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MARGARET RASULO

# LANGUAGE FIRST

*Analyzing Online Discourse*





*Proprietà letteraria riservata*

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## INTRODUCTION

*What amazed me wasn't just the speed with which we obtained precisely the information we needed to know, right when we needed to know it. It was also the immense inner sense of security that comes with discovering that real people... are available, around the clock, if you need them.*

(Howard Rheingold)

The last decade has witnessed a phenomenal growth of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), generally defined as verbal, visual and audio discussion that takes place using computers and similar Internet-based devices (Walther 1996; Thurlow *et al.* 2004). This type of communication began as far back as the 1970s (Herring 1994), and has continued to expand with the widespread use of digital and wireless technology which has “pumped up collaboration, making it mobile and personal” (Baltzan, 2009: 4). Over the past thirty years, research studies have progressively intensified their focus on CMC, clearly owing to the rapidly changing nature and availability of its domains such as social networking and media-sharing sites as well as more traditional editorial products radically transformed into digital formats such as e-books, online magazines and newspapers (Baym 2010; Turkle 2011; Androutsopoulos 2014). The ultimate aim of these perennial emerging genres is to share and disseminate human communication in the form of a vast body of knowledge that is accessible worldwide (Norris 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Along with the changing landscape of contextual factors, online communication that occurs by means of one or more networked digital technology systems (Lee and Oh 2015) has transformed its text-only communication modes into rich multimodal channels that are pervasively present in everyday life. To date, there are numerous accounts of the

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<sup>1</sup> Norris, Ashley. Retrieved from: <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/617/computer-mediated-communication-and-globalization-considering-social-academic-and-business-factors>. Last Accessed November 9, 2017.



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various uses of CMC whose features have developed from what can be described as the move from first to second generation infrastructure. First generation CMC relied heavily on the language-based modes that mainly featured email, chat, mailing lists and discussion forums, all of which depended on the technological affordances and infrastructure of the time. Androutsopoulos describes it as the era of CMC under the influence of technological determinism (2014). The lack of nonverbal contextual cues in this pre-networked modality was by far CMC's critical disadvantage compared to communication occurring Face-to-Face (*FtF*) and one of the most demanding challenges of second generation models, which currently feature photos, avatars, audio, graphics and video, and tend to focus more on the degree of social presence conveyed by these applications in generating participant involvement (Walther 2011).

Against this backdrop, the role of research in approaching online language use is also up against a number of predicaments owing to the unceasing development of CMC contexts and modalities, and this constitutes one of the reasons why current scholarship in this field is situated in the area that focuses more on the role of language in carrying out its role in constructing both individual and group identity. Androutsopoulos in 2006 already had a very clear idea of where research in CMC was going and described it as "a shift of focus from medium-related to user-related patterns of language use" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421), whereby a variety of group-practices is brought to the centre of attention. This implies that language will always take center stage in online communication, but the focus is now on how the medium's contextual factors, once freed from the technological restraints of the past, contribute greatly in creating, forging and asserting the online persona (Turkle 2011).

Having said that, the consideration to make is that advanced CMC, as it is conceptualized in this study, within these more flexible and accommodating environments requires the engagement of three main factors that need to work together, namely the technological, the social and the contextual, in order to "shape computer-mediated language practices and the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421).

The contextual factor is this study's main focus as it constructs its investigative process on the notion of community and its scaffolding features that generate communication among participating members and, consequently, on the behavioral practices that are part of the interaction that takes place in this shared space. The focus is also on the context that



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hosts this community interaction, the discussion forum, a largely text-based environment that is also responsible for generating and informing research into more multimodal-based contexts of online communication. Community is by far the necessary structure that best displays instantiations of online discourse, and it is within this long-standing traditional space that the dynamic activity of sharing comes to life through the creative and unique use of language.

In support of this view is, once again, the aforementioned shift of recent CMC research which has turned its attention to the multimodal channels that have, indeed, increased social presence and identity representation (Bryant *et al.* 2006; Hu *et al.* 2004; Nastri *et al.* 2006), but have also attenuated specific investigation into the workings of verbal language online. In determining the degree of personal involvement and self-disclosure as well as the diversity of the process of identity formation, analysis of online talk should look primarily into the meaning-making resources of language as these mechanisms provide the necessary understanding of how other resources are introduced to enrich communication scenarios.

In this study, robust evidence of the multifaceted use of language in online communication is provided by the participants contributing to mainly asynchronous discussion forums. As explained in more detail in the two sections and the eight chapters of the book, the study of how language works in these discussion forums is the key to the understanding of what people actually say online, how they say it, and the consequences of the message that is conveyed.

Section One comprises four chapters and is dedicated to the discussion of the changing and developing nature of CMC. Beginning with Chapter One, the concept of CMC is discussed in relation to today's world dominated by social networking sites. By looking into the past of CMC, the investigation focuses on its new conceptualizations as language rather than a series of texts, and as space rather than place. The issue of identity is also introduced in this chapter and developed further on in the book.

Chapter Two is an initial presentation of the collected corpus, and its division into two sub-corpora, for the purpose of formulating research hypotheses and subsequent questions.

Chapter Three is dedicated to the concept of community as it is the defining feature of the two groups whose discussions and interactions come to life within this environment. Language performs at its best when employed in building community belongingness, and it is through this tool that participants share their common interests, goals and achievements. The



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reasoning behind this is that community, as argued and sustained throughout the book, is animated essentially by verbal language, by discussion, and then by other tools such as images, sound and graphics. Some community types are also listed in this chapter, and the features that transform a randomly-organized group into a community are briefly discussed. The chapter also defines the term ‘discourse’ by looking at the similarities and differences between online and *FtF* modalities. Subsequently, some characterizing features of the kind of discourse that qualifies a discussion board are provided as this is the space in which the two online communities in this book interact.

There are a number of methodologies that are used to effectively unravel the intricacies of online communication, particularly those that are featured in written-to-be-spoken texts such as those posted on discussion forums. Chapter Four introduces an in-depth discussion regarding Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis or CMDA, a valid methodological tool that calibrates the affordances of more traditional methods of analysis, and used in this study for the scrutiny of online behavior. The framework of analysis illustrated in Table 4.3 is an adaptation of the all-encompassing principles of CMDA (Herring 2001).

The findings of this research study are progressively introduced in all the four chapters of Section Two. The discussion undertaken in Chapter Five essentially explains the comparative method employed in the analysis of the data extracted from the interactions of this study’s two groups of participants; a discussion which then continues in Chapter Six. Both of these chapters explain the process of creating two sub-corpora of messages, but they also discuss the extent to which participation percentages are representative of online behavior and therefore of individual and collective identity formation within a community environment. In addition, Chapter Six discusses the formation of a typology of role definitions. Particular attention is also placed on the role of cultural diversity in relation to online behavioral differences.

The linguistic analysis, which includes the quantitative component conducted by using a corpus-assisted software tool, is the point of discussion in Chapter Seven. This chapter specifically concentrates on the structure of language and its discrete elements such as typography, orthography and punctuation, as illustrated in the analysis framework in Table 4.3.

Chapter Eight presents the interactions of both groups by adopting a qualitative approach though which online behaviors are analyzed week-by-week for the purpose of conducting a final comparative analysis (Strauss *et al.* 1994).



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Chapter Eight ends with the analysis of CMC as conversation, where turn-taking issues are particularly addressed in terms of how these are manifested in online discourse.

Results are reassembled in the Conclusion. By highlighting the effort of pursuing community formation on the part of the two groups, the role of language in generating and sustaining this social process is brought to the forefront, thus reclaiming the pivotal role of verbal language in online communication.



