Properties and strategies of computer-mediated communication: a case study of a thread on a Croatian forum

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DIGITALNI AKADEMSKI ARHIVI I REPOZITORIJI

Properties and strategies of computer-mediated communication: a case study of a thread on a Croatian forum

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The aim of this paper is primarily to observe which strategies are used on a forum thread in order to maintain efficient interactive exchange of ideas, opinions and beliefs in a new medium. Research on computer-mediated communication is ample, and one area of CMC that research has focused on is how the properties of traditional written and spoken registers were renegotiated and reconceptualized in the framework of new communication technologies. We wish to see at this point in time, after decades of use of CMC and, of course, parallel scholarly work on the topic, what issues have been resolved regarding the affordances of the medium. Posts for analysis were extracted from a thread on the largest Croatian discussion forum. Visual cues, hyperlinking, quoting and editing are presented as the medium-adapted cues and strategies that help the users to maintain coherence, a clear succession of posts and high interactivity and dynamics of the discussion.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, discussion forum, written register, spoken register, emoticons, hyperlinks, cues and strategies, emergent register

Introduction

Extensive research has been conducted on the relationship between language and computer-mediated communication (CMC). The very properties of computer-mediated communication have made way for new conventions to arise that combine features of existing written and spoken registers and adapt them to the new setting. It is safe to say that the tenets of traditional communication have been transferred into this new type of communication, as the fundamental impulse still remains to communicate, to relay a message, to exchange thoughts, opinions, ideas, beliefs. The new medium has provided new space for human linguistic creativity and the users have again showed that we adapt the medium at hand to our communicative intentions.

Computer-mediated communication

Susan Herring (1999) claims that, according to most CMC historians, computer networks were predominantly aimed at data transmission, not social interaction. It could be said that social interaction has slowly risen to prominence, but nowadays what is almost automatically associated with CMC is social interaction, communication, exchange. Wherever one looks, various platforms of online communication are actively used and developed – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, etc. Computer-mediated platforms now have their mobile versions (adapted to smart phones and tablets) and mobile apps have developed desktop versions (adapted to personal computers)[1]. These various platforms are used for content creating, sharing and developing, from corporate brands, smaller enterprises to personal content created and shared by individual users. The very notion of user is at the same time simple and complex – users can be active in creating and sharing content, but may also be passive users in the sense that they only read, watch and listen to various contents on the Internet, and both types of users can be considered to be engaged in creating the large online community. Content varies, from textual to audiovisual input to a combination of these[2]. It is important to note that the term 'communication' has expanded as well – via online platforms we not only communicate in the traditional sense of exchanging written and spoken material/texts/data (i.e. personal letters, formal correspondence, formal and informal conversations are still relevant genres now mediated through a new medium), but we also have the opportunity to create and communicate ample content by sharing it on social media, YouTube, messengers, on various other websites. Content sharing has become a prominent property of online communication.

Properties of computer-mediated communication in relation to traditional written and spoken registers

One of the recurring topics in CMC research has been the explication of the properties of the traditional written-spoken dichotomy within this new

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[1]   For the purpose of this paper we will use the term computer-mediated communication because the focus of the analysis remains on what was primarily designed and has been developed as computer-mediated type of communication. Forum.hr is now available via a mobile version as well, but the fundamental properties have remained the same. CMC is not an outdated term, and it would not be incorrect to expand its meaning towards mobile and tablet technology as well. Were the focus of the analysis on communication via mobile messengers, then we would have delved deeper into the contrast in terminology.

[2]   Audiovisual input can be considered to be 'text' as well, but for the purpose of this paper it is important to have a clear distinction between *textual* and *audiovisual* input. The focus is not on the types of texts that are at disposal for the users, but on how the users adapt this new medium to their use and communicative objective.

communicative framework (i.e. Ferrara et al. 1991; Baron 2000; Segerstad 2003; Baron 2008; Kalman and Gergle 2014)[3]. The main activity of CMC is still *typing*[4], which is inherently still linked to the practice of *writing*. It is extremely important to note here that the point is not which one carries more weight in this dichotomy, writing or speaking, but that both registers are equally valuable, important and challenging not only for scholars, but for speakers in general as well. Speaking and writing carry properties and qualities that should be viewed within the respective frameworks regarding their linguistic structure, uses and objectives (Halliday 1994: 51-73). Writing and consequently printing have brought forth societal developments and progress in the sense that records of human activity and behavior have finally been made available, from formal institutional levels to everyday informal personal setting. Written register has its own properties that have been set out to comply with the communicative intention of the author, and the genre of the text, as well as the rituals and traditions of the community (Chafe and Danielwicz 1987; Biber 1995; Baron 2000; Biber et al. 2007; Biber and Conrad 2009). The main property of writing that we would put forth here is that it enables or rather permits *editing*, i.e. re-structuring the thoughts and the text that is being produced through erasing, rephrasing, elaboration. *Editing* means that even in highly emotionally intense contexts (should the context call for it) the author can reduce the affect in their text and use various pragmatic strategies to express affect in a straightforward, yet not as intense manner as their actual feelings on the topic are. *Editing* also means that the author can deliberate on sentence structure, on the choice of words, on the objective of their writing, on the audience/recipients. As Chafe and Danielwicz put it broadly (1987[5]):

