Chapter 34
Impoliteness as a Model for Virtual Speech Community Building

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to account for linguistic strategies of breaking into a virtual speech community, particularly the community the author refers to here as the Pen community. Virtual communication necessitates accommodations not otherwise engaged in face-to-face conversation, and the Pen community is both virtual and leet. Being leet necessitates interactional behavior consisting of techie knowledge, leet speak fluency, and a shared interest in the venture of building and maintaining a leet identity online. The goal for this ongoing research is to understand virtual conversational behavior and its role in leet speech community building. With a brief discussion of the literature on sociolinguistic perspectives as well as pragmatic theories pertaining to conversational behavior (Watts, Ide, & Ehlich 2005; Culpeper, 1996), exchanges from three threads of discourse from the Pen virtual speech community are accounted for. The notable features of discourse are the strategies employed by participants in order to create, build, foster a sense of place and identity, and strengthen said communities. The Pen community’s discourse permits examples of strategies undertaken for this collective effort through attempting to enter into the community and become a member, topic shifting behavior, and flaming. The author operationalizes each of these examples via Culpeper’s Impoliteness model. Included here are a brief review of relevant literature, a discourse analytical approach to the interactional behavior found in The Pen community, and conclusions about how a leet speech community is built virtually. The Impoliteness model serves well here as a starting point for further research on virtual speech community building.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Situated within frameworks of social pragmatic theories, including Politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2003; Watts, Ide, & Ehlich 2005) and Impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996), the aim of this paper is to account for linguistic strategies of breaking into a virtual speech community. Anderson’s (1983) notion of imagined communities is an apt description for those communities which are built and maintained online. Unlike face-to-face situations, online imagined communities are specialized not only in their linguistic strategies, but in the foundations upon which the communities themselves are built. With a brief discussion of the literature on sociolinguistic perspectives as well as pragmatic theories pertaining to conversational behavior, exchanges from three threads of conversation will be accounted for via the frameworks discussed.

Virtual speech communities are as varied as those in face-to-face interaction, and the discourse within these communities will vary accordingly. Notable features of discourse in virtual communities are the strategies employed by interlocutors, to use the term for describing the extension of “speech events” in virtual space, in order to create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, build, foster a sense of place and identity, and strengthen said communities. I examine the discourse practices of one particular virtual speech community, which entail examples of strategies undertaken for this collective effort. While all speech communities may have distinct discourse practices, I do not intend to present those of this community to be universal; rather, this discourse is one of many possible examples, as communities vary widely across the virtual landscape. Hence, the ethnographic information gleaned from this community’s message board archives is merely situated within theoretical frameworks of pragmatics and discourse analysis in order to attempt to account for the similarities and/or differences in the manner whereby communities are built online versus those built face-to-face.

Specifically, if a male-dominated community is built on a few principles of collective interests being discussed online, such as is the case in this community, then the question I raise is whether Impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996) is more often the guiding pragmatic concern. Face-to-face verbal speech events or encounters such as verbal dueling (Dundes et al, 1970) or signifying (Labov, 1972) are considered ritualized in nature. Contrarily, the strategies observed in building and maintaining this particular community seem to fit the description of these so-called ritualized events when they are in fact a new practice fitting nicely within the older models of ritualized talk yet occur more often than would ritualized talk. This notion is supported by examples from the message board data in the analysis section.

Unlike chat rooms, the Pen discourse is asynchronous, thus a running tally of all threads appears on the home page of the forum. Upon entering the message board forum, a participant sees a list of threads by title (which the initiator of the thread gives) and then has the option to click on the title to read the thread. If one is not registered as a member, s/he cannot post a reply (or begin a thread for that matter). When one registers, s/he chooses an avatar, or a name for herself, which identifies to the community of established members that someone new has arrived. The administrator has programmed an application into the website that automatically attaches a caption to this avatar, which always first appears as “neophyte Pen.” This label serves to place the new member as low status in the community, but still recognizes her entry. Once the new member posts a particular number of times, the caption then changes to “member with a member,” blatantly signaling to both the user and the community that this person has now been approved as a participant and gains a higher status as a member in the community with some level of authority (in the Pen case, a metaphorical