deconstruct their stereotypical views of Spain and for Spaniards to start developing an image of a country they know so little about. In the particular case of Spaniards, further reflection activities on their own imagined community might also prove rewarding, especially in the light of the sore identity issues discussed above. This could be done first in the EIL class and then through the 'EIL in Poland and Spain' project, which could thus become a blogosphere for free discussion and reflection, especially with a view to creating critical, respectful individuals in a democratic society.

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Identifying Features of English-Speaking Countries from an ELT Learner Perspective

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Abstract

The rising use of English as an international language has caused scholars in the field of culture pedagogy to question the relationship between the English language and the cultures of the English-speaking countries it has traditionally been associated with (Kramsch 1993, 1998; McKay 2002; Risager 2006, 2007). As a result, research into this area of language teaching and learning has been highly prolific in the twenty-first century as can be confirmed by the number of articles and books addressing the subject. This paper comments on some of the results obtained from a larger piece of research which considered the role played by culture in the learning of English as a foreign language in Majorca, Spain. Results indicate that much of the cultural knowledge of EFL learners is based on popular cultural stereotypes. This paper will discuss how these results can be understood within a theoretical framework of language socialisation theory (Shieffelin and Ochs 1986), social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and stereotype theory (Gudykunst and Kim 1997) and how this may have consequences for the future of English language learning within the context of English as an international language.

Keywords

EIL, EFL, ELT, language and culture pedagogy, cultural stereotypes



1. Introduction

Learning about the culture of a country has traditionally been an important part of learning any new language (Byram 1997; Sercu et al. 2005, Sercu 2000) especially when one of the major reasons was to travel, work or reside in the target-language country. However, social factors such as globalisation and technological advances such as the Internet have brought people together from

some cultural schemata that have been acquired concerning people from other cultures. These cultural schemata are often based on cultural stereotypes. Hence we can say that speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) may progress to becoming speakers of English as an international language (EIL) as they acquire transcultural awareness.

Departing from this premise, this article reports some of the results obtained in a recent research project undertaken on the Balearic island of Majorca with adult learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The overall objective of the research was to obtain the students' opinions on the role played by culture with respect to their English language classes and use of English. The study included a questionnaire on language and culture in the ELT classroom, a detailed analysis of the course-books used by our participants and an optional essay where students could express their views on the necessity or not of including cultural aspects pertaining to English-speaking communities in their English language course.

2. Theoretical perspectives

In this section a brief outline of the theoretical framework in which the empirical analysis will be based will be given. The three perspectives are (language) socialisation theory, social identity theory and stereotype theory.

(Language) socialisation theory

According to supporters of this theory the road taken to becoming a competent member of a particular social group begins at birth, or even before if we consider the preparation for each new member of society taken by parents or carers before the new addition arrives. Language and culture play decisive roles along this road to socialisation. Ochs states that "the process of acquiring a language is part of a much larger process of becoming a person in society" (2002: 106). As a result of their ethnographic research with Samoan and Kaluli children, Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin created the subfield of language socialisation within developmental psycholinguistics. Ochs and Schieffelin's original work documented how children become members of a

a wide variety of different cultural backgrounds. It is becoming customary to move to another country with one's job or for study. As a result it is quite usual to find multicultural and multilingual families living in countries where they were not brought up. Furthermore, the use of English worldwide has become an important medium for world communication and cultural exchanges. From this it is easy to see that in many cases the utilization of English is not restricted to its use within an English-speaking context and that a modern approach to English language teaching (ELT) should cater for new international contexts of communication and thus should include a more global approach to language and culture.

There is a growing awareness of the importance that cultural competence plays in any act of communication since it may condition the result of the interaction (Gudykunst 2004). The fact that English is the principal foreign language learnt at school provides the perfect opportunity to encourage learners to reflect on their own language and culture as well as to broaden their horizons concerning other world cultures. This should lead to the questioning and consequent re-evaluation of

particular social group by specific uses of language which promote the "socially recognized and organized practices" associated with the group (Ochs 2002: 105-106). One of the principal points made by these researchers is that, in order to be a competent member of any social group, one must be able to fully understand how language is used in the construction of a discourse that is group specific, and consequently is also culture specific. Although their original work was developed from research into first language acquisition and defined within the areas of primary and secondary socialisation, the process of language socialisation has been extended within the field of foreign language pedagogy to discuss 'tertiary socialisation' (Byram 1991, 1997, 2008; Osler and Starkey 2005; Risager 2006, 2007; Roberts et al. 2000).

Socialisation theory relates how human beings acquire knowledge about their society and how they learn to adhere to the norms of that society in order to behave and act in an acceptable manner (Byram 2008). Primary socialization is the basic, personality-forming stage of socialization which is essentially regarded as taking place within the family context. A country's education system is largely responsible for what can be termed 'secondary socialization', which happens when the young are introduced to social codes that are often more politically orientated and which prepares the young for their future as citizens of a specific nation. Hobsbawm (1992) stresses the emotional aspect of belonging to a certain nation and that the education system is ultimately a tool to spread a certain image which promotes a sense of belonging based on traditions and national heritage.

Byram suggests that modern education systems have three distinctive purposes: 1) socialisation, 2) economic investment into the future workforce, and 3) the creation of equality of opportunity (2008: 21-22). He goes on to say that these three purposes are also of great importance in foreign language learning. If the principal aim of a language teacher or foreign language curriculum is to produce linguistically competent language speakers from a grammatical posture, these three purposes may not be of any importance. Nevertheless, with the growing recognition of English as an international language or lingua franca, the idea of intercultural competence takes on new importance. The term 'tertiary socialisation' was first coined by Byram (1989) and later used by Doyé (1996) to refer to this extension of the notions of primary and secondary socialization whereby young people acquire intercultural communicative competence.

Nevertheless, as Risager (2007) points out, tertiary socialization can also take place in multilingual and multicultural contexts, just as secondary socialization may. She considers that the term 'tertiary socialization', used to refer to the kind of socialization associated with communication between different cultures or nations, is essentially problematic. However, if we understand the concept as proposed by Doyé (2008: 230, quoted in Byram 2008: 31), who focuses attention on those areas of socialization such as cognition, evaluation and behavior, it can be seen as a useful expression to describe the continuation of the socialization process from a global perspective. Doyé takes into account the way that schemata and behaviours learnt in childhood become modified in adult life as they are challenged by new knowledge acquired from the multicultural world. He also allows for the introduction of totally new schemata that are actually easier to incorporate since they do not require modification or the unlearning of previous schemata. Byram sums up the importance of the tertiary socialization process in the following quote: In the cognitive, moral and behavioural changes of tertiary socialization there is a process of reassessment

of assumptions and conventions stimulated by juxtaposition and comparison of familiar experience and concepts with those of other cultures and societies. The purpose is not to replace the familiar with the new, nor to encourage identification with another culture, but to de-familiarise and de-centre, so that questions can be raised about one's own culturally-determined assumptions and about the society in which one lives. (Byram 2008: 31).

Risager (2007) believes that primary and secondary socialisation are more closely linked and that educative institutes along with the media influence the primary socialisation with roots in the family. A similar thing happens with secondary and tertiary in that during their formative years children and young adults will be constantly on the receiving end of new signals which will modify earlier schemata and build on them. When it comes to preparing the future workforce for international mobility, Byram (2008) feels that any policy which advocates socialization. Socialization requires a type of socialization which counterbalances the inculcated national identity of secondary socialization. The learning of foreign languages provides the ideal opportunity for foreign language learners to socialise this by experiencing tertiary socialisation as part and parcel of the language learning process (2008: 29).

Social Identity theory

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) is concerned with the relationship between in-groups and out-groups. Turner defines social group as "two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or [...] perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" (1982: 18). Social identities are construed by systematically including or excluding people from various social categories. Parameters of one's social identity include gender, age, residence, income, occupation, language, marital status, etc. Social identity theory is, thus, built around two constructs: 1) social categorisation; and 2) social comparison. Social categorisation is the way in which we organise and classify thoughts and social comparison is the manner in which individuals make comparisons with their in-group and others (the out-group) in order to establish a positive social identity (Ting-Toomey 1999).

Linked to this discussion is the investigation into levels of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. We can see that from childhood human beings receive a constant flow of cultural knowledge which functions within different contexts whilst also creating various identities: this identity may be national or more defined such as a family, a school, or a team (Samovar et al. 2004). When a human being demonstrates a strong attachment to a particular cultural group to the extent that he/she develops a superior position in contrast to others, then we say that this person has a high level of ethnocentricity. But as Samovar et al. also point out, another reason for such strong feelings may be due to a lack of contact with other groups. In effect, high levels of ethnocentricity have been hailed as a major cause of breakdowns in intercultural communication. Thus, the development of intercultural awareness is an essential competence that is needed in today's multicultural environment.

Stereotype theory

Cultural awareness involves understanding how the knowledge of one's society and rules of behavior are culturally based and how this knowledge influences greatly one's own beliefs, values and attitudes. This leads us to consider the role that stereotypes play in our perceptions of other cultures. Within the field of social psychology, studies on stereotypes and related topics such as prejudice and discrimination have been

prolific in recent decades (Hewstone and Brown 1986; Gudykunst & Kim 1997; Gudykunst 2004; Tajfel 1981). The word 'stereotype' was originally used in the world of printing where it represented the duplicate impression of an original. The modern usage of the term as "an image or idea of a particular type of person or thing that has become fixed through being widely held" (Oxford dictionary entry) was coined in 1922 by American journalist Walter Lippman in his renowned work *Public Opinion* where he described stereotypes as being pictures in our heads. Schneider gives an interesting summary of definitions of 'stereotype' which have been used in a variety of fields in his introduction to *The Psychology of Stereotyping* (2005). He finally opts for a fairly straightforward but all inclusive definition when he defines stereotypes as the "qualities perceived to be associated with particular groups or categories of people" (Schneider 2005). Sociologists argue that the mental categorising of information in the form of stereotypes is a natural and normal procedure within the communication process (Gudykunst 2004). According to Hewstone and Brown, three essential aspects that characterise stereotypes should be considered: 1) easily identifiable characteristics are used to identify others; 2) it is assumed that these characteristics can be used to describe most of a particular group and this creates a sense of difference between this group and another group; and 3) it is assumed that an individual within this group is representative of the characteristics attributed to the group as a whole (1986: 25). From this we can understand stereotypes as being cognitive representations or constructs which have the capacity to exercise influence over how we feel about a particular group. Tajfel differentiates between stereotypes – as being unique to personal experience – and social stereotypes – as those that are shared with a large number of members of a group (1981). Similarly, Glaveanu uses the term 'cultural stereotype' to classify these communal stereotypes when they are beliefs held by macro groups about micro or other macro groups. Stereotypes can be racially, gender, age religion or profession based. They are also very often historically based, such as the Victorian English gentleman, complete with umbrella and bowler hat or based on fiction. These social stereotypes are often learnt through the media, where they are used constantly as identifying traits of 'others'. Stereotypes may be positive or negative. However, negative stereotypes may be inaccurate and offensive. The size of the group to which the stereotype is applied determines the strength of influence of the stereotype. Stereotypes undoubtedly influence how we categorise others and in continuation affect how we communicate with others due to the creation of certain behavioural expectations (Gudykunst and Kim 1997). Only when we process all information available from an intercultural communicative act will these automatic stereotypes be altered, if at all. The ability to re-evaluate stereotypes will lead to more accurate perceptions and predictions of the behaviour of others and result in fewer accounts of miscommunication due to cultural differences (Gudykunst 2004).

The cultural information included in a language course could be one way in which people continue the processes of secondary and tertiary socialisation. This implies that language courses, and in particular English language courses, could aim to include material that allows students to question their previous knowledge of other world cultures giving them the opportunities to revise and, if necessary, to redefine the cultural schemata that they have stored pertaining to their own and other cultures.

3. The Study

In accordance with the theoretical framework described above the study aims to how shed light on how one's perception of other cultures is influenced by stereotypes and how course-books and the media also play a part in the dissemination of stereotypical information. Two hundred and eighty-seven adult EFL learners at lower and higher advanced levels of three official language schools²⁷ on the island of Majorca, Spain, were asked to give examples of cultural elements for six L1 English-speaking countries (the UK, the USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland) as part of a questionnaire on language and culture in ELT (other results obtained in the overall investigation will be referred to when necessary to support results achieved). The student gender ratio was 2:1 female to male and the average age group range was twenty-six to thirty-four.

The analysis applied to these data consisted in the compilation of an exhaustive list of all the cultural elements suggested by the participants. The total variety of references obtained for each country was: the UK – 431; the USA – 400; Australia – 166; Canada – 154; New Zealand – 121; and Ireland – 202. Table 1 below shows the results of the total of different references according to specific cultural dimensions given for the UK, the USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland. The results are given as percentages and were obtained by calculating the variety of different elements in a specific cultural dimension as a percentage of the total number of different references obtained for the country. For example, for the UK there were 35 different references in the traditional/stereotypical dimension. As a percentage of the total number of references for all dimensions (431) we obtain 8%.

