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Pragmatics for online learning - communicative competence and learning technologies (0228)

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Language users learn how to interact in face-to-face settings by immersion – exposure to contexts, people, meaning functions and interactions in progress. Much of this learning is tacit. We are privileged as speakers and later as readers of our first language to engage passively with interactions and exchanges, watching experienced users conduct conversations, construct texts and negotiate speech acts and sociolinguistic complexity. Only after considerable experience do we venture in to the production of language, taking a role in interactions, contributing to dialogue, and constructing our own texts. Recent work on academic language and writing (e.g. Street 2009) suggests that developing as a writer within a subject discipline proceeds by a similar process of passive followed by active engagement in numerous and repeated 'real' settings.

This process of 'learning the rules' by observation followed by trail and error is known in linguistics as the acquisition of 'communicative competence' (Duranti 2009). The system of unwritten and largely tacit 'rules' which becomes internalised constitutes the 'pragmatics' of a particular language (Levinson 2001). All languages depend on systems of this kind, which allow speakers to communicate on the basis of sets of shared assumptions about the background knowledge, values and intentions of participants in a conversation, the kind of information which is relevant and available for particular exchanges, and the 'value' of contributions to these exchanges. Speakers also bring to every interaction expectations about how they will be treated, about the underlying purpose of contributions, and about the consequences of their participation. They are also in a position to exercise considerable control over their own self-presentation, both as they speak and as they listen.

Many face-to-face settings are relatively safe for learners partly because they offer opportunities to undertake very limited, brief and 'safe' participation especially at the early stages. In most cases it is possible to make a short contribution and receive immediate feedback of one sort or another. Even where this goes disastrously wrong there is often swift feedback, which may be delivered with an intention to save the 'face' of someone who is physically present in the same setting. Errors are also temporary and although they may be remembered, their actual content is 'gone' once they are spoken.

Participants in online interactions have learned how to learn the pragmatics of their spoken language[s] in such face-to-face contexts. Online interactions, by contrast, look deceptively simple. The volume of text contributed is far smaller, and the 'asynchrony' allows time to consider how a comment or response may be interpreted and to craft it into the best possible form. Similarly the 'rush' of non-linguistic cues encountered by speakers in face-to-face settings is simplified down to a screen, some text, and minimal, formulaic identifiers (an avatar, a screen name, some 'profile' information and possibly a signature).

This simplicity is deceptive, however. Online settings pose a wide range of difficulties for participants, in particular those who are new to *online interactions* and to *particular, established online communities*. Participants must decode minimal cues, and must work out whether similar cues carry the same weight in different situations. Anxieties over this decoding, or failure to make the right assumptions, can result in a failure of communication; at best the interaction can 'peter out' and at worst hostility, exclusion and bullying of

individuals can occur. Different online interactions may depend on very different pragmatic systems, and in novel online settings the pragmatics may evolve alongside the content of interactions.

In this paper I draw on two research studies. In the first, a group of academics and students with experience of online learning were asked to reflect on their awareness, understanding and application of tacit 'rules' for online interactions. This revealed a wide range of experiences, from the construction by individuals of explicit limitations on their online behaviours (e.g. over disclosure, topics to be addressed, and individuals with whom to interact) to various experiences of learning 'the hard way' and subsequent reflection. In these cases the difficulties invariably resulted from a failure of 'communicative competence' which would have easily been remedied in a 'face to face' interaction.

The second study involved the construction of a Facebook group for a particular discussion task between a group of academics. This was moderated by the researcher, who observed the development of discussions and the evolution of pragmatic 'rules' through interaction, trial and error, and observation. Participants were asked, after contributing to the group for several months, to reflect on their understanding of the pragmatic which operated and the ways in which they had gained this.

Some key issues to emerge include:
  * a tension between anxiety over participation and the need to participate *early* and relatively *frequently* in order to avoid invisibility or marginalisation.
  * difficulties arising from minimal cues and 'false cues' over how individuals will participate. For example, the presence of a group of friends can provide false 'network cues' when not reinforced by a physical setting such as a classroom or a social situation.
  * the problems which arise when an 'unlimited' online community is able to observe interactions of types and on topics on which individuals would embark very selectively in face-to-face settings.
  * the 'high salience' which becomes attached to written, permanent contributions when these are the main or only 'presence' of an individual in an exchange (what might be a 'throwaway comment' in a face to face setting becomes fused with individual online presence and identity). This is exacerbated by the asynchronous setting, when the 'weight' of any particular contribution by an individual cannot be judged.
  * the contested nature of the written language, and anxieties over this for individuals who find themselves using words to construct an online identity.

References
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