Click if You Want to Speak: Reframing CA for Research into Multimodal Conversations in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the lack of formalised methodology for analysing learner interaction data created in conversations on audiographic platforms. First the author shows the importance of conversations in language learning and the need for researchers to understand how users learn from these interactions. Then the author establishes that appropriate methodologies for investigating interaction data collected from online platforms have as yet emerged neither from the field of computer-assisted language learning nor from conversation analysis (CA). Three brief multimodal conversations involving language learners in platform-based tutorials are analysed. The author shows that linguistic means of communication are only one way in which to achieve learning aims and other communication modes are identified. The author concludes that the analysis and interpretation of such exchanges can be improved by a crossdisciplinary approach which consists of augmenting constructs drawn from CA with selected constructs from social semiotics.

Keywords: Audiographic, Computer-Mediated Communication, Conversational Analysis, Embodiment, Multimodality, Second Language Acquisition, Social Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on research into conversations undertaken in voice-enabled learning platforms by learners seeking to enhance their oral and written fluency in a second or foreign language. The aim of the study is to establish methodological principles to address a gap in current research, which relates to the way that data collected from such conversations is analysed. Focusing on the phenomena of turn-taking, face-saving and use of space in online language tutorials, the study takes Conversational Analysis (CA) as its theoretical starting point but adopts a multimodal perspective that appears to shed greater light on the meaning-making processes involved in interactive digital environments.

We will start by establishing the need for an understanding of what learners are doing when they converse via learning platforms such as Lyceum, Elluminate, Centra Symposium and others. We will then discuss the applicability of CA to multimodal conversations online. Finally, drawing from communication theory and multimodal social semiotics, we will identify three frameworks which may provide guiding principles for a methodology with the potential to answer questions raised by our data.

DOI: 10.4018/jvple.2012010101
CONVERSATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: FROM FACE TO FACE TO ONLINE SETTINGS

Conversations are seen as beneficial to language learners for two reasons. Firstly oral conversations have been core to the communicative model of language teaching for half a century, as part of conversation classes. In these, learners, in the safety of the classroom, are invited to experience the “pressure of conversation” (Cook, 1991, p. 61) that it is assumed they will face when called upon to talk with native speakers in the target country. Secondly, research carried out since the mid-80s within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, including in computer-assisted settings where for a long time only written exchanges were possible, has established a consensus about language learning. Specifically it is agreed that, providing interactions are structured so as to require participants to negotiate meaning, conversations can indeed promote socio-cognitive progress (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Long, 1983; Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998; Chapelle, 2004).

To attain these learning outcomes, research has shown that conversations have to satisfy certain criteria. They need to be part of a constraining task: typically, a group of learners might be asked to address a problem then reach a negotiated consensus. Synchronous tutorial platforms can offer such opportunities: they are structured so as to allow learners to negotiate in groups online (through the use of ‘grouping’ tools and ‘breakaway rooms’), to respond individually (by text-chat or audio) or collaboratively (with written documents and graphic objects co-created during the interaction). Multimodal platforms, which provide group-management tools, and written as well as aural/oral facilities, are thus of great interest to language teachers and they are gradually being adopted in language courses as vehicles for conversation practice around language tasks.

RESEARCHING LANGUAGE LEARNER EXCHANGES IN TECHNOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENTS

However, teachers as well as researchers often fail to take proper account of the nature of the new environments in which exchanges occur. For example, noting teachers’ preference for linguistic communication over other means available in such environments, Karabulut and Correia (2008) judiciously warn them that “if not carefully designed, web-based videoconferencing sessions may turn into mediocre lectures because not full advantage of the medium is taken. Converting in-class interactions into synchronous environments requires extensive design considerations” (Karabulut & Correia, 2008, p. 481).

Concerning researchers in the computer-mediated language-learning community, with some exceptions to which we return below, they have drawn from online learner data in order to investigate aspects of the language acquisition and socialisation processes, rather than examine the online learning event as a whole. For example they have studied group dynamics (Vetter & Chanier, 2006; Reffay & Chanier, 2003), task design (Rosell-Aguilar, 2005; O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Hauck & Youngs, 2008), affective variables (Payne & Whitney, 2002; Hauck & Hurd, 2005), fluency and accuracy (Xiao, 2007) and “electronic literacy” (Helm & Guth, 2010). This literature asks to what extent the tools help or hinder the pedagogical processes that are accepted as the most effective for language learning. However, in its often stated concern – with which this author sympathises – to avoid technology-centered interpretations of human learning, it focuses away from the materiality of the hardware and software, failing to heed Kress’ (2003) advice to see “the material stuff” (Kress, 2003, p. 32, original emphasis) that surrounds us as a resource for making meaning,
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