Figurativeness as a feature of online linguistic behaviour: an example from BBC News Facebook comments

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Abstract: The article describes the results of a study investigating the behaviour of the users of one of the most popular social networking sites, namely Facebook. Specifically, it focuses on their treatment of Grice's Conversational Maxims and Cooperative Principle – elements of the major theory accounting for figurativeness in language. The author analyses comments published under four pieces of news posted on BBC News Facebook profile. Prior to the description and analysis of the study, a brief overview of Grice's theory of Conversational Implicature and the features of CMC as a communicative medium is presented.

Introduction

Communication has always been a dynamic phenomenon, initially taking place directly, face-to-face, using words and gestures. With time, it has evolved and developed more advanced forms. The 20th century also witnessed rapid changes in human communication mainly thanks to technological developments and the so-called communication technologies. What seems to be crucial in this respect is growing popularity of the communicative use of computers, which allow such forms of interaction as chats, forums and social media platforms.

Scholars try to keep up to date with those changes and describe new phenomena. Computer-Mediated Communication has also attracted their attention, which results in emergence of such research fields like Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) developed by Susan Herring [1,2]. Research in these fields are of pragmatic nature since they focus on language used in a specific context.

The aim of this article is to present the results of a study which tested the usefulness of one of the most influential pragmatic theories, namely Grice's theory of Conversational Implicature [3], to analyzing interactions that take place in a unique context of social media. Special attention is going to be paid to the figurativeness used in them.

Theory of Conversational Implicature as a tool to investigate figurativeness

The original aim of Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature was to explain the mechanics of communication. But some of its features suggest that it can be successfully used to identify and analyze figurativeness.

Firstly, according to Grice, the meaning of an utterance is more than just a sum of the semantic values of individual words. He emphasized the difference between semantic meaning, which is an abstract idea not precise enough for thorough linguistic analysis, and use, which is language used in communicational context. Bearing this distinction in mind, Grice tried to establish the scope of meaning, that is, draw the boundary between the meaning of an expression and its use in context, paying much more attention to the latter. That is why, he introduced the notion of conversational implicature, that is the meaning

that is not conveyed by semantic values of the words but is read between the lines.

Secondly, it needs to be remembered that the basis of implicatures are communicative intentions, the recognition of which leads to the pragmatic meaning of an utterance. The intentions are rarely conveyed linguistically and their recognition lies with the recipient of the message. The intentions in question are recognized thanks to "general features of discourse", that is the well-known conversational maxims and the cooperative principle [3].

The arguments presented above prove that Grice's theory is an appropriate tool for analyzing language from the point of view of figurativeness. However, it needs to be borne in mind that the theory came into being nearly 60 years ago, which means that it focuses on traditional forms of interaction. The aim of the presented research is to verify if the theory is flexible enough to be used in a new communicative environment, namely the Internet. As in many points of the research we refer directly to the unique characteristics of the virtual world, we believe it necessary to briefly discuss the features of the Internet as a communicative environment.

The Internet as a unique communicative environment

Firstly, computers do not offer such coherence of interactions like traditional conversations, where initiating turns (for instance questions) and responses are found in physical neighbourhood, forming the so-called adjacency pairs. Such structure means that the participants can control the interaction easily and plan their next conversational moves. However, in CMC the sequence of exchanges is very often disrupted. It stems from the fact that computer systems work in a linear way, that is, the utterances are shown on the screen in the same order as they arrive at the server. This causes problems for the users of multi–

participant internet forums, whose initiating messages are usually separated from the responses by a number of other posts that were sent in the meantime.

Another shortcoming of CMC is the lack of simultaneous feedback and contextual clues, which in a face-to-face conversation are conveyed through means such as body language and prosodic devices. In case of computer-mediated discourse (most types of it at least), meaning can only be conveyed through one channel, that is text. The fact that the participants are usually anonymous and invisible to each other is also of vital importance as it decreases the amount of shared knowledge among the interlocutors. The issues of turn taking and discourse management prove to be problematic as well due to the abovementioned factors, as well as the fact that computers use one way data transmission. It means that messages are only posted as wholes, not for example letter after letter, which, in turn, makes it impossible for the users to tell whether they are being addressed or not and to signal listenership and willingness to take floor in the conversation [4].