²⁷ These are Spanish state-run language schools which adhere to specific levels of aptitude which are determined by the Department of Education's linguistic programme (Royal Decree 1629/2006). Students are required to sit official exams in order to obtain certificates pertaining to three achievement levels, basic, upper-intermediate and advanced, and are recognised nationwide.

	COUNTRY						Overall average
	UK	USA	AUSTRALIA	CANADA	NEW ZEALAND	IRELAND	
Cultural elements	(431)	(400)	(166)	(154)	(121)	(202)	
Traditional /stereotypical information	8%	9%	13%	11%	8%	10%	10%
Personal characteristics	7%	4%	3%	9%	4%	11%	6%
Geographical references	12%	15%	43%	40%	54%	26%	32%
Famous buildings/monuments, tourist sights	13%	8%	2%	2%	0%	2%	5%
Historical references	9%	10%	8%	5%	7%	7%	8%
Political/economic references	10%	21%	5%	10%	4%	12%	10%
Art, literature and meta-linguistic references	10%	5%	1%	1%	1%	7%	4%
Food and drink	12%	7%	2%	3%	4%	8%	6%
Music	7%	5%	3%	6%	4%	7%	5%
Media (TV/cinema)	4%	9%	10%	3%	2%	3%	5%
Religion	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0.5%
Sport	5%	6%	10%	9%	12%	5%	8%
Monarchy	2%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0	0.5%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 1: Cultural references given by participants for six English-speaking countries

Apart from identifying the areas of cultural knowledge for each country, an important part of this analysis was to see how many times a particular element was cited by different learners. Given the limited space available, this article will only comment on a selection of cultural dimensions: traditional/stereotypical information, personal characteristics and political/economic references. Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the most cited references for each country in each cultural dimension with the amount of times the element was cited in the adjoining column. It was important to interpret this information with the total references for each dimension since, although an area may have had few references, those references were very often cited by a high number of learners. For example, in the media dimension for Australia there were a total of sixteen different references. Many of these references were given only once or twice, but there were a total of fifty occurrences of the Australian actress Nicole Kidman and fifteen occurrences of the film character Crocodile Dundee. There was a similar phenomenon for New Zealand, where there were only three references for this dimension, but thirty-six allusions to *The Lord of the Rings*. This was possibly a direct reference to the fact that the cinema-graphic version of the famous trilogy by Tolkien was filmed on location in New Zealand. The references are occasionally wrongly provided by the learners but we have left them where placed since this may provide important information.

Table 2 shows examples of the traditional and stereotypical information given by our participants. It is

in this cultural dimension where we can most clearly perceive those elements which make each of the countries different and unique. The references for the UK reflect a typical postcard of busy, multicultural London with red buses, post-boxes and telephone boxes with 'bobbies' to ask for directions, tourists and shopping. In contrast, the USA is the Wild West postcard with cowboys, the land of opportunities, freedom and the American dream. Although Australia has fewer references, those given describe the mixed cultural tradition with aboriginal artefacts such as the boomerang and the didgeridoo highlighting this. The use of 'down-under' is also a very distinctive label used to describe the geographical location of Australia in contrast to the UK or the USA in the northern hemisphere. The cultural elements used to describe Canada represent the natural environment and a peaceful, unspoiled landscape with log cabins and the Mounted police. When it comes to New Zealand there is very little information in this section that can truly provide a postcard picture of the country, especially concerning traditions. Ireland is perceived as the land of magic with its tradition of myths and fairies upon a background of traditional music and dancing. We do, however, see that learners often mix information. For example, kilts are representative of Scotland rather than Ireland, and boomerangs for Australia rather than New Zealand. This could mean that for some our learners, these countries are seen as having similar cultural elements.

UK (Total different references 36)		USA (38)		Australia (21)	
1. Red buses	26	1. Multi-ethnic culture	17	1. Boomerang	1
2. Left-side drive	18	2. Cowboys	13	2. Didgeridoo	4
3. Fashion	16	3. Flag	12	3. Left-side drive	5
4. Bobbies/police	14	4. Freedom/liberty	11	4. Modern culture	3
5. Telephone boxes	12	5. Fashion	10	5. Multi-cultural	3
6. Multi-cultural London	11	6. Land of opportunities	5	6. Down-under	3
7. Multi-cultural society	11	7. American Dream	3		2
8. 5 O'clock tea	11	8. Lack of cultural background	3		
9. Shopping	10				
10. Bed & Breakfast	6				
Canada (17)		New Zealand (10)		Ireland (21)	
1. Mounted police	19	1. Tattoos	4	1. Gaelic/Celtic culture	2

2. Flag (maple leaf)	15	2. Sailors	2	2. St. Patrick's Day	2
3. Bi-cultural	4	3. Boomerangs	2	3. Mythology	
4. Less violence than USA	3	4. Rugby tribal dance	2	4. Fairies/leprechauns	1
5. Modernity				5. Molly Malone	4
6. Rivalry with USA	3			6. Traditional dances	7
7. Wooden cabins/roaring fires	2			7. Kilts	6
8. Totems	2			8. Shamrock	5
				9. Bagpipes	5
	2				4
					3
					2

Table 2: Traditional/stereotypical information

The results for personal characteristics in table 3 show that our learners see the British and Irish, and the Australians and New Zealanders, as sharing certain characteristics. However, this is not true for the

Americans and Canadians. We also highlight the use of highly negative vocabulary to define the American social identity.

UK (32)		USA (16)		Australia (5)	
1. Hooligans	17	1. Patriotism	17	1. Happy	1
2. Well mannered/polite	12	2. Obesity	13	2. Open-minded	1
3. Punctual	9	3. Racism	4	3. Friendly	1
4. Sense of humour	9	4. Aggressive	1	4. Young	1
5. Traditional people	7	5. Narrow-minded	1		
6. Serious	5	6. Superiority complex	1		
7. Drink a lot	5				
8. Nice people	2				
9. Class conscious	2				
10. Racist	2				
Canada (14)		New Zealand (5)		Ireland (23)	
1. Polite	4	1. Friendly	1	1. Drink a lot	7
2. Calm/quiet natured	3	2. Wealthy	1	2. Friendly	4
3. Respect for nature	2	3. Young	1	3. Kind	4
4. Happy disposition	2			4. Traditional people	3
5. Social values	2			5. Red-haired	3

Table 3: Personal Characteristics

Table 4 shows the political and economic references given for the six countries.

UK (44)		USA (83)		Australia (9)	
1. Pounds/currency	25	1. Obama	67	1. Australian dollar	1
2. Margaret Thatcher	10	2. Bush	49	2. Mandarin-speaking PM	1
3. Tony Blair	7	3. Guns/firearms	26	3. Work opportunities	1
4. The City	6	4. Power	16		
5. Labour/Conservative Parties	5	5. Dollar	16		
6. Anti-Europe	4	6. War (Vietnam)	15		
7. Commonwealth	4	7. Capitalism	14		
8. Powerful state	4	8. 11/S	12		
		9. Iraq	11		
		10. Technical(Scientific research)	11		
		11. 1st World economy	10		
		12. Clinton/Lewinsky	10		
		13. Petrol	9		
		14. Terrorism	8		
Canada (16)		New Zealand (5)		Ireland (24)	
1. Public health service	6	1. Commonwealth	2	1. IRA	41
2. High level of living	5			2. Catholics vs. Protestants	12
3. Division English/French	4			3. Terrorism	10
4. Ex-colony	2			4. Northern Ireland	9
5. Independence	2			5. Political problems	6
				6. Independence	4
				7. War	3
				8. Economic development XXI century	3
				9. Michael Collins	2

Table 4: Political and economic references

4. Discussion

By taking a close look at the results of the cultural dimension tables and linking these data to other results obtained from the questionnaire, we were able to identify factors which form the basis of the perception of these countries by our learners.

From the table of cultural references for Inner Circle countries (table 1), we observe notable differences in the knowledge that our students have of the cultures of different English-speaking countries and that knowledge in specific dimensions varies from country to country. Learners have a more equally distributed knowledge of the UK, USA and Ireland, whereas in other countries knowledge is located in more specific areas. Results from the questionnaire showed that a higher percentage of participants had visited the UK on more than one occasion and, thus, we may have expected our learners to demonstrate a far higher level of knowledge concerning the UK and Ireland, but this is not the case. Results for the UK and the USA are fairly similar, with a slight difference of 31 different references for the UK. Nevertheless, although the total amount of references for these two countries may be similar, there are substantial differences in the numbers of references for each dimension. This suggests that there are certain cultural aspects which are more visible to our learners. This can be explained by the idea that stereotypes, as perceived by Lippmann (2004), are like pictures in our heads and that we automatically retrieve certain easily identifiable characteristics which can be used to describe most of a group. The fact that many of these schemata are shared by a large number of students fits the pattern of being social stereotypes as suggested by Gudykunst (2004) and Glaveanu (2007).

Our observation of the cultural elements provided by our learners gives evidence that the USA, the UK, Canada and Ireland are indeed perceived as being culturally different by our learners and, even though the references for Australia and New Zealand are fewer in many of the dimensions, they are still given their own identifying characteristics which make them different to other English-speaking cultures, such as the 'boomerang', the indigenous wildlife and fauna, and the Aborigine culture. The lack of overall references for Australia and New Zealand reflects the fact that these two countries are not as visible in Europe as the North American countries, the UK and Ireland. Research into the cultural content of course-books used in Spain by Mendéz García also concluded that these countries receive less attention and for this reason she classified them as being "peripheral cultures" (2004: 448).

Clearly, many of these cultural elements are representative of positive, generalised stereotypes that emphasise certain cultural characteristics that are used to project a specific image of a country, very often by the country itself. They are an important part of the country's cultural identity and are used to create a sense of difference. They are habitual themes for attracting tourists and are essentially positive in nature. Polezzi borrows the terms auto- and heterostereotypes from Pfister (1996: 4) to explain this phenomenon. He describes such use of stereotypes as being produced and imposed from the outside and with such power that they can even end up being adopted and accepted by the already stereotyped people, thus becoming "autostereotypes" (Polezzi 1998: 62).

The references also give insight into the way the cultural identities of the L1 English speakers from the different countries are perceived by our learners. In the personal characteristics (table 2), for example, references for Australia and New Zealand are sparse; however, they are all positive in nature. The English speakers in these two countries are considered to be friendly, happy and open-minded. In contrast, the

references for the UK and the USA show a mixture of positive and negative values. In the UK section, on the one hand, we have references to the stereotype of the 'British gentleman' who is 'well-mannered', 'punctual' and 'serious' and, on the other hand, we have references to hooliganism and unhealthy drinking habits.

In the context of Majorca, these references are especially significant since they are associated with the groups of young British tourists who visit the island during the summer months. The Irish also share many of these traits; nevertheless, the overall opinion of the Irish is positive. Essentially, the references to the characters of the Americans are fairly negative, with only one learner classing them as friendly. Once again, this could be interpreted as a result of how the media influence the overall image of a country and, consequently, how it is perceived by other cultures.

The references for Canada in the personal characteristics and the political-economic dimensions show positive qualities, which are in evident contrast to those given for the USA. Again, a possible explanation for this is the way that these two countries project their image and how these images are treated by the media, since these differences are not reflected in their EFL course-book. It is, of course, essential that we consider how the very nature of the native culture of our learners influences the way other cultures are perceived, especially if we take into account how messages are interpreted by the Spanish media and then transmitted to the population in general.

This is illustrated to perfection in table 4 by the vocabulary provided for the USA in the political-economic dimension. September 11th (9/11) and its repercussions are fully reflected in the references provided by our learners and this is, in a sense, a result of how the catastrophe was interpreted and reported in Spain. The references for the USA reflect, in great part, the perception by our participants of the fairly recent political developments and scandals that have surrounded the country. The recent election of Barack Obama to the presidency and the previous President, George W. Bush, with his role in the Iraq war, are referred to by a large majority of our learners. There are also a large number of references to the Vietnam War. The references depict a fairly negative perspective concerning the USA, highlighting its capitalistic consumer society, as perceived by the students, and its role as a world leader. The USA is clearly seen as the 1st world economic and political power. However, the country's role in scientific and technological advances is also acknowledged. The results for the USA and Canada show that the two countries are perceived as very different entities despite the fact that they share much of their initial history. Furthermore, the references for Canada reflect a much more positive opinion.

In contrast to the references for the USA, the references for the UK are fewer and less specific. The references to the British pound and an anti-European stance are important associations since the 'pound' could be interpreted as one of the symbols of the UK which allows the country to maintain a certain element of uniqueness in the Europe of today.

