Chapter 5

Ludicity and Negotiated Meaning in Internet Chat

Rivka Niesten and Roland Sussex

The language used in Internet chat constitutes a large body of language data-in-use, and one which is notorious for its asystematic, irregular, creative and unstable characteristics. There have been some studies of the formal irregularities of Internet chat language, and of its exercise of humour in different modes. There has, however, been less work on language play and playfulness in Internet chat — ludicity in the sense advocated by Crystal (1998) and Sussex (2004). The exercise of creative playfulness with language involves not only the forms of language, but also speech acts, aspects of interactive language use and competitive interaction in the chat environment. Such language play can be its own justification, or it can be directed to the social manipulation of group membership in chatline communities. Ludicity offers a framework for the investigation of patterned behaviour in Internet chat.

1 Introduction: Conversation and Internet Chat

Negotiation of meaning in face-to-face conversations belongs to the area of conversation analysis, an outgrowth of the traditions of ethnomethodology (Goffman, 1981; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1972). Contemporary conversation analysis (Ten Have, 1999) has made major progress in areas like turn taking, theme development and tracking, adjacency pairs, openings and closings, and speech acts. This research depends on a coherent, synchronous interactive environment with acceptably low levels of noise — in the communication theory sense of factors potentially interfering with interactive efficacy. Synchronous environments can be either face-to-face or remote, and either audio or video, for instance via telephone or radio, or audio or video teleconferences. But in either case they involve interactions in real time, with appropriate linearity of contributions and content. In other words, even where speakers interrupt each other, or where there may be more than one speaker
contributing simultaneously to the conversation, the coherence of the interactions is sufficient to sustain continued contributions. If not, the contributions tend to fall away, and the conversation peters out, or changes course or topic.

This relatively orderly organization takes on a different perspective in Internet chat (“IC”). Conventional wisdom has it that IC is a poorer medium. While this is inevitably true to some extent in the absence of face-to-face contact, IC has a number of ways of working with, exploiting and compensating for the factors which, we argue, are closely associated with ludicity. The differences between face-to-face and IC communication can be described on a number of dimensions:

- IC is a written, typed medium, limited by the speed of typists, networks and servers.
- IC is only weakly synchronous (Hutchby, 2001). IC contributions are usually sent to the server for distribution to the other chat members only when the writer presses the RETURN key to dispatch what is usually a line of text, though in some systems like Hotline the limit may be as much as 2049 characters.
- IC is not live, either physically, or in audio or video terms. Participants therefore miss most of the non-verbal content of the contributions, which some researchers have claimed are between 65% and 90% of the total information (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967; Mehrabian & Wiener, 1967). In spite of the use of emoticons (smileys) and such devices, which are specific to and characteristic of IC, the overall interactivity of IC is less rich than that of real-time conversation. Conventions of interaction, relevance (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1995) and turn taking which are broadly followed in face-to-face and real-time interactions are not as relevant in IC, but important compensatory practices do exist.
- IC contributions are displayed in order of receipt by the server. This means that multiple participants may display their contributions in parallel, in chronological order of receipt at the server, but not in chronological order of transmission by the contributors.
- This means that threads can overlap, and multiple threads can be running at the same time, or that a new thread may be launched before a currently running thread is brought to a proper conclusion.

All these factors show that the negotiation of meaning in IC is a rather different activity from what happens in synchronous face-to-face interactions. They also help to differentiate IC from Instant Messaging, a (usually) one-to-one real-time interactive version of email; and SMS, again a usually one-to-one interactive conversation, but limited by slower input rates from the cell-/mobile-phone keyboard, and by slower response times. This makes it only weakly synchronous, though advances in bandwidth are making this genre converge to some extent with IC.

Attempts at the analysis of IC texts have tended to focus on the ways in which IC deviates from face-to-face practice in synchronous conversations: for instance, in discussions of topic persistence and decay, and multiple topic overlap (Herring, 1999; O’Neill & Martin, 2003; Riffel, 2003). We also find treatments of multiple concurrent participants,

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1“IRC” or “Internet Relay Chat” is strictly speaking the name of the software developed by Jarkko Oikarinen in 1988. These terms are sometimes used in a generic way to refer to quasi-synchronous Internet chat interactions. We separate the two by using “IC” as the generic term. The data in this paper comes from a corpus collected from the Hotline IC environment (Niesten, 2005).