Another feature of CMC that is crucial for its communicative usefulness is the anonymity of its users. Social scientists who have been investigating this phenomenon established that the virtual world grants the so-called social anonymity, that is sense of being unidentifiable. As a result, the users feel free to experiment with social behaviours without fear of consequences which, in turn, may lead to anti-social and aggressive behaviour [5].

The features that have been presented above can be seen as a basic characteristic of CMC. However, it needs to be borne in mind that CMC is a vast area that can be divided into many smaller fields, each of which is worthy of research. The present study focuses on interactions taking place on a social networking website Facebook which, as we hope

to prove, can be seen as a unique communicative medium of the virtual world.

Material and methods

The data consists of a sample of comments posted on BBC World News Facebook profile referring to four pieces of news published by the BBC. The comments have been selected over the period of four days, one post per day. From the whole collection of comments referring to one content, a sample of eight was selected. The choice was not done at random as we were searching for the so-called conversational threads, that is the contributions that were logically connected to each other. Majority threads consist of initiating turns and responses to them but in some cases the threads were longer. Another criterion was the unusual form of the comment, for instance extensive length or non-standard spelling, which might prove to be meaningful to our analysis. Summing up, our database comprises 32 comments to four posts, most of which form conversational threads.

The data was analysed on two levels. First, each comment was evaluated with respect to the maxim(s) it may be flouting or violating. The crucial factor here will be the relation of the comment to the neighbouring contributions in the conversational thread, specifically whether any meaning is conveyed by means of conversational implicatures. Another factors that were taken into consideration are the negative phenomena, such as flaming ("aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels" [6]) and trolling ("A common phenomenon in online discussion groups is the individual who baits and provokes other group members, often with the result of drawing them into fruitless argument and diverting attention from the stated purposes of the group." [7]), that might be caused by the comment. Secondly, we focused upon the comments dealing with each Maxim separately. This part of analysis

will therefore be divided into four parts according to the Maxims.

Results and discussion

Maxim of Relevance

Paul Grice offered a very brief explanation of this maxim, namely "be relevant" [2]. Grice himself was aware of the problematic nature of this formulation, which leaves no space for such common phenomena as topic chance or digression. For the purpose of the present study we accept the definition of relevance offered by Susan Herring who understands it as logical connection of an utterance to the general topic of conversation on the one hand and the neighbouring utterances on the other [4]. However, such definition entails the division of relevance into two types – global and local, respectively.

Research conducted so far suggest that CMC favours weaker standards of relevance than traditional communication, which leads to frequent cases of topic change and decay [4]. Our study corroborates this conclusion since none of the four analysed topics was commented in a relevant manner. As the conversations evolved, the comments were becoming less and less relevant from the point of view of the contents, which eventually led to topic change. The transition could take one of two forms. The first one involved gradual shift of topic via loosely connected comments. An example is a conversation about films depicting the war in Iraq, which gradually drifts towards an argument about the violent nature of Islam as religion. The change takes place through comments such as (original spelling): "Islam is to blame for that war there was no Jihad at all just a handful of mentaly sick muslims taking there prophet muhamads words out of contex".

A different type of topic change is exemplified by comments under the information about the first

ever full term of office of Pakistani government. Here, the conversation did not switch gradually but abruptly, thanks to one irrelevant comment: "The people who will be commented against pakistan will be absolutely an Indian,, Pakistan is a great country with great people living there, it is only ruin by greedy and stupid wealthy people and neighboring country". After this contribution, the conversation became an aggressive exchange of views on the relations between India and Pakistan.