The references for Ireland reflect a country with a history of struggle for independence from the UK. However, on a more positive level, they acknowledge the economic developments in the 21st century of the country. It should, however, be pointed out that data for this article is previous to the economic crisis that Ireland is currently submerged in. The references to 'Michael Collins' Irish revolutionary leader, are surprising, but a recent Hollywood film, depicting his role in the function of the Irish Free State, could, to a certain degree, be responsible for catapulting his

biography into the world of popular culture (Michael Collins 1996).

Although these results suggest that, overall, these countries are perceived as being quite different, it is also clear that they are often judged by information that produces universal opinions on them and the people who live there; in other words, by stereotypes. These findings are also coherent with Brown (2000), who feels that stereotyping is often responsible for fostering negative attitudes. Although the course-book analysis (See Jacob 2011 for further information) also confirmed the high presence of stereotypical information, the variety of non-stereotype elements in the different cultural dimensions leads us to conclude that the course-book cannot be held totally responsible for the socio-cultural interpretations that the EFL learners apply to the information. French philosopher, sociologist, and historian Michel Foucault, in his theory of discourse, argued that discourse itself is the manifestation of ideas, attitudes and beliefs that are used to construct 'truths' about the world around us (Foucault 2002). The media text articulates a whole range of social discourses touching upon essential identity variables, and being in turn representative of hegemonic discourses or counterdiscourses to be found in the sociocultural context within which the text has been produced (Marshall and Werndly 2002: 104; see also Kellner 1990: 1-24). The speaker, or the official institution behind the speaker, can be said to be in control over the way a message is delivered and how they would like it to be interpreted. In the case of the media, this discourse is subjected to 'rules of exclusion' in order to project a specific image, thus discourse has the power to affect our views on the world around us. It appears that much of the cultural knowledge of our learners is based on stereotypes that have been acquired as a result of how certain events are reported by the media and thus perceived in Spain. These findings also confirm those reported by Sercu et al. (Méndez García 2004: 437) who also question the role played by the media in creating a true international understanding of these cultures. We could say that the media are largely responsible for the creation and dissemination of the popular culture which originates from all English-speaking countries concerned, creating a cultural link between them whilst, at the same time, opening up these cultural areas to the rest of the world.

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5. Conclusion

The results suggest that there is a need for the materials used in English language courses to be more challenging in order to encourage the modification of previously learnt cultural schemata during primary and secondary socialisation. Byram (2000) suggests that both foreign language teachers and learners would benefit from being introduced to notions of social identity theory. By using an approach to foreign language learning which considers the basic tenets of the theory, students would discover how social identities are expressed in terms of beliefs, values and behaviours by themselves and by others (Byram 2000). Byram uses the term 'intercultural' to refer to this form of awareness, but his research almost exclusively concentrates on the non-native to native speaker paradigm (1991, 1997, 2000).

A transcultural approach, in contrast to the much simpler intercultural approach which adopts a global perspective to EFL, would allow learners to raise questions about how and why they have such culturally determined assumptions both concerning other world cultures and their own, by seeking out global similarities and differences. Such knowledge is a core competence for international mobility and removes the importance given to one's national identity in order to be able to identify with a wider cultural group. From this we can also stress the role of the transcultural speaker or mediator as an essential factor in achieving overall linguistic competence. The re-evaluation of stereotypes would prove to be more than helpful in the understanding of how different cultural beliefs condition the behaviours of each individual cultural community.

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Concessive Signalling in Asynchronous Online Communication: The Case of Comments and Discussion Fora

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Abstract

Focusing on asynchronous online communication, the article aims to examine Concessive signalling in two e-genres: comments and discussion fora. Following the dialogic concept of Concession, the author looks at the conversational behaviour of Internet users and the way in which they handle counterarguments in the context of the two e-genres, offering limited communicative immediacy as compared with face-to-face encounters. The data selected for analysis come from a discussion forum hosted by The Guardian and comments posted by readers of The Telegraph.

Keywords

online discourse, asynchronous interaction, e-genres, Concession

1. Introduction

With its distinct computer-mediated or electronic language, the Internet is revolutionising the way people communicate, work and learn at an unprecedented rate. Undeniably, being a technological innovation, the Web is also a social fact and a linguistic phenomenon. As such, it has aroused much interest among social scientists, linguists and discourse analysts.²⁸ These investigate the still evolving online language varieties and pragmatic strategies employed in online interactions, being a response to the capabilities that the new medium affords and the reshaped social context in which communication takes place.

Offering limited communicative immediacy as compared with face-to-face encounters, online comments and discussion threads are two interactive, though asynchronous, genres in which participants exchange their arguments in what should be perceived as a hybrid mode rather than just “spoken writing” or “written speech”.²⁹ In light of the above, this article looks at the e-styles and the conversational behaviour of online comment authors and discussion fora users and the manner in which they handle counterarguments in interactive written discourse. In particular, it aims to examine recurrent patterns in Concessive signalling in the context of the two genres. The data selected for analysis come from *The Talk*, a discussion forum hosted by *The Guardian*, and comments posted by readers of *The Telegraph*.

2. An interactional concept of Concession

Unlike earlier sentence-level approaches to concessivity, the concept of Concession applied in the present study is that of a discourse-pragmatic relation consisting of an interactional sequence of moves, developed by Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (1999, 2000). As the authors hold, the prototypical Concessive schema involves two interacting interlocutors who produce subsequent moves:

- A: *claim* (X)
- B: *acknowledgment* (X')
- B: *counterclaim* (Y)

It is the model of Concession outlined above that is by far the most frequent realisation of the Concessive relation in spoken discourse (see Barth-Weingarten 2003). That, however, does not mean that its modifications, involving variation in the order and number of moves as well as in the number of participants, are not to be found in the spoken mode of language. In fact, five distinct moves making up Concessive patterns can be identified, as has been demonstrated in Table 1 below.

Move	Symbol	Description
IMPLICIT CLAIM	0	implied/ projected claim that may be inferred from the context
CLAIM	X	initial “disagreement-relevant” move, an explicit assertion or statement
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	X'	concession/ act of conceding; it refers to the claim by means of an agreement token/ phrase; it repeats or paraphrases the preceding claim or it implies the same point as the claim
COUNTERCLAIM	Y	contrastive move/ countermove
RETURN TO THE COUNTERCLAIM	Y'	repeated counterclaim; it provides additional information/ arguments

Table 1: Moves in Concessive schemata (adapted from Barth-Weingarten 2003)

Among the recognised Concessive moves are: *implicit claim* (projected claim inferred from the context), *claim* (initial statement triggering the whole Concessive sequence), *acknowledgment* (move signalling the very act of conceding), *counterclaim* (countermove embodying the arguer's preferred stance) and *return to the counterclaim* (move developing the argument advanced in the countermove). Various configurations of Concessive moves include both monadic patterns

²⁸ See, for instance, Herring (1996), Barnes (2002), Crystal (2004), Grzenia (2006), Turkle (2011).

²⁹ Cf. Crystal (2004: 48).

produced by one arguer, which are found mainly in edited written language, and dialogic schemata realised by at least two disputants, which are typical of spontaneous talk-in-interaction.³⁰ In what follows, an attempt will be made to apply the conversational concept of Concession in an analysis of online interactions exemplified by posts obtained from two asynchronous online genres: comments and discussion threads. However, since applying an analytical framework designed for the spoken mode of language in an examination of hybrid online discourse is likely to present methodological challenges, it will have to be adapted to suit the needs of the current study. Therefore, before any analysis of the two genres under study is undertaken, it is essential that the unique communicative context of asynchronous computer-mediated interaction should be described.

3. Comments and discussion threads as online genres

However distinctive, Internet language is still in a state of transition and as such it defies easy classification. Yet, one may venture, following "Internet genology" as suggested by Grzenia (2006: 152), to describe the emerging e-genres, be it less complex genres or more complex hypergenres (i.e. hybrid genres), bearing in mind, however, that they are constantly undergoing modification. Thus, online comments and discussion threads are among the less complex genres, exemplifying asynchronous communication, in the case of which one may draw many parallels.

To begin with, it should be stressed that the two genres under analysis exhibit features typically associated either with spoken or written production, and that their categorisation is not straightforward. This combination of spoken and written language criteria as applied to comments and discussion threads has been summarised in Table 2 below, drawing on the set of criteria proposed by Crystal (2004: 42-43).

	Online comments	Discussion threads
Spoken language criteria		
time-bound	yes, but in different ways	yes, but in different ways
spontaneous	variable	variable
face-to-face	no	no
loosely structured	variable	variable
socially interactive	yes, but with restrictions	yes, but with restrictions
immediately revisable	no	no
prosodically rich	no	no
Written language criteria		
space-bound	yes, but may be deleted	yes, but may be deleted
contrived	variable	variable
visually decontextualised	yes	yes
elaborately	variable	variable

³⁰ Interestingly, a unit as small as one syllable can constitute a single Concessive move in spoken discourse. For instance, Łyda quotes an example of a syllable-sized acknowledgment realised by way of non-standard syllable accentuation (2007: 157). On the other hand, Concessive moves found in judicial discourse, known for its lexical density and syntactic complexity, are made up even of entire paragraphs (Szczyrbak 2009: 135).

structured		
factually communicative	variable	variable
repeatedly revisable	variable	no
graphically rich	no	no

Table 2: Spoken and written language criteria as applied to online comments and discussion threads

As can be seen, comments and discussion threads, similarly to speech, are time-bound and may be loosely structured productions involving social interaction. Still, it must be acknowledged that given the physical distance between the interactants, unlike face-to-face encounters, they are void of prosodic features available to speakers. Also, by contrast to spoken discourse, the two genres are not immediately revisable, even though in the case of online comments real-time updating may be enabled, thanks to which users are able to edit the comments they have already posted. Notwithstanding the above characteristics and resemblance to speech, however, asynchronous online interactions lack properties that are a sign of spontaneity in real-life settings, such as: immediate reaction signals (e.g. *yeah, uh-huh*) and comment clauses (e.g. *you know, you see*). And though the latter may occur in Internet writing, they are not a natural element of typing (Crystal 2004: 40). For that reason, given the absence of direct feedback, kinesic and proxemic features as well as the time-lag between posts, many online interactions are likely to be misinterpreted as "abrupt, cold, distant, or antagonistic" (Crystal 2004: 40). Finally, another feature of online conversational messages that distinguishes them from face-to-face conversations is their persistence, thanks to which it is possible to retrieve and view past posts.

Being space-bound is then, for obvious reasons, a property thanks to which online discourse can be deservedly likened to traditional written communication. Still, it must be remembered that electronic messages can be easily deleted, which is unthinkable in the case of conventional written texts. For that reason, online texts are dynamic, even more so given the technical functionalities that enable Net users to restructure the text, move it on the screen, change its colour or annotate it (Crystal 2004: 44). Thus, certain e-genres, including Internet comments (unlike discussion threads though) may be repeatedly revised similarly to primary written communication. As regards the degree of contrivance, it varies as both comments and discussion fora messages range from single-word (or even single-link) posts to syntactically complex and elaborately structured ones. Further, it will not escape notice that neither of the two genres relies on extensive use of colour or is graphically rich, even though both comments and discussion threads contain hypertext links to external sites including pictures or videos.³¹ Thus, being an inherent feature of what may be justifiably identified as "interface-to-interface encounters" (Grzenia 2001), hypertext can be found among the distinctive conventions associated with online comments and discussion threads. These have been listed in line with other Internet text genres such as, for instance, e-mail, MUD games, blogs or chats (Grzenia 2006: 172). As can be expected, in the two genres analysed, the senders are anonymous and they

³¹ It might also be remarked that online discussion participants usually add avatars to their screen names, i.e. two- or three-dimensional graphical representations used to identify the contributors and their actions. Such avatars may symbolise the users' interests or beliefs, or even their status in the forum.

are individuals, rather than institutions, who are involved in asynchronous communication (see Table 3). Yet, as held by Grzenia, online comments tend to be monologic utterances, whereas discussion fora posts are, by nature, interactive and dialogic (2006: 172). However, as will be shown further in the article, comments do not lack the interpersonal dimension, as their authors do engage in conversational exchanges.

As regards the internal structure of the messages themselves, these are noticeably heterogeneous in terms of length, language style, structure and topic; however, as posited by Lewis, examining discourse-marking in English and French political discussion fora data (Lewis 2003, 2005), online messages tend to follow the *reaction + position + evidence* pattern, being a modification of the “basic electronic message schema” recognised by Herring and consisting of “a link to an earlier message, an expression of views, and an appeal to other participants” (1996: 91 in Lewis 2003). Likewise, the hierarchical organization typical of online messages, which have also been labelled “hierarchical dialogues” (Tigelaar *et al.* 2010), should not be ignored in the analysis of the two genres under study, either. The sequential arrangement naturally results from the organization of online discussions, in which replies (usually preceded by the abbreviation “Re:”) occur lower than the original post (OP). What is more, hierarchy, which may be highlighted by users quoting the preceding posts in their own,³² indicates the mutual relation and chronology existing between individual messages. In this manner, the users determine their status in the ongoing discussion: either by joining it at a given point in virtual space and time or, conversely, by abandoning it at any time in order to mark distance from the other arguers, or even to start a new discussion thread, thereby pronouncing their own stance and upgrading their status (Grzenia 2006: 113-114). Last but not least is the question of the dominant functions performed by the respective genres. As Grzenia observes, both comments and discussion fora are associated with the communicative function; however, at the same time, as the author maintains, comments are predominantly expressive, while discussion fora posts are linked mainly to the phatic function (2006: 172).

