Internet Language

Pragmatics faces a challenge in relation to computer-mediated communication (CMC: *see* Herring 1996). 'Classical' pragmatics evolved primarily in a context of spoken language interaction (as suggested by such terms as '*speech acts*' and maxims such as 'Do not *say* what you believe to be false'). CMC maintains the emphasis on interaction, but the criteria which define the nature of face-to-face **conversation** do not apply, and the technology permits and motivates new kinds of interaction. As a result, several principles of pragmatics need revision if they are to take into account what actually happens when people communicate through computers.

In many modes of CMC – notably email, chat, bulletin boards, blogs, and most website correspondence – communication does not take place in real time, and so lacks the simultaneous feedback which is critical to the success of face-to-face interaction. Even in so-called 'instant' messaging, there is a lag before a reaction to a message is received. Only in audio CMC (such as Skype) or video CMC (such as iChat) do we get anything resembling a traditional conversation; and even here, audio lag and picture breakdown is routine. One does not, in everyday conversation, see the body of one's interlocutor fragment into a thousand pixels when it moves! The linguistic result of this new state of affairs is

that senders have to make their messages more unambiguous, looking out for ambiguity or unintentional tone, and avoiding conventions which are likely to be misunderstood (such as using CAPITALS, which will be perceived as 'shouting'). Receivers have to revise their expectations, understanding the constraints which have led messages to be typed in unconventional ways, often using nonstandard spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, heavy **ellipsis**, and novel expressions, such as emoticons (Baron 2000; Crystal 2004).

Face-to-face conversation is typically one-to-one; and where there are several listeners it is not possible to take in and respond separately to simultaneous multiple responses. By contrast, in CMC modes, interaction is often one-to-many, and multiple responses are the norm (Davis and Brewer 1997). In a chatroom, members simultaneously send their own messages and comment on messages sent by others. The messages arrive on screen in unpredictable ways, with semantic threads interweaving; and varying time-delays ('lag') from different computers can cause disruption to normal turn-taking expectations (Hutchby 2001). A message on Topic A from one member can appear on screen when most other members have moved on to Topic B or C. To manage all this, new strategies and states of mind need to be devised. Senders may have to explain which message they are reacting to. Receivers have to relax their expectations of relevance.

Even if only two people are involved and there is no lag, turn-taking notions (such as adjacency-pairing) have to be revised. A typical sequence in an instant messaging dialogue is:

P makes point A
P makes supplementary point B
Q responds to point B (Q1)
P makes supplementary point C
Q responds to point A (Q2)
Q responds to point C (Q3)
P responds to Q1

and so on. It is a kind of interaction which has no precedent, and which requires both sides to work out appropriate reaction strategies. For example, a Q response to P might be being typed while seeing a new point from P coming

up on screen. Q has to decide whether to send the message being typed or to rewrite it because P's remark has made it redundant. If Q sends it without change, both parties need to tacitly recognize that it is no longer relevant.

Anonymity has a great deal to do with the distinctive pragmatics of CMC. This is not the first medium to allow anonymous interaction, but CMC is certainly unprecedented in the scale and range of situations in which people can hide their identity, especially in chatgroups and forums, where it is routine to use nicknames ('nicks') and hide personal characteristics such as age and **gender** (Wallace 1999). Operating behind a false persona seems to make people less inhibited: they may feel emboldened to talk more and in different ways from their real-world linguistic repertoire. They must also expect to receive messages from others who are likewise less inhibited, and be prepared for negative outcomes. There are obviously inherent risks in talking to someone we do not know, and instances of harassment, insulting or aggressive language ('flaming'), and subterfuge are common (Cherny 1999).

Multiple and often conflicting notions of truth therefore co-exist in Internet situations, ranging from outright lying through mutually aware pretence to playful trickery. It is of course possible to live out a lie or fantasy logically and consistently, and it is on this principle that the games in virtual worlds operate and the nicknamed people in chatgroups interact. But it is by no means easy to maintain a consistent presence through language in a world where multiple interactions are taking place under pressure, where participants are often changing their names and identities, and where **cooperative principles** can be arbitrarily jettisoned. In Gricean terms, all basic principles are disturbed (Grice 1975).

The **maxim** of quality is disturbed by 'spoofing' – an unattributed utterance introduced into a chatroom conversation by one of the participants (in a game, sometimes by the software) in order to disrupt proceedings. The result can be a fresh element of fun injected into a chat which is palling, with everybody knowing what is going on and willingly participating. Equally, because spoofing can confuse other participants, many groups are critical of it.

Because there is no way of knowing whether the content of a spoof is going to be true (with reference to the rest of the conversation) or false, such utterances introduce an element of anarchy into the cooperative ethos of conversation. A similar problem arises with 'trolling', the sending of a message (a 'troll') specifically intended to cause irritation to others.

The maxim of quantity can be undermined. At one extreme there is 'lurking' – a refusal to communicate. 'Lurkers' are people who access a chatgroup and read its messages but do not contribute to the discussion. The motives include a new member's reluctance to be involved, academic curiosity (researching some aspect of Internet culture), and voyeurism. 'Spamming' typically refers to the sending of a single message to many recipients, producing electronic 'junk mail', or the sending of many messages to one user, as when a group of people electronically attack a company's policy. Either way, people find themselves having to deal with quantities of unwanted text (Stivale 1996).

The maxim of manner can be challenged. Contributions should be orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and **ambiguity**. Brevity is certainly a recognized desideratum in most CMC interactions, in terms of sentence length, the number of sentences in a turn, or the amount of text on a screen. In chatgroups, however, there can be an extraordinary degree of disorder, chiefly because of the way participants are all 'talking at once', which can make interactions extremely difficult to follow. And although web page designers constantly affirm the importance of 'clear navigation' around a page, the amateurishness of many web pages means that the manner maxim is repeatedly broken.

The maxim of relevance – that contributions should clearly relate to the purpose of the exchange – is also undermined. What is the purpose of a CMC exchange? In some cases, it is possible to define this easily – a search for information on a specific topic on the Web, for example. In others, several purposes can be present simultaneously, such as an email which combines informational, social, and ludic functions. But in many cases it is not easy to work out what the purpose of the exchange is. People often seem to post messages not in a spirit of real communication but just to demonstrate their electronic presence to other members of a group – to 'leave their mark' for the world to see (as with graffiti). From the amount of topic-shifting in some forums we might well conclude that no subject-matter could ever be irrelevant. The notion of relevance is usually related to an ideational or content-based function of language; but here we seem to have a situation where content is not privileged, and where factors of a social kind are given precedence. Incorporating new functional dimensions of this kind is one of the many challenges facing pragmatic theory.

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See also: Conversational turn-taking; cooperative principle; electronic health discourse; Grice, H.P.; maxims of conversation

Suggestions for further reading

Crystal, D. (2006) *Language and the Internet*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maricis, I. (2005) *Face in Cyberspace: Facework, (Im)politeness and Conflict in English Discussion Groups*, Acta Wexionensia 57/2005, Vaxjo, Sweden: Vaxjo University Press.

Wallace, P. (1999) *The Psychology of the Internet*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.