Another type of relevance that shall be examined is local relevance, that is logical connection of an utterance to the neighbouring contributions. To analyse this factor we must focus upon conversational threads that are included in our data together with the broader context of conversations in which they appear.

In a traditional conversation, individual utterances that form conversational threads can be found in physical neighbourhood. The analysed data seem to confirm the general tendency found in CMC to break the expected order by other, unrelated contributions. An example is a conversational thread consisting of 3 utterances. The first (an initiation) is separated from the answer by 13 unrelated comments. The response is still separated from the next comment in the thread by 2 more comments. The universality of this phenomenon is evidenced by the fact that out of 10 analysed threads, only 2 can be found in physical neighbourhood.

The conclusion that can be drawn at this point is that Facebook, similarly to other forms of CMC, accept lower standards of relevance than traditional communication. Another conclusion is that Facebook seems to value global relevance over local. We believe that the reason behind it is that the medium was not designed with the view to engaging the users in conversations (as IRC chats) but rather making them comment on the content posted by the second party. That is why

conversational threads are difficult to come by on Facebook and when they do evolve they are very short (only 3 out of 10 threads in our database comprise as many as 3 contributions).

Maxim of quality

Maxim of quality is connected with the truth of the conveyed information. According to its creator, people involved in cooperative communication cannot give false information, nor the one that cannot be proven [2]. In the virtual world, this maxim if frequently threatened as users, believing in the anonymity granted by the medium, can violate it in order to achieve dishonest goals. Examples of such behaviour have become so common that some have been given specific names, for instance flaming and trolling.

Facebook as a communicative medium seems to be unique in this respect as its users are not entirely anonymous because their contributions are signed with names and surnames. To use Christopherson's terminology [5] – they cannot have social anonymity for they lack technical anonymity.

In this context, our analysis of the comments connected with the maxim of quality focused on establishing the motivation behind breaking the maxim. If it was flouted in a way that was obvious for the interlocutor, we assumed that such behaviour obeyed the cooperative principle and, consequently, conveyed some non-literal meaning. If it was broken consciously, without any cooperative intention, such behaviour was classified as anti-social.

Out of 32 analysed comments, 8 made use of maxim of quality. Half of these aimed at generating conversational implicature. Let us consider one of these comments as an example: "Islam was the reason for millions of red indians killed, Million veitnamese killed, World war 1 and 2 Islam is the reason !!". Information conveyed literally is

obviously false as Islam is not responsible for any of the atrocities mentioned. However, on some deeper level, the reader is able to recognize the hidden meaning, which the author's frustration caused by accusations towards his or her religion.

The other half of comments violates the maxim of quality with the view to achieving dishonest goals. One example is the comment stating that "Islam is violent and hateful religion". The comment has a form of a slogan, which is just dropped without any context, explanation or evidence supporting it, therefore it cannot be said to convey any hidden meanings. However, the fact that it appeared in a conversation which is bound to be read by a number of Muslims may suggest that the author's intention was to infuriate them, spark violent reaction and, consequently, begin a flame war.

The analysis above shows that lower levels of anonymity offered by Facebook does not prevent its users from aggressive and anti-social behaviour. It may stem from the fact that even though the comments are signed with author's names and surnames, they still don't know each other personally, often come from different countries and backgrounds, which means that they have no problems cheating each other. The conclusion is confirmed by other studies, for example our own research described in [8].

Maxim of Quantity

Maxim of Quantity states that the amount of information conveyed should be neither more nor less than is required at a given point in a conversation [2]. Such formulation is problematic from the perspective of Facebook interactions as well as other modes of CMC that rely on typed text. Participants in face-to-face conversations have numerous non-linguistic means, such as prosody and body language, to convey very often crucial pieces of information and manage the discourse.