	Online comments	Discussion threads
Sender	anonymous, person	anonymous, person
Main form of communication	monologue	dialogue
Mode of communication	asynchronous	asynchronous
Hypertext links	possible	possible
Hierarchical organization	yes	yes
Interactivity	yes	yes
Multimediality	no	no
Dominant functions	expressive communicative	communicative phatic

Table 3: Generic features of online comments and discussion threads (adapted from Grzenia 2006: 172)

³² For a study of framing tactics in argumentative messages, i.e. inserting segments from previous posts into a new message including counterclaims, see Mabry (1997).

Taking into account the above properties of asynchronous online interactions as well as constraints resulting from the novel communicative context in which a virtual exchange of arguments and counterarguments occurs – especially overlapping interactions with multiple users and lack of linearity and chronology – one may raise questions of whether it is possible to apply the interactional model of Concession in an examination of online conversational behaviour. In fact, instead of identifying Concessive schemata, which in the case of asynchronous discussions may span several messages, occur in overlapping multi-party interactions or appear within single posts, in the following section attention will be drawn to individual Concessive moves, rather than their sequential arrangement. Still, it should not be forgotten that since the analysis is carried out on a relatively small corpus, one may not be sure whether the recognised patterns in the use of Concessive signalling are genre-specific or whether they result from idiosyncratic usage. Nevertheless, irrespective of the above limitations, exploration of recurrent Concessive signalling patterns in online comments and discussion threads may licence interesting conclusions and that is why it deserves consideration.

4. Concessive signalling in asynchronous online discourse

While previous studies on concessive marking focused chiefly on “traditional” concessive markers determining the relation between the propositions of the main clause and the subordinate adverbial clause, of which the conjunction *although* is a prime example, researchers following the action-oriented approach, such as Barth-Weingarten (2003) and Lyda (2007), have chosen to investigate a wide range of pragmatically relevant signals co-occurring with Concession, including those marking syndetic constructions, i.e. conjunctions, connective conjuncts and prepositions and asyndetic constructions, namely: correlates subsuming correlative conjuncts, modals, adverbials, emphatic “do”, extensive agreement and other signals as well as prosodic signalling (for a chart detailing Concessive signal categories see Lyda 2007: 132). By the same token, the present contribution aims to analyse the most frequent grammatical and lexical devices that cue Concessive moves in asynchronous online interactions and, in particular, signals that tend to co-occur.

The 62,170-word corpus compiled for the purpose of the present study, though far from being exhaustive, is believed to be large enough to indicate certain trends in the realisation of Concession in online discourse and to suggest a direction that might be followed in further investigations of this relation. It consists of a collection of posts dealing with up-to-date, debatable social issues, such as the quality of education and police powers. The first part of the corpus, comprising 434 posts, includes comments made by users who have read Charles Moore's article posted on *The Telegraph's* Website: *Tuition fees: Rioting protesters mask the real problem facing today's students*, dealing with difficulties encountered by UK students and, in particular, with increased tuition fees and the quality of education provided by UK universities. The second part of the corpus, comprising 375 posts, includes messages from *The Talk*, a discussion forum hosted by *The Guardian*. The thread used for the analysis, i.e. *Police use CS spray on tax protesters*, raises the issue of police powers and, more specifically, their authority to use gas when dealing with protesting crowds. Both the issue of education and the problem of police powers proved to be contentious enough to attract much interest among Web surfers and, consequently, to

generate substantial site traffic. In total, as at the access date, as many as 195 Net users contributed their comments on Moore's article (with the most active user posting 52 messages), while 41 arguers took part in the thread dealing with police authority (with the two most active users posting 73 and 64 messages, respectively). The two subcorpora, believed to be comparable, were examined with a view to identifying Concessive signals and drawing conclusions as to the realisation of the relation under analysis in the context of the two e-genres. Still, it needs to be restated that given the limited size of the data sample, the recognised schemata should be treated with caution as indicative of certain trends, rather than as definitive findings, even more so given the relative imbalance between the number of contributions made by different authors.

At the outset of the discussion it should be noted that, for reasons of space, only selected Concessive signalling patterns, including the most frequently employed lexical and grammatical choices, will be examined in detail.³³

Generally, Concessive sequences occurring in spontaneous spoken interactions, as outlined by Barth-Weingarten (2003: 208), are dialogic and follow the *X is true but Y* formula, as opposed to prepared written discourse, where the *although X is true, Y* pattern is typical.³⁴ However, in the case of asynchronous online discourse which is rife with many "impurities" (i.e. unfinished sentences, shortcuts or ungrammatical structures, not to mention spelling or punctuation mistakes), claims (X), acknowledgments (X') and counterclaims (Y) are rarely adjacent turns.³⁵ Hence, the data had to be sifted through attentively for logical connections to be made between individual sections of messages. At the same time, the interactional patterns that emerged during the examination were as follows:

- (a) user A → original topic-focused post
- (b) user A → user A
- (c) user A → user B
- (d) user A → multiple users

It was noted that the messages posted by the participants were either: a) monologic responses to the original topic-focused post; b) monologic responses to claims advanced or implied by the same user in the current post or in an earlier post; c) dialogic responses to claims advanced by one of the users in an earlier post; or d) multi-dialogic responses to claims advanced by more than one user in earlier posts. As the analysis showed, dialogic responses to single messages were by far the most frequent type of interaction in the data. At the other end was the first type of monologic pattern, i.e. a response to the original message, which, imaginably, was added by the users post their comments in response to the message opening the discussion. Further, multi-dialogic responses, referring to several users and their arguments within one post, were relatively frequent, followed by monologic messages in which users produced counterarguments to implicit claims that could be inferred from the context.

³³ The examples presented in the article are reproduced in the original format without any corrections.

³⁴ Interestingly, as revealed by Szczyrak (2010: 156-157), judicial argumentation, which exemplifies highly edited discourse, abounds in Y-, even assuming X is valid, -Y schemata, proving that even formal discourse, usually thought of as static and monologic, exhibits a certain degree of interactivity and dialogicality.

³⁵ For a discussion dealing with online forum messages as conversational turns see Lewis (2003).

Although embedded in the messages, all the acknowledgments were easily recognisable thanks to overt or implied Concessive signals. However, unlike Barth-Weingarten's (2003) and Łyda's (2007) analyses of Concessive marking encompassing signals that cue both acknowledgments (X') and counterclaims (Y), the focus of the conducted analysis was primarily on signals that cue the very act of conceding, that is the acknowledging move (X'). In total, 139 acknowledgments were recognised in the comments, while 182 were found in the discussion thread. It is worth noting that the acknowledging moves were counted instead of individual signals, as the latter tended to co-occur to achieve the overall aim of conceding, as a result of which the number of individual signals exceeded the number of acknowledgments themselves.

Among the patterns recognised both in online comments and the discussion thread, the *agreement token + contrastive marker* schema came to the fore (Example 1). In this case, beside the obvious agreement marker *yes*, the following were also common: *ah yes, yeah, yup, ok, okay, aye*. As predicted, *but* was decidedly the most frequent contrastive marker cuing counterclaims in all the recognised patterns. Still, it needs to be reiterated that unlike in face-to-face conversations, the adjacency of the countermove found in the corpus was usually disrupted.

Example 1

X'	Y
agreement token	+ contrastive marker
<i>Yes,</i>	<i>but I expect that really ranks as a half-truth.</i>
<i>Yup,</i>	<i>although it makes no mention of what he was doing...</i>

Illustrating an extended variant of the pattern presented in Example 1, Examples 2 and 3, in turn, show the *agreement token + claim restatement + contrastive marker* schema, where the agreement marker may be overt or implied.

Example 2

X'	Y
agreement token + claim restatement	+ contrastive marker
<i>Yes, yes, we are all stupid thugs, I know.</i>	<i>Except, I've truly never met a stupid bobby.</i>
<i>Yes, I think you do support the others...,</i>	<i>but am not sure about Charles.</i>

Example 3

X'	Y
implied agreement token + claim restatement	+ contrastive marker
<i>(Yes) I support the coalition's efforts to do so,</i>	<i>but I hope that they are flexible enough to make ...</i>
<i>(Yes) And it wasn't only the BBC.</i>	<i>[...] but then they were too busy trying to stop the mayhem...</i>

Further, as can be seen in Example 4, contrastive markers in the corpus were preceded by the emphatic "do" or, as is indicated in Examples 5 and 6, by explicit or implied stance adverbials, of which *of course* was the most frequent, alongside *certainly, perhaps, obviously* and the least common *sure/ surely*.

Example 4

X'	Y
emphatic "do"	+ contrastive marker
Bristol <u>does</u> have some major problems.	<u>But</u> there are good academics there.
The monarchy <u>does</u> indeed <u>perform</u> magnificent work,	<u>but</u> this scene is almost reminiscent (I imagine) of somewhere like France ...

Example 5

X'	Y
stance adverbial	+ contrastive marker
Now <u>of course</u> there is added value in a university graduate	<u>But</u> I abhor the sheep dip mentality...
<u>Sure</u> at primary level everyone needs to read and write ...	<u>But</u> when it comes to vocational training, this system trains for only ...

Example 6

X'	Y
implied stance adverbial	+ contrastive marker
(<u>Of course</u>) I don't mean the media, who are very keen to get a soundbite ...	<u>but</u> a more comprehensive recording of the events ...
(<u>Of course</u>) I'm not saying that no bobby ever used CS inappropriately,	<u>but</u> I have witnessed literally hundreds of occasions when

Related to stance adverbials mentioned in Examples 5 and 6, epistemic modal verbs, chiefly *may* and *might*, also played a significant role in the structuring of acknowledgments, which has been demonstrated in Example 7 below.

Example 7

X'	Y
epistemic modal verb	+ contrastive marker
It <u>may</u> be that the officer was precise...,	<u>but</u> that is pure speculation.
If you take ... you <u>might</u> be worth engaging with.	<u>Otherwise</u> simply regurgitating this is a waste of electrons.

Another type of acknowledgment that was found in the data included an evaluative adjective, such as for instance *fair*, *good*, *excellent* or *valid*, preceding one of the following nouns: *argument*, *analysis*, *comment* or *point* (see Example 8).

Example 8

X'	Y
evaluative adjective + argument / analysis / comment / point	+ contrastive marker
There are some <u>good</u> and <u>valid</u> points about...,	<u>but</u> no discussion of the Coalition's own policy ...
A <u>fair</u> analysis.	<u>But</u> the prognosis is for grade inflation.

Further, "agreement" verbs, in particular *agree*, *appreciate*, *accept*, *endorse*, *recognise*, and *support*, were often found to be followed by the contrastive marker *but*. Noticeably, the said verbs represented a sizeable portion of all Concessive signals in the data. What is more, it was observed that elliptical constructions containing past participles of these verbs frequently co-occurred with acknowledgments, which can be seen in the following comments: *Agreed - to both points!; Well argued, Andy G. or point taken.*

Example 9

X'	Y
"agreement" verb	+ contrastive marker
I <u>agree</u> that the EU contribution is huge and disproportionate,	<u>but</u> it represents the wholly ineffective negotiating skills ...
I <u>appreciate</u> your engagement...,	<u>but</u> I doubt you're going to achieve much.

In addition, it should be remembered that as Concessive signals were mostly multiple (co-occurring) signals, many of the examples shown would fit into more than one of the above patterns. By analogy, in the statement: *I also do recognize the sticky dynamics of Scotland, but that still doesn't explain why only the English have been targeted and how*, both the emphatic "do" and the communication verb *recognise* are used to signal acknowledgment. Likewise, in the concession *I accept that kettling is probably necessary, but I don't really like the idea of keeping people confined for long periods of time*, the verb *accept*, signalling complete agreement, co-occurs with the stance adverbial *probably* and the evaluative adjective *necessary*. All these examples clearly demonstrate that signals hardly ever occur in isolation and that they collectively signal specific relations, including Concession.

