Chapter 53

Relational Work in Synchronous Text-Based CMC of Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Based on close examinations of instant message (IM) interactions, this chapter argues that an interactional sociolinguistic approach to computer-mediated language use could provide explanations for phenomena that previously could not be accounted for in computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA). Drawing on the theoretical framework of relational work (Locher, 2006), the analysis focuses on non-task oriented talk and its function in forming and establishing communication norms in the team, as well as micro-level phenomena, such as hesitation, backchannel signals and emoticons. The conclusions of this preliminary research suggest that the linguistic strategies used for substituting audio-visual signals are strategically used in discursive functions and have an important role in relational work.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams enable participants from geographically distant locations to work together. The increasing popularity of this type of work lies in the fact that the widely available and cost effective new communication technologies enable continuous and intense communication, and provide tools for speedy and efficient cooperation (for example, knowledge repositories, searchable forums, many-to-many communication, and so forth).

This chapter focuses on text-based CMC, specifically on synchronous instant messaging (IM). IM is widely used for virtual work because it allows for prompt, as well as simultaneous, multiple interactions. Moreover, compared to other audio modes, environmental interference is not considerable. IM is a communicative mode that is fundamentally different from those previously known (Crystal, 2004), as it combines the features of written and spoken discourse (see, for example, Herring, 1999; Zitzen & Stein, 2004). Thus it is essential that the team members adapt to this communicative mode and use it effectively to achieve mutual understanding.
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and consequently efficient cooperation. Failure to do so might result in the miscommunication of content or even in interpersonal misunderstanding; both of which are unacceptable in a work environment. Therefore, an exploration of naturally occurring IM interactions will shed light on how, at a basic level, computer-mediated communication happens, and will identify the factors that affect its success.

Working in a virtual environment and communicating via computer-mediated channels is thought to enhance participation, and thus facilitate the efficacy of the group. Those who argue that virtual work enhances cooperation (for example, Adkins & Brashers, 1995) base their observation on the fact that due to the lack of physical and auditory presence, CMC provides an opportunity for group members to participate equally in the conversation. However, recent findings in several areas of linguistics reveal that identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) and power relations (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003) are discursively constructed during the course of the interaction itself. This suggests that computer-mediated communication in itself does not facilitate equal participation, as described above, because participants actively negotiate their identities and relationships through interaction. Besides this function interaction in a virtual team has several other intertwining functions: it is the means of completing the work through discussions, negotiations, orders, enquiries, and so forth; the means of establishing social relations, as well as the means of forming and negotiating member and team identity. To understand how these functions are completed if the communication takes place in a computer mediated setting, we have to examine how communication happens, and observe the language and discursive practices used in the interactions.

The study of computer-mediated discourse and the study of organisational discourse are both complex and interdisciplinary pursuits in their own rights. As indicated in the above comments, the analysis of the computer-mediated discourse of virtual teams will provide answers about the new medium’s effect on language use, cooperation, team and identity formation for both disciplines. The need for empirical studies, where the discourse and language use of the team members are closely examined, is evident from the literature of both disciplines (Boczkowski & Orlikowski, 2004; Herring, 2007). The main aim of this chapter, therefore, is to introduce an interactional approach to synchronous CMC data. By taking a bottom-up approach, and closely observing interactions of an online discourse community, it will provide adequate explanations of both computer-mediated and organisational discourse analysis regarding language use in virtual teams.

DATA

In this chapter I analyse naturally occurring IM conversations. The data was collected in a virtual team of a global consultancy company based in London, UK. The team comprises 18 members dispersed geographically across several countries, including: China, India, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Hungary, the USA, the UK and South Africa. The official company language is English; the ratio of native and non-native speakers is 9:9. The team has 13 female and 5 male members and the positions of the members within the team spans 3 levels of the organisational hierarchy. With the consent of the national head of the group, I approached the group members to participate in this research, and log IM conversations. Six team members volunteered to take part in my study, and over a period of two months provided me with the IM logs at regular intervals (depending on whether they could fit the data collection into their schedule). However, as some of the volunteers had been saving logs for a longer period for their own personal records, these were put at my disposal, too. Consequently, the first set of data dates back to November 2007.
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