The virtual world very often lacks these channels, which resulted in developing numerous strategies to compensate for the lack of contextual clues. The major of them is redundancy, that is including those elements into the message. The strategy seems problematic, though, since it leads to the "Gricean conflict" [9] that is the apparent contradiction between using too much information in order to introduce context to the message and the Maxim of Quantity. The internet users, Facebook included, try to balance out both aspects by using various techniques and strategies that are the subject of the present part of the analysis.

The first strategy is quoting, that is repeating a whole or a part of the message that is being responded to. Such action would seem to be contradictory to the Maxim of Quantity as it entails repeating the same information twice, yet it is widely used to provide linguistic context to an utterance. Another advantage is that it restores broken adjacency pairs, therefore making the conversation easier to follow [4]. Quoting is used twice in the analysed data, but one quote came from the commented article (it was relevant globally) and the other was the words of another user (it was relevant locally). In both cases, the quotes served their basic function.

Another recontextualisation device that is present in many contributions in our database is naming the addressee of the message at the beginning of the text. The aim is to restore broken conversational threads and signal to another user that the message is aimed at him. A common way of introducing the addressee is to write his or her name after the sign @, which is read as "at". 9 Examples from our database feature this device, with another two having the addressee included in the main body of the text.

Next devices which are employed to supplement emotional elements to the contribution are non-standard punctuation, especially multiplied

question and exclamation marks, emoticons and abbreviations. Of all examples in our database, 6 employ the first device. When it comes to abbreviations, only one (LOL) was used to highlight the humorous character of utterance. What may seem surprising is that no emoticons were found in the analysed comments. We believe, however, that it stems from the serious character of the analysed conversations.

Maxim of Manner

Unlike other maxims, Maxim of Manner deals with the way in which the contributions are made rather than the content. In order to be called cooperative, contributions must be perspicuous, which means that they cannot be obscure or ambiguous [2]. It may seem, on the face of it, that the Maxim of Manner should be relatively easy to follow in the text-based environment such as CMC since written language is subjected to much stronger conventions than speech. However, the internet users are extremely creative when it comes to handling the written code and employ various means to overcome the limitations of the medium such as slow pace of interactions and lack of contextual clues. In this part of the study we shall investigate the ways of violating and flouting the Maxim of Manner together with the possible causes.

The first phenomenon that we would like to focus on is the so-called leet speak, which is defined by Blashki and Nichol [10] as communication code invented by the internet community which is based on English, but letters are replaced by numerals or other symbols that even remotely resemble them. Leet is an obvious violation of the Maxim of Manner as it makes contributions deliberately obscure and sometimes even unfathomable for less proficient users. There are a number of reasons behind using it, the major ones including the sense of superiority over less knowledgeable users and

hiding some information from them. The two instances of leet found in our database can be branded "mild leet", which means that they do not employ very sophisticated symbols, which, in turn, makes them understandable for other users. Therefore, we reckon that the users' aim must have been showing their proficiency and knowledge concerning the customs of the virtual community. In any other case, the code used would have been much more elaborate and understandable only to the select few

Another case of flouting the Maxim of Manner is capitalizing. According to the internet conventions, capitalising stands for shouting. Following this trace of thought, a conclusion can be drawn that such way of putting down messages is supposed to draw attention in a very busy, multi-participant conversation – an equivalent of using loud voice at a busy party. The analysed material contains two such examples.

Finally, the Maxim of Manner can be violated in order to make typing faster. It needs to be borne in mind that time efficiency is a thorny issue in CMC environment as typing nearly always takes more time than speaking. To compensate for this fact, the internet users apply wide range of abbreviations and alternative spelling patterns. The most common examples (7 cases in the database) are using letter "u" for "you", abbreviation "NK" for North Korea and small letter "i" for "I".

Conclusions

The presented study confirms that Grice's theory of Conversational Implicature can still be used to describe and analyse linguistic behaviour of the Internet users. It turns out that the unique features of the medium, however problematic they may seem from the point of view of the communicative usefulness, do not prevent the users from successful communication, which still fits neatly into framework offered by Grice.

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