As can be observed, the majority of co-occurring signals reflected the prototypical Concessive order, with preposed acknowledgments followed by counterclaims. Instances of reversed order schemata, with counterclaims followed by postposed acknowledgments, were also found; however, their frequency was much lower. Additionally, given their sentence-final position, acknowledgments recognised in reversed patterns were employed by the users mainly for backing down, as has been illustrated in Example 10. Perceptibly, contrastive markers (*but*, *yet*, *though*) cuing counterclaims in $X + X' + Y$ schemata, in this case signalled acknowledgments.

Example 10

Y	X'
varied signalling	+ contrastive marker
I would now be in a dilemma if ...,	<u>yet</u> the irony is that it worked!
I have seen evidence of support for them ...,	<u>but</u> not of course for the thugs.

Even though the above analysis, with examples taken both from comments and the discussion thread, leads to the conclusion that there is a considerable overlap between signalling patterns found both in online comments and discussion fora, two differences were recognised and they deserve to be mentioned. Thus, in the case of comments, agreement with third party arguments, followed by contrasting information, was sometimes signalled with the verb used in the third person singular, like in the following concessions: *Everything Charles Moore says about Universities is true!; flyingscotsman's comment was both sensible and balanced and He is right!* The above might be attributed to the fact that, more than discussion fora, comments resemble monologic utterances. Further, as online comments may be revised and updated at any time, the degree of their editedness is higher than that of discussion fora messages and, consequently, they tend to display limited directness and immediacy. On the other hand, the threaded discussion, evidently more dialogic, abounded in *verba dicendi*, of which the verb *say* was definitely the most common.³⁶ It is of

³⁶ That corroborates Crystal's claim that not all Internet situations are "equally spoken" and that some e-genres,

interest to note that the majority of the occurrences of this verb contained its negative form used in the first person singular. Implying the arguer's limited knowledge on the topic in question or their low confidence in the proposition advanced in the argument, the words *I'm not saying (that)* typically preceded the contrastive marker *but* or signals restricting the validity of the claim, for instance *only*. Other speech act verbs found in acknowledgments included *speculate*, *have a go* and *make a point* (see Example 11).

Example 11

X'	Y
verbum dicendi	+ contrastive marker
<i>I'm not saying that it happens in every case ...</i>	<i>only that sometimes bits get edited...</i>
<i>I'm speculating here and happy to be corrected,</i>	<i>but I think that in some cases...</i>

Finally, it should not be overlooked that certain online discourse signals, though clearly Concessive, did not follow any of the schemata outlined above. Among them were informal statements like: *Too bloody right!* or *Aye. Kudos to gingerly for being willing to engage though*. A separate category of concessions including idiomatic expressions can be exemplified by the following clearly dialogic posts: *Norto, you're spot on this one!* or *Charles, you hit the nail on the head at the end*. Another group of acknowledgments that emerged from the analysis was, as can be justifiably claimed, an attempt at adding emphasis which in spoken interactions is conveyed prosodically, and it involved using the bold typeface. Hence, in the sentence: *I'm saying they **appeared** reasonable*, the arguer stresses the epistemically modifying verb *appear* in order to admit that what they are saying is not necessarily true and that their proposition may have to be corrected.

5. Conclusions

As manifested by the data, Concession, used to position arguments with respect to other arguments, is a frequent strategy employed by online discourse participants, even though these enjoy unrestricted anonymity and do not fear potentially face-threatening acts, which might easily translate into outright clashes of opinions. That said, the relation's argumentative potential cannot be denied its importance in the structuring of asynchronous online discourse, including comments and discussion threads. It is in these e-genres that Internet users engage in conversational exchanges which, to a certain extent, mirror face-to-face interactions. As revealed by the analysis, drawing on the assumptions of the action-oriented model of Concession, the repertoire of lexical and grammatical devices that are relevant in the realisation of this relation in asynchronous online discourse is varied, if not unlimited. Clearly, by analogy to spoken discourse, the contrastive marker *but* resurfaces as the most prominent signal cuing counterarguments, while acknowledgments are marked by agreement tokens, emphatic "do", stance adverbials, epistemic modal verbs, evaluative adjectives or *verba dicendi*, to name but a few signal categories. Since no significant differences were found in the signalling patterns associated with comments and discussion threads, except for the two cases referred to in the article, it might be posited that Concession is marked similarly

across asynchronous e-genres. To validate this claim, however, research based on a larger corpus would have to be undertaken, as, given the limited size of the data sample analysed, instead of reflecting general trends, the results of the present study might be partially attributed to idiosyncratic preferences. Yet, even though the findings cannot be thought of as complete, they shed light on how Concession is realised in asynchronous online interactions, and as such, they offer new insight into one of the most frequent discourse-pragmatic relations found in spoken, written and online discourse.

for instance chats, are "spoken", while others, like e-mails, are "written" (2004: 29).

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Doctor–Patient Communication Research in a Digital World

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Abstract

Within the last twenty years, large electronic corpora have become an invaluable resource for linguists of all kind of specializations. In an attempt to draw our attention to the significance of corpus linguistics for a sociolinguist and/or discourse analyst investigating English medical consultations, the paper outlines the history of corpus-linguistic practice in general, and then it proceeds to more specific corpora-related issues, focusing, among others, on the British National Corpus (BNC) and its informative and technological value for the analysis of doctor–patient communication.

Keywords

Corpus linguistics, doctor–patient communication research, British National Corpus.

Introduction

As has been argued (e.g. Urbanová 2004), the linguistic observations of pragmatologists, sociolinguists, discourse analysts, and other specialists involved in research within the field of spoken face-to-face interaction should be made on the grounds of natural and authentic language material. Nevertheless, “to obtain naturally existing data can be difficult, due to the personal involvement of the speakers as well as the subsequent transcription and tagging of the spoken texts” (ibid.: 13). The condition of doctor–patient interaction research appears to be even more intricate because of a number of ethical considerations involved. Quoted as well as shared experience (e.g. Humphreys 2002) confirms that both doctors and patients are often, for reasons of confidentiality, opposed to the recording. If they are willing to participate in the investigation, and let the researcher record their consultations, specific conditions, including the changing of names, must be adhered to.

Luckily, new research possibilities have emerged within the last twenty years. The arrival and development of corpus linguistics as an independent branch of linguistic studies has provided researchers with a new language resource: large electronic corpora, enabling them to pursue a new, more systematic type of analysis. In this respect, the primary goal of the present article is to outline the history and significance of data-driven and corpus-based linguistic studies. In the first section, I will briefly illustrate the history of corpus-linguistic practice. In the second part, I will turn my attention to more specific corpora-related issues, focussing on the *British National Corpus* and its informative and technological value for the analysis of medical interviews.

Corpus-linguistic practice

According to Štícha (2008: 9): “The label *corpus linguistics* applies to a wide range of linguistic research that all has to do with corpora-related studies.” He distinguishes two main domains of focus: (i) *building language corpora*, (ii) *making use of corpus data in linguistic analysis*. While, in his opinion, “the former has become a well-established area of study, (...) linguists who base their language research on data provided by these corpora and who take systematic advantage of the increasing availability and ever higher quality of corpus material still represent a relatively small minority” (ibid.: 9). In particular, sociolinguists and discourse analysts, as Štícha (2008: 10) has it, have so far neglected the potential of electronic corpora as a useful resource, although it is clear “that empirically

oriented descriptive linguistics is the way of the future” (ibid.: 10).

It is not difficult to answer the question why machine-readable corpora will, indubitably, become a chief analytical tool for a discourse-oriented linguist. Computerized corpora allow the researcher to study the naturally occurring language data in their own contexts (Biber 1998: 1); furthermore, it is only with the support of a large-sized and high-quality corpus that we can prepare descriptively more satisfactory grammars (Svartvik 1966: vii).¹ In addition, electronic corpora afford a background for a quantitative perspective on linguistic description (Kennedy 1998: 271), and can hence be viewed as effective devices for verifying conclusions based on qualitative analysis.

On the other hand, as Urbanová (2005) maintains, findings based on data-driven scrutiny should not be taken for granted, “since the language material available is skewed: it need not necessarily represent the substantial changes occurring underneath the surface, nor does it include all the existing phenomena of language in their entirety” (ibid.: 122). Therefore, the results of any linguistic analysis are merely probabilistic; paraphrasing Halliday (1991: 31), the linguistic system is inherently probabilistic, and the frequency in text is the instantiation of probability in the grammar.²

No definition of a corpus has been given so far in this article. For obvious reasons, it is not sufficient to rely on the original and quite vague delineation that a corpus is “a body of texts put together in a principled way, often for the purposes of linguistic research” (Johansson 1991: 3). At this stage of the development of computerized corpora (see below), it is more suitable to extend the definition as Baker (1995: 225) has done: a corpus means a collection of texts held in machine-readable form, and capable of being analyzed automatically or semi-automatically; it is no longer restricted to ‘writings’ but includes spoken as well as written texts; it may include a large number of texts from a variety of sources, by many writers and/or speakers and on a multitude of topics.

Electronic corpora can thus be classified according to what type of language material they include, whether they are collections of spoken and/or written samples, and whether they represent diachronic or synchronic points of view. Moreover, corpora might be monolingual or bilingual (further subdivided into parallel and comparable), possibly even multilingual, prepared either for research purposes or as learning aids. In relation to these subdivisions, we might also distinguish two broad categories of corpora: (i) *general-*

purpose and (ii) *domain-specific*; the former being designed to represent general features of the language, the latter to represent a particular variety. For other available distinctions see, for example, Valera (2003: 299–301).³

Electronic corpora of the English language

The investigation of language based on naturally occurring data has a long tradition in English studies. According to Leech (1991), it dates back to the post-Bloomfieldian period of structural linguistics “when linguists (such as Harris & Hill in the 1950s) were under the influence of a positivist and behaviourist view of the science, and regarded the ‘corpus’ as the primary *explicandum* of linguistics” (ibid.: 8). Certain antecedents of today’s corpus-based approaches could be traced to even earlier periods. Already in the 18th century, lexicographers (e.g. Johnson) made use of authentic language data, and their dictionaries were equipped with a large number of citations from genuine sources. Also 19th century phoneticians (e.g. Ellis) and 20th century grammarians (e.g. Jespersen) used natural language examples in order to prepare background materials for language pedagogy.

Although the time around the year 1960 brought certain discontinuity and slowdown in the development of the systematic study of corpora, as a result of anti-corpus campaigns by the supporters of the transformational generative grammar (cf. Chomsky 1962),⁴ it was in 1959 that the most outstanding corpus to date appeared. This landmark in the history of corpus linguistics is associated with Randolph Quirk and his project entitled the *Survey of English Usage*

(SEU). The plan was to collect “a large and stylistically varied corpus as the basis for a systemic description of spoken and written English” (Aijmer & Altenberg 1991: 1). Over the following thirty years the SEU corpus team managed to amass 200 samples of texts, half spoken, half written, each consisting of 5000 words. All the SEU texts were annotated and analysed grammatically, thus creating a material springboard for *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985). In addition, their spoken component was converted under the direction of Jan Svartvik in the second half of the 1970s into a machine-readable form as the principal section of the *London-Lund Corpus* (LLC).

The first computerised corpora was compiled by W. Nelson Francis and Henry Kučera in the 1960s. Their electronically processed collection of texts, officially titled *Standard Corpus of Present-Day Edited American English, for Use with Digital Computers*, emerged in 1961, and today contains 500 samples from different genres, with the total amount of words reaching one million (see Chart One below). The corpus, nicknamed the *Brown corpus* after Brown University in Providence (Rhode Island) where it was prepared, launches what Leech (1991: 10) labels the era of ‘first-generation’ electronic corpora.⁵ Together with the *Brown Corpus*, this label also applies to the *Lancaster/Oslo-Bergen Corpus* (LOB), compiled and elaborated in the 1970s by a team of researchers under the supervision of Geoffrey Leech and Stig Johansson. In contrast to the *Brown Corpus*, the LOB provides a database of British English.⁶

Text categories			
Genre group	Category	Content of category	No. of text samples
Press (88)	A	Reportage	44
	B	Editorial	27
	C	Review	17
General prose (206)	D	Religion	17
	E	Skills, trades, hobbies	36
	F	Popular lore	48
	G	Belles letters, biographies	75
	H	Miscellaneous	30
Learned (80)	J	Science	80
Fiction (126)	K–R	Various sub-genres	126
TOTAL			500

Table 1: The Brown Family of Corpora: Internal Composition by Genre

(cited in Mair 2008: 47)

As regards corpus size, the above-mentioned corpora were surpassed by the so-called ‘second generation’ of the 1980s. This generation is represented, among others, by John Sinclair’s *Collins Birmingham University International Language Database* (COBUILD corpus) and *Longman/Lancaster English Language Corpus*; both with several tens of millions of words. And just a few years later technological progress enabled the production of ‘third generation’ corpora, with the *Bank of English* (BoE; over 450 million words) and the *British National Corpus* (BNC) being the most extensive representatives.

And what about the prospects for the future? Twenty years ago Stig Johansson argued that: “Variety study is probably the area where corpus workers can make their most significant contributions” (1991: 306). Any language is diverse, still in progress, and experiences continual change. It is generally accepted that “sociolinguists have been the pioneers in the study of ongoing change and corpus-linguists must learn from them” (Mair 2008: 46). To prepare a background for the satisfaction of this demand and for the examination of

language variety, future corpora related studies would have to progress along three dimensions: (i) existing small corpora can be made even more useful by refining annotation through morpho-syntactic part-of-speech tagging and syntactic parsing; (ii) where material is needed which is copious, up-to-date and self-renewing, the World Wide Web (WWW) should be used as a major resource for linguistic research; (iii) a long-standing bias in corpus linguistics towards the written language needs to be redressed (ibid.: 2008: 36).

Design of the British National Corpus

Within the large and incessantly growing collection of electronic corpora of English, the *British National Corpus* (BNC) plays a prominent role. The BNC ranks among the most respected, representative, and often cited sources not only due to its impressive size, with extraordinarily large percentage made up by the spoken component, but also due to its systematic sampling procedure, well-organized structure, and multilayer classification of the language material. Many scholars consider the BNC to be a new standard and

benchmark for corpora-related studies (see Šulc 1999: 38). Let me now, therefore, present a more detailed description of the design of the BNC. The information given is based on *BNC User Reference Guide* (2007).⁷ The *British National Corpus* is a 100 million word set of British English, both written and spoken, collected during the final part of the 20th century. It is a result of a collaboration between Oxford University Press, Longman, Chambers, Oxford and Lancaster Universities, and the British Library. So far the BNC has appeared in three, gradually revised and data-enhanced editions. The first edition was launched in 1994. The second edition, titled *BNC World*, was produced in 2000. The third edition was distributed seven years later (2007); it is reformatted in XML, with full documentation in HTML format. It is this last edition of the BNC which is described in the subsequent paragraphs, and moreover it is also the one which is used for the purposes of my own research.

To align the characteristics of the *British National Corpus* with the general definition of a corpus by Baker (1995; see above), we might summarize that the BNC is (i) a *sample corpus*: composed of text samples generally no longer than 45,000 words; (ii) a *synchronic corpus*: which means that the corpus includes recent data, more specifically, it comprises imaginative texts from 1960, informative texts from 1975; (iii) a *general corpus*: not exclusively restricted to any particular subject field, register or genre; (iv) a *monolingual corpus*: it includes only those texts which are the product of British English speakers; (v) a *mixed corpus*: because it contains examples of both spoken and written language.

To compare the BNC with the Brown Family of Corpora (see Chart 1), it is relevant to mention that the *British National Corpus* contains approximately 100 million words of text, sampled in more than 4000 extracts. As it is much easier (and cheaper) to acquire written texts than spoken language data, the written component of the BNC constitutes 90 per cent (90 million words) of the total, while the spoken component 'mere' 10 per cent. Still, with its 10 million word collection of spoken language material the *British National Corpus* forms the world's largest spoken corpus of any language (Šulc 1999: 37). It is, moreover, one of the most current corpora, with samples recorded during the 1990s.

To be more specific, the XML Edition of the *British National Corpus* embraces 4049 texts, and fills (including annotation) 5,228,040 Kb. All extracts are classified with reference to the relevant component of the corpus (text type), i.e. whether a particular text belongs within the written text portion or spoken text portion. Moreover, texts are classified according to their date of production. For spoken extracts, their date was that of the recording, in the written component, the date used for the classification was the date of publication of the source edition. The only exception was that of imaginative texts, where the date of the first publication of the work was used.

The most important and often-discussed considerations when constructing the BNC were related to the issues of sampling and representativeness. In other words, the editors of the BNC strived to form a large set of texts which would be as representative of the totality of the language that is produced as possible. For these purposes, they sampled and classified language material from the broadest range of existing linguistic productions.⁸

The sampling procedure applied for the written part of the corpus took into account both production and reception of the written data. As a result, selection was based not only on texts that appeared in catalogues of books and magazines published per year, but also on library lending statistics, literary prizes, periodical

circulation figures, geographic spread, etc. Samples were taken randomly, and incorporated into the BNC according to three selection features: (i) *domain* (imaginative vs. informative; the latter subcategorized into natural & pure science, applied science, social science, world affairs, commerce & finance, arts, belief & thought, leisure), (ii) *time* (within certain dates), (iii) *medium* (book, periodical, to-be-spoken, miscellaneous published, miscellaneous unpublished).

These categories of written texts were further classified according to sets of descriptive features, including information about authors of texts, target audience, and publication place. The authors were characterized on the basis of the type of their *authorship* (unknown, sole author, corporate author, multiple author), *sex* (male, female, mixed, unknown), and *age* (0-14, 15-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-59, 60+). Target audience was described in terms of *age* (child, teenager, adult, any) and *sex* (unknown, male, female, mixed). The *place* of publication referred either to various parts of Britain (North: north of Mersey-Humber line, Midlands: north of Bristol Channel-Wash line, South: south of Bristol Channel-Wash line) or to some other English speaking countries (e.g. Ireland).

In a similar manner to the written component of the BNC, also the spoken section also takes account of the problems of corpus sampling and representativeness. With regard to the specific character of spoken language material, the editors of the corpus prepared two modules: (i) the *demographically sampled part* and (ii) the *context-governed part*. The aim was to cover the amplest range of linguistic variation found in spoken language, comprising both language producers and spoken text types. Consequently, recording procedure became an essential issue.

The sampling approach adopted for the first module (*demographic*) involved, first of all, recruiting randomly chosen individuals from across the United Kingdom. Later on, when 124 adults were chosen in this way, these individuals were given a portable tape recorder so that they could record either their own speeches or their conversations with other people. Finally, the recordings were classified according to the respondent's *age group* (0-14, 15-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-59, 60+), *social class*⁹ (unknown, AB: managerial and professional, C1: supervisory and clerical, C2: skilled manual, DE: unskilled manual and unemployed), and *sex* (unknown, male, female). As the complete anonymity of speakers was guaranteed, and because in most cases the only person who was aware of being recorded was the person carrying the tape recorder, it can be summarized that all conversations added to the BNC come close to the ideal of genuine spontaneous speech.

Unlike with the first module, consisting predominantly of conversational British English, the sampling procedure of the second module (*contextual*) approached spoken language with the goal of mapping typology of spoken texts. The language material was therefore collected and divided according to four *a priori* delimited categories: namely educational & informative, business, public/institutional, and leisure. Each category was further divided into the following classes: lectures, talks, educational demonstrations, news commentaries, classroom interaction (for *educational & informative*); company talks and interviews, trade union talks, sales demonstrations, business meetings (for *business*); medical consultations, political speeches, sermons, government talks, council meetings, religious meetings, parliamentary proceedings, legal proceedings (for *public/institutional*); speeches, sports commentaries, talks to clubs, broadcast chat shows and phone-ins,

club meetings (for *leisure*). The total number of spoken texts forming the context-governed part reaches 757. In addition, both modules (2000 hours of transcribed recording time) were classified according to *region* (unknown, South, Midlands, North) and *interaction type* (monologue or dialogue). The issue of transcription and tagging will be described below.

BNC and medical encounters

The above-mentioned qualities of the spoken part of the *British National Corpus*, especially its sample size, the naturalness and authenticity of the language data, the character of the sampling and recording procedure, and the struggle for representativeness, represent a suitable foundation for a sociolinguistic investigation of medical encounters. Until recently analysts in the field of doctor-patient interaction research had to rely on corpora either without electronic support or without proper sociolinguistic information. Available corpora often comprised only incomplete interviews between doctors and patients, moreover, in the form of 'rough' transcripts. Besides, most texts included into the corpora preceding the BNC had been recorded in the 1960s 1970s and 1980s, and as a result they cannot provide new information on the profound social change which has been modifying the traditional asymmetry of doctor-patient relationship in favour of the patient.

The *British National Corpus* offers 115 texts of electronically transcribed and annotated medical interviews, with the total word stock of the language material reaching 79,632 items. All texts start with the header, which presents a structured description of the text, informs the user about the length of the sample, about the date, time, place, and duration of the recording, and also about the type of the context (in the case of medical consultations it is the *public* context). Then the header follows with more detailed information on the situational background of the particular interaction. It outlines the setting in which the encounter takes place, and, if possible, it comments upon the participants of the interview: their age group, sex, social class, and dialect. Finally, it presents the patient's medical problem.

The greatest advantage of the BNC for the analysis of any spoken interaction, not only of medical consultations, is the procedure of transcription, notably the amount of attention paid to paralinguistic phenomena. It is a great advantage that researchers are not only equipped with language data, but that also, besides information on the utterance level of the text, they have encoded data on paralinguistic features. It enables scholars to undergo a more qualitative analysis of the research material, and thus arrive at findings which would not have been possible if a purely quantitative approach was used. To put it differently, the type of annotation¹⁰ as introduced in the following paragraph is an essential prerequisite for an adequate analysis.

Annotation tags utilised for the BNC encode the following features: (i) *voice quality* (e.g. whispering, laughing); (ii) *non-verbal but vocalised sounds* (e.g. coughs, humming noises); (iii) *non-verbal and non-vocal events* (e.g. passing lorries, animal noises); (iv) *significant pauses* (unusually long silence); (v) *unclear passages* (e.g. inaudible parts); (vi) *speech management phenomena* (e.g. truncation, false starts, or corrections); (vii) *overlaps* (points at which more than one speaker was active).

Not to focus only on the positive aspects of the BNC, both in general and with regard to doctor-patient interaction research, it should be mentioned that the BNC also has its weaker points. Hopefully, one example will be sufficient. All medical interviews are solely of one kind: they are samples of general-practice

consultations. The fact that no more branches of medicine have been included in the corpus prevents us from carrying out a comparative analysis of doctor-patient interviews in different medical settings, which would definitely support the idea that different dialogic contexts of medical disciplines shape the character of doctor-patient encounters and the language used within these dialogues (cf. Černý 2007). In other words, as Sinclair (2004) puts it, "no corpus, no matter how large, how carefully designed, can have exactly the same characteristics as the language itself".¹¹

Endnotes

¹ Among the most commonly used English grammars based on language corpora belong *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985); *A Communicative Grammar of English* (Leech and Svartvik 1994); *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al. 1999); *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002).

² To this Aarts (1991: 59) adds that "a grammar describing language use cannot be written by trying to account for each and every fact of performance; language use and performance are two distinct notions. Whether or not a particular construction found in the corpus should be accounted for in the grammar is determined by the currency of that construction. The currency of a construction is compounded of its frequency and its 'normalcy'".

³ A selective list of electronic corpora, relevant institutions, projects, archives, software, etc., are to be found, for instance, in *English Corpus Linguistics* (Aijmer, Altenberg 1991); or *Korpusová lingvistika* (Šulc 1999).

⁴ Chomsky (1962). Paper given at the University of Texas 1958, 3rd Texas Conference on Problems of Linguistic Analysis in English, Austin, University of Texas: "Any natural corpus will be skewed. Some sentences won't occur because they are obvious, others because they are impolite. The corpus, if natural, will be so wildly skewed that the description would be no more than a mere list" (cited in Leech 1991).

⁵ For further information on the Brown Corpus see ICAME, the International Computer Archive of Modern/Medieval English, available [online] at: <http://helmer.aksis.uib.no/icame.html>.

⁶ The Brown Corpus and the Lancaster/Oslo-Bergen Corpus are so-called matching corpora, i.e. that they were built according to the same general design.

⁷ *Reference Guide for the British National Corpus (XML Edition)*, ed. by Lou Burnard, February 2007. Available [online] at this webpage: <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/XMLedition/URG>.

⁸ In practical terms, a corpus is 'representative' to the extent that findings based on its contents can be generalized to a larger hypothetical corpus. For instance, the *Brown Corpus* is often assumed to be representative of American English, of written English, or of English in general. At present, an assumption of representativeness must be regarded largely as an act of faith. In the future we may hope that statistical or other models of what makes a corpus representative of a large population of texts will be developed and will be applied on existing corpora" (Leech 1991: 27). Viewed from this perspective, the BNC might be understood as a representative corpus of British English, of both written and spoken English, or even of English in general.

⁹ The classification follows the NRS social grade.

¹⁰ The term annotation has been defined by Souter (1993: 202) as "... the labeling of a machine-readable text with markers to allow the 'original' text to be accurately re-created on paper in a human readable form, or to allow next text created on computer to

conform to a common formatting standard". This information is acquired in Valera (2003: 317). <http://ahds.ac.uk/creating/guides/linguistic-corpora/chapter1.htm>.

¹¹ Sinclair, J. *Developing Linguistic Corpora: a Guide to Good Practice*. 2004. Available [online] at this webpage:

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Computational Lexicography: Status and Perspectives

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Abstract

The article is concerned with the use of computers in dictionary making and the means by which lexicographers represent information included in the electronic dictionaries. Several dictionaries are listed, compared, and contrasted in terms of the use of the modern developments in computational linguistics for their construction. Electronic dictionaries surpass printed dictionaries in many ways, offering quick-finding facilities, cross-references, and hypertext references, semantic and pragmatic

information. Their main advantage is that they are easily updated by the dictionary makers or even by the users. Electronic dictionary is a product of interdisciplinary interaction between linguistics, lexicography, corpus linguistics and computer science.

Keywords

Computational linguistics, computational lexicography, corpus linguistics, lexicography, electronic dictionary, printed dictionary, hypertext

Introduction

Today, more and more electronic dictionaries, and electronic pedagogical dictionaries in particular, are much more than electronic versions of paper dictionaries. They are no longer a distant dream, and they have the potential of being turned into powerful language teaching or learning tools. Such modern and forward-looking dictionaries include an online dictionary that combines a learner's dictionary or lexical database, a corpus of newspaper texts, a CALL application and direct access to other freely accessible lexical resources on the Web. Another example concerns the worldwide decision taken at this point is irreversible, there is little doubt that the present strategic decisions in terms of lexicography will have a big impact for years to come.

There are various reasons for this challenging situation, which can also be defined as an *identity crisis* for lexicography. The three main reasons are:

1. the theoretical efforts carried out during the last decades and the growing schism between the most advanced theories and the majority of the dictionaries produced today;
2. the development of the new computer and information technologies and the present transition from printed to electronic dictionaries;
3. the advent of the so-called information and knowledge society and the growing need for quick and easy access to information.

De Schryver (2003: 152) discussed the advantage of paper dictionaries over electronic ones. He claims that some aspects of the traditional paper dictionaries remain unbeatable and listed the following advantages in (1):

1. Familiar, reassuring
 2. Symbolic value as a physical object that can be owned and admired
 3. Easy to browse, can most readily be read recreationally, easy global reading, manhandling is part of the reading pleasure
 4. Easy to read, best for the eyes
 5. Easy to annotate, one can physically write on them
 6. Durable, can be carried around the world without fear of serious damage or loss of functionality
 7. Has a solid independent existence
 8. Does not require a computer to be switched on
- There are not so many works written on dictionary making. Among the first and crucial ones is Ladislav Zgusta's "Manual of Lexicography" (1971) where he combines the main contributions of Czech

lexicographers and scholars. S. I. Landau's "Dictionaries. The art and craft of lexicography" (1984, 2001) is also intended for all those interested in or professionally associated with dictionaries and other reference books. Its main focus of attention is English dictionaries for adults and for children, for native speakers and for the foreign users, for special or technical professionals. He also contrasts the problems of bilingual lexicography with those of monolingual. According to P. A. Fuertes-Olivera, the amount of dictionary research has increased considerably, since the late 1980s [Fuertes; 2010: 193]. And now the concept of electronic dictionary includes not only CD-ROMs, DVDs and internet dictionaries but first of all "dictionaries conceived to support the spelling, hyphenation and other functions integrated in text processing programs". P. A. Fuertes-Olivera defines electronic dictionaries as "reference tools that have been designed to fulfill one or more functions, that are presented as collections of electronic structured data and can be accessed with multiple tools, enhanced with a wide range of functionalities, and used in various environments" [].

Current research done by Ana Frankenberg-Garcia shows that learners use dictionaries mainly to look up meanings, and do not generally prefer bilingual over monolingual look-ups. Despite the advances that have taken place in pedagogical lexicography over the past decades, many features of learners' dictionaries remain underexploited. The investigation was based on the premise that these dictionaries tend to be underused primarily because learners are insufficiently aware of their reference needs. The received results prove that reference preferences are changed, the bilingual dictionary no longer being a favourite, and many learners do not know where to look up much of the information they need (Frankenberg-Garcia, 2011: 97).

Material and methods

Lexicographers define several the most common kinds of usage information given by general printed or electronic dictionaries:

1. Currency or temporality: archaic, obsolete;
2. Frequency of use: rare;
3. Etymology, origin of words: OE, ME, OF;
4. Regional or geographic variation: U.S., British, Canadian, Australian; sometimes regional areas within a country are specified;
5. Technical or specialized terminology (field labels): music, sport, medicine, science, business, etc.;

6. Restricted or taboo usage: vulgar, obscene;
 7. Insult: offensive, disparaging, contemptuous;
 8. Slang: slang, jargon;
 9. Style, functional variety, or register: informal, colloquial, literary, poetic, humorous;
 10. Grammar notes: irregular forms of nouns, verbs and adjectives, comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, countable and uncountable nouns, etc.;
 11. Status or cultural level: nonstandard, substandard, illiterate (Landau, 1984: 175).
- Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (6) online provides information on:
1. Spelling (British and American English spellings);
 2. Pronunciation (British and American English pronunciations);
 3. Grammatical use;
 4. Meaning or meanings;
 5. Examples showing word use in current English;
 6. Interactive cross-references;
 7. Visual thesaurus.

A headword in the Dictionary is printed in bold type. An entry comprises the information explaining parts of speech in italic type, the meanings and uses of the headword. A brief account of the etymology is not given in the entries. The part-of-speech label is given for all headwords and derivatives immediately after the headword. When a headword has more than one part of speech, a list is given in the left-hand column of the entry. Variant spellings are given before the pronunciation and definition. Variant American spellings are indicated by the designation *US*:

colour *noun* (APPEARANCE) UK (US **color**)
enrol *verb* (-ll-) UK (US usually **enroll**)

Inflection of words is given in bold type in brackets after the part of speech concerned and pronunciation:

photo *noun* (plural **photos**)

Comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs are given in bold type in brackets after the pronunciation:

UK  US  /hɒt/ (US) /hɑ:t/ (**hotter, hottest**)

Pronunciation (British and American English) is given in red and blue colours. Clicking on the labels **UK**  **US**  you can hear the UK and US pronunciations of a given word:

UK  US  /'fʌŋk.ʃən/
 UK 

Grammar notes are given in square brackets, for example: transitive [T] or intransitive [I], countable [C]

or uncountable [U]. Also the entry provides some visual cues. Such symbol as · acts as a signpost and differentiates several meanings of the word, for instance:

Colour *noun* (APPEARANCE) UK (US **color**)

Definition

· [C or U] red, blue, green, yellow, etc.

What's your favourite colour?

She wears a lot of bright colours.

What colour are your eyes?

Does the shirt come in any other colour?

I like rich jewel colours, such as purple, blue and green.

Are the photos in colour or black and white?

· [U] the pleasant effect of a bright colour or of a lot of colours together

I think we need a bit of colour in this room.

Red and yellow peppers give a little colour to the sauce.

literary The whole garden was ablaze with/a riot of colour (= full of different bright colours).

· [C] a substance, such as a paint or dye, which you add to something to give it a particular colour

I put my new green shirt in a hot wash and the colour ran (= the colour came out of the material).

· [U] a pink colour in someone's face, often showing good health or showing feelings such as embarrassment or excitement

That walk has put some colour in your cheeks.

I watched the colour drain from her face as she heard the news.

She has a high colour (= The natural colour of her face is red).

Examples are provided in italic type:

camera *noun*

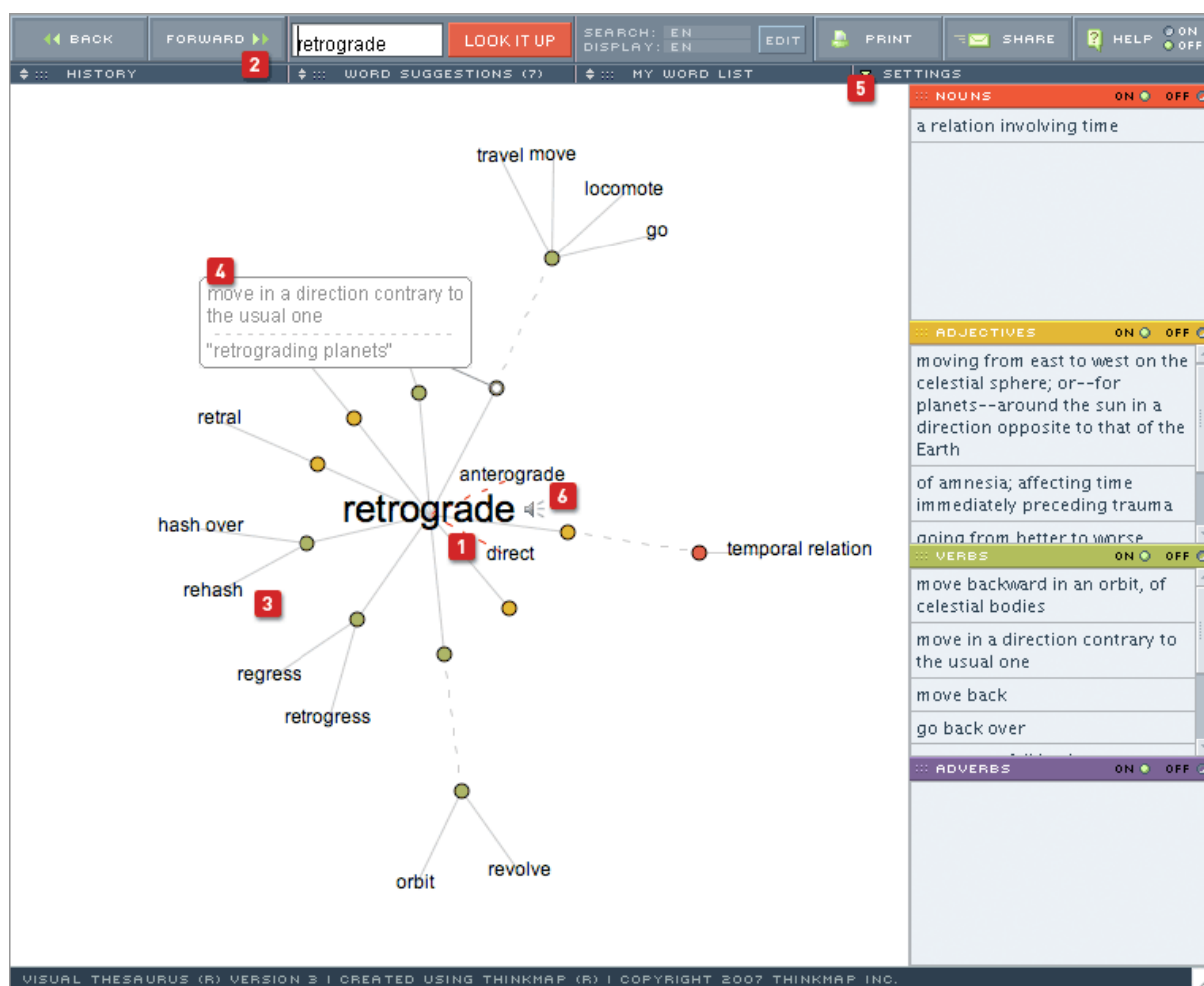
I forgot to take my camera with me to Portugal, so I couldn't take any photos.

Television camera crews broadcast the event all round the world.

It was said of Marilyn Monroe that the camera loved her (= that she looked very attractive on film and in photographs) (6).

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary online gives interactive references and Thinkmap Visual Thesaurus after illustrative examples, that enables user to find and visualize synonyms of a given word.

Thinkmap Visual Thesaurus is an interactive tool that helps to discover the connections between words in a visually captivating display. We can explore related concepts with the help of Visual Thesaurus and reveal the way words and their meanings relate to each other. It consists of more than 145000 words and 115000 meanings in an innovative and intuitive design (8).



The Visual Thesaurus displays words and meanings that are related to the item in the center of the display. The Toolbar provides easy search for words, view of word suggestions, search history, and change preferences settings. Forward or Back buttons provide easy navigation. Help tips are always available. Clicking on a word brings it to the center. Clicking on the speaker icon enables user to hear the word spoken. Surrounding the word are words and meanings that are related to it. Rolling a mouse over a meaning you learn more about it. Clicking on the settings menu helps to personalize font size, types of relationships shown, content filtering, special keyboard shortcuts, and more. Printing, spell checking, Internet image and web page search are all available. There are two types of editions: online and desk top, which help the learner of English to master the main three language skills: writing, reading and speaking (8).

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary is easy to work with. Learner should type the word or phrase he/she is looking for into the search box and press "Search". The best match will appear in the entry.

The social bookmarks, such as



provide an opportunity for a user to share an entry with online community or to bookmark it for easy finding it again later (7).

Dictionary editors inserted special labels and symbols which are explained in the section Guide to Labels. Symbols used in the dictionary:

derivative(s) section of an entry. Derivatives do not have their own entry in the dictionary because they can be easily understood from the meaning of the word from which they are derived (the root word);

- in phrasal verbs, shows that the object may come either before or after the particle;
- shows a word from the *Oxford 3000™*. Click on this icon to see a list of other words that are part of the Oxford 3000™;
- shows the parts of the entry that are the most important;
- shows a word is from the *Academic Word List*. Click on this icon to see a list of other words that are part of the Academic Word List;
- shows a *usage note* within an entry. Click this icon to see a list of entries that have usage notes of the same type (7).

The following labels (in blue type) are used in the dictionary with words that express a particular attitude or are appropriate in a particular situation:

- approving expressions show that you feel approval or admiration, for instance *feisty*, *petite*;
- disapproving expressions show that you feel disapproval or contempt, for example *blinkered*, *newfangled*;
- figurative language is used in a non-literal or metaphorical way, for instance: *He didn't want to cast a shadow on (= spoil) their happiness*;
- formal expressions are usually only used in serious or official language and would not be

appropriate in normal everyday conversation. Examples are *admonish*, *besmirch*;

- humorous expressions are intended to be funny, for instance *ankle-biter*, *lurgy*;
- informal expressions are used between friends or in a relaxed or unofficial situation. They are not appropriate for formal situations. Examples are *bonkers*, *dodgy*;
- ironic language uses words to mean the opposite of the meaning that they seem to have, as in *You're a great help, I must say!* (= no help at all);
- literary language is used mainly in literature and imaginative writing, for instance *aflame*, *halcyon*;
- offensive expressions are used by some people to address or refer to people in a way that is very insulting, especially in connection with their race, religion, sex or disabilities, for example *half-caste*, *slut*;
- slang is very informal language, sometimes restricted to a particular group of people, for example people of the same age or those who have the same interests or do the same job, for instance *dingbat*, *dosh*;
- taboo expressions are likely to be thought by many people to be obscene or shocking. Examples are *bloody*, *shit*;
- technical language is used by people who specialize in particular subject areas, for instance *accretion*, *adipose* (7).
- The following labels in the on-line dictionary show other restrictions on the use of words:
- dialect describes expressions that are mainly used in particular regions of the British Isles, not including Ireland, Scotland or Wales, for example *beck*, *nowt*;
- old-fashioned expressions are passing out of current use, for example *balderdash*, *beanfeast*;
- old use describes expressions that are no longer in current use, for example *ere*, *perchance*;
- saying describes a well-known fixed or traditional phrase, such as a proverb, that is used to make a comment, give advice, etc, for example *actions speak louder than words*;
- ™ shows a trademark of a manufacturing company, for example *Band-Aid*, *Frisbee* (7).

Information on word origins is not available on the website of the online Dictionary. However, this information is presented on the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary CD-ROM. Dictionary editors included in some entries synonyms and antonyms. Apart from this a user can find additional information in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary CD-ROM that has an integrated thesaurus. To form the usage note dictionary editors used the British National Corpus, a collection of 100 million words of text representing every kind of writing and speech in English (5). Compare the dictionary entry for word "colour" from Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary online (given above) with the same entry from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary online:



colour *noun* (especially US **color**)

BrE 'kʌlə(r) **NAmE** 'kʌlər

red, green, etc.

1 [countable, uncountable] the appearance that things have that results from the way in which they reflect light. Red, orange and green are colours

□ *What's your favourite colour?*

□ **bright/dark/light colours**

□ *available in 12 different colours*

□ *the colour of the sky*

□ *Her hair is a reddish-brown colour.*

2 [uncountable] (usually before another noun) the use of all the colours, not only black and white □ *a colour TV* □ **colour**

photography/printing □ *a full-colour brochure*

□ *Do you dream in colour?*

of skin

3 [uncountable, countable] the colour of a person's skin, when it shows the race they belong to discrimination on the grounds of race, colour or religion (especially North American English) □ **a person/man/woman of colour** (= who is not white)

of face

4 [uncountable] a red or pink colour in somebody's face, especially when it shows that they look healthy or that they are embarrassed

□ *The fresh air brought colour to their cheeks.*

□ *Colour flooded her face when she thought of what had happened.* □ *His face was drained of colour* (= he looked pale and ill).

substance

5 [countable, uncountable] a substance that is used to give colour to something

□ *a semi-permanent hair colour that lasts six to eight washes* see also **watercolour**

interesting details

6 [uncountable] interesting and exciting details or qualities □ *The old town is full of colour and attractions.* □ *Her acting added warmth and colour to the production.*

to add/give/lend colour to something (= make it brighter, more interesting, etc.) see also **local colour**

of team/country, etc.

7 colours [plural] the particular colours that are used on clothes, flags, etc.

to represent a team, school, political party or country □ *Red and white are the team colours.*

□ *Spain's national colours (figurative)* □ *There are people of different political colours on the committee.*

8 colours [plural] (especially British English) a flag, badge, etc. that represents a team, country, ship, etc □ *Most buildings had a flagpole with the national colours flying;* □ *sailing under the French colours*

Idioms

see *the colour of somebody's money*

(informal) to make sure that somebody has enough money to pay for something

□ *You need to see the colour of his money before you sell him the car.*

more at with flying colours □ *at flying* adjective, lend colour to something **at** **lend** noun, *nail your colours to the mast* at nail verb, *your true colours*;

at true adjective see also **off colour**

Usage note: colourshade hue tint tinge, etc.

□ These words all describe the appearance of things, resulting from the way in which they reflect light.

□ **colour/color** the appearance that things have, resulting from the way in which they reflect light. *Red, green and blue are colours: What's your favourite colour? bright/dark/light colours*

□ **shade** a particular form of a colour, especially when describing how light or dark it is. *Sky blue is a shade of blue.*

□ **hue** (literary or technical) a colour or a particular shade of a colour: *His face took on an unhealthy, whitish hue.*

□ **tint** a shade or small amount of a particular colour;

a faint colour covering a surface: leaves with red and gold autumn tints

□ **tinge** a small amount of a colour: *There was a pink tinge to the sky tint or tinge?*

□ You can say: a reddish tint/tinge or: *a tinge of red* but not: *a tint of red.*

Tint is often used in the plural, but **tinge** is almost always singular.

□ a **warm/rich** colour/shade/hue/tint

□ a **bright/vivid/vibrant/dark/deep** colour/shade/hue

□ a **pale/pastel/soft/subtle/delicate** colour/shade/hue

□ a **light/strong/neutral/natural** colour/shade (7).

It appears that Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary online gives lesser sufficient information concerning the usage level and cultural issues to satisfy a learner of English. On R. A. Wells and P. B. Gove opinion, "the lexicographer's citation file can give an accurate account of usage only insofar as the sample is reliably representative. Ideally, the linguist should be able to observe all linguistic events. Every human utterance should come from his scrutiny. At present no one has time, machinery, or qualified assistants to record or store or analyze on such an ideal scale" (Wells, 1973: 118). Everyone knows that "no dictionary can ever be complete, which is caused partly by the technical restrictions imposed by the size or the

audience of the work" (Zychla, 2007: 77). R. A. Wells states, that with the modern techniques of information storage and retrieval, the ideal of a complete corpus may seem to be closer to realization. However, the linguists should ensure that corpus is fully representative (Wells, 1973: 119). He also argues the arguments that the dictionary 'shapes' the language and sets or preserves a standard of usage are relics from the past, and the evolution of the historical principle and the development of more scientific methods for studying language, made such assumptions no longer tenable (Wells, 1973: 119).

Conclusions

S. I. Landau states that printed dictionaries are not likely to become obsolete in the foreseeable future, "the development of cheaper and better computers has profound implications for the preparation of dictionaries, if not for the distribution of their contents". However, "it is inconceivable that any major dictionary could be undertaking today without planning to store the material in a computer" (Landau, 1984: 272). Lexicographers are nowadays also stressing the fact, that "in a nation of two hundred million native speakers, usage may vary markedly, and yet remain linguistically valid and socially acceptable. Under such conditions no notion of a single standard of usage can be valid, or even relevant for the lexicographer. The only position possible is a healthy linguistic pluralism. The lexicographer's attention must be focused constantly on the language as it is used, for in that, and only that, can be found linguistic authority" (Wells, 1973: 120).

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Recenzie/Reviews

Interpretation of Meaning across Discourses

(Jančaříková, R. (ed.). Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno 2010)

Review by Ludmila Adamová, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

There is no doubt that every language is culturally and historically determined by a place and an environment of its origin. Consequently, these factors influence its grammatical structure and language functions which are directly reflected in the way of conveying information and interpretation of its meaning regarding different kinds of spoken and written discourse.

The volume *Interpretation of Meaning across Discourses* edited by Renata Jančaříková is an interesting piece of writing dealing with grammatical and interpretation aspects of a great variety of discourse that represents a central topic to the work on the project *Coherence and Cohesion in English Discourse*. The project is supported by the Czech Science Foundation, within the framework of which the *Fourth Brno Conference on Linguistics Studies in English* was held at the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, in September 2010. According to its logically structured content the volume provides information on written as well as spoken discourse including: academic, fictional, learner, legal, media and political – prepared and spontaneous. As the title suggests it is focused on the fundamental problematic issue of meaning and its interpretation taking in account differences between the contextual and background knowledge of a creator and a recipient, the difference between the context of the source and target culture as well as different structure, function and purpose of the texts.

Chapter One consists of several studies on academic discourse, typically represented by a written form, a formal register, a high level of informativeness and explicit logical organization. The authors of the studies are primarily focused on the comparative analysis of the grammatical and lexical means and their contribution to the perception of coherence and cohesion in the texts analysed. Moreover, the function of modality and hedges and their role in shaping the meaning conveyed by the authors trying to anticipate the expectations of their recipients and to guide their interpretation and understanding of the text in accordance with their intended purpose.

The material under research in the second chapter includes two studies on fictional discourse. Jolana Kaštovská is interested in the current use of lists and enumeration in literary fiction, which is traditionally considered to be a marginal topic in the fields of linguistics, with the aim to point out the discrepancy between exemplifying and enumerating and its impact on meaning interpretation. By means of precise qualitative analysis including semantic interpretation of samples from Simon Mawer's *The Glass Room* the author proves it is worth to consider these cohesive devices, because they may greatly contribute to the overall structure of the text and thus they may be responsible for a part of ambiguity. Šimůnková's study on modality and the comparative analysis of explicit and implicit expressions of necessity in English and Czech language seems to be very engaging especially for translation theory and practice. In spite of the fact that some linguists attempt to introduce a universal description of modality it is almost impossible due to existing divergence between modal systems of the languages. Scrutinizing the translations of the eight books from English into Czech and vice versa, she focuses on the cases in which necessity explicitly expressed at the lexical level in one language corresponding to the absence of such an expression in the other language with the conclusion that Czech more frequently than English does utilize an explicit means on a lexical level to express necessity.

The Third Chapter comprises three studies on learner discourse. Besides topics such as different functions of word order in translation and the appropriateness of language materials used in tertiary education in Greece, we can find there the study which exceeds due to its topic. It is Al-Jarf's study on the role of prior knowledge in interpreting media reports from Arabic to English and vice versa. As the results of his research show Saudi college students have problems with discriminating phonemes and comprehending the meaning of unfamiliar foreign proper names such as place names, names of politicians, organizations, chemicals or diseases and providing the correct equivalent. The possible solution includes watching British and American T.V. news and reading English newspapers. In addition, for the future it would be interesting to conduct similar research with Slovak or Czech students majoring in translation and to measure their knowledge about foreign proper names and compare the final results with the study of Al-Jarf. The research of both contributions presented in the fourth chapter is focused on legal discourse. While Monika Gyuró studies the presence and function of coherence in court arguments, Magdalena Szczyrbak's genre-based analysis investigates concessive schemata in judicial argumentation.

The authors publishing their studies in Chapter Five contemplate over different aspects of media discourse including the investigation of generic structure of science news, deviations from the grammatical word-order in newspaper discourse, faithfulness and verbatim reproduction in direct reported forms, as well as choice of lexis in British quality newspapers regarding personal and preferred partner characteristics in personal advertisements.

Chapter Six deals with persuasive strategies in political discourse. Jana Adámková examines what communicative strategies and effects the interviewers and interviewees try to achieve by means of vague reference to numerical quantity and semantically empty nouns and phrases, while Jana Svobodová explores threat perception in the speeches of two American presidents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

The great variety of the topics presented in the volume is supplemented by the studies on spontaneous and prepared spoken discourse by Jana Švárová and Petra Zmrzlá focusing on the structure and use of the compliments in contemporary British and American sitcoms and a research study into the use of discourse marker *now* in spoken discourse.

In conclusion, it is necessary to appreciate the fact that all the contributions unite the inevitable theoretical background with its practical application, so the results of the research can be found as very useful for linguists, teachers as well as the students of the linguistics and translation studies. Since all of them reflect current topics the volume is in high accordance with the modern linguistic trends not only in Czech Republic, but also abroad.

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