> "When we speak we have little time to choose our words, and once we have uttered them, they have been uttered. If we are not satisfied, we may try to revise what we have said, but too much fumbling is harmful to effective communication, and in any case our fumbling is laid bare for all to hear. When we write, we can produce language at whatever pace we wish. We can take hours, if we need to, to find an appropriate word. And there is no need to remain committed to the first lexical choices we make. Whatever words and phrases we may initially decide on, we are free to revise them again and again until they satisfy us."

As opposed to writing, speaking is our primary activity in language production, often the result of an impulse to communicate and share opinions

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[3] For example, Segerstad (2003) studies the adaptation of written properties in CMC and concludes (2003: 233) that, among other, written language as used in the types of CMC analyzed in her dissertation (e-mail, chat, IM, SMS) varies from what is considered to be normative written language. Kalman and Gergle (2014) show that letter repetitions in CMC are unique "CMC cues" which reflect spoken language, i.e. they are a written emulation of a spoken paralinguistic cue (e.g. ''Yeeeeeeeeehaaaw!!!!!!!!!!'' or ''Whaaaas-sssupppp'') (2014: 187, 191). The properties of written and spoken language are both reflected and repurposed in CMC.

[4] Or *tapping*, to include touchscreen technology as well.

[5] No pagination.

and beliefs in or about a certain situation. This is not to say that speaking is devoid of all regulation, not only in the sense of using language structures, but conforming to social and cultural practices and traditions. Speaking is performed in a variety of settings as well, that range from highly informal to highly formal environments which in turn set out their own contextual regulations. But, the inherent property of *editing* in speech is not as prominent as it is in writing. When we speak to our friends or family, to persons we are close to and open with, our speech is often casual, not necessarily informative, but is rather an act of sharing, establishing and maintaining connection. If we are to speak in front of an audience at a conference or at a highly regulated event with a strict protocol, then we will surely pay close attention to the way we are speaking, presenting, holding a conversation, choosing appropriate topics, etc. – we will *control* 'the presentation of self'[6] by again employing a variety of language choices and pragmatic strategies to fulfill whatever objective we set out for ourselves, but which is also set out by the social rituals. Nevertheless, the most prominent property of speaking is the almost immediate response a person receives to their output, both in informal as well as formal contexts, which is in line with Biber's claim that "Most spoken registers are produced by individuals who are readily identifiable." (Biber 1995: 41). „Identifiable" should be understood here in the widest sense – the recipient is in front of us, we will hear the input, the language the recipient uses as well as the gestures, which may even precede verbal input. We can thus identify some aspects of the person in question. The speaker has a whole array of *signals* at disposal to interpret the reaction from the audience, regardless of whether it consists of one person or a hundred of them. The speaker can get an immediate positive or negative response, and in turn respond to it and engage in a (highly) interactive exchange. This exchange allows for overlaps, correcting one's own or other people's statements and arguments, and may depend on the actual physical setting as well as contextual permissions or restraints.

The overview of the writing-speaking dichotomy provided above is very simplified, but it does provide the basic properties, the most common elements that we use and act upon in written and spoken communication. But how do we translate, or rather how have the users of online platforms *translated* these properties into the new technological medium of communication? Computer-mediated communication has been around for decades, both in the sense of data transmission as well as social interaction. As humans need to communicate, it was only a matter of time to develop the communicative framework and regulations within this new environment. Of course, adaptations had to be made and rules renegotiated, but the underlying, fundamental principle and the drive were still the same. Communication flourished in the new environment and under newly formed conditions. As Ferrara et al. state (1991: 12):

> "When confronted with a new situation, people draw on **previous knowledge** of partially similar activities to form an amalgam. Similarly, it appears that competent users of language have an extended language

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[6] A deliberate nod to Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956).

repertoire, and when new situations arise, **they create new appropriate language varieties out of existing language varieties**: They form hybrids." (emphasis mine)

Ferrara et al. (1991) go on to develop the notion of the *interactive written discourse as emergent register,* claiming that "the IWD (interactive written discourse) may be the first type of language use to be studied to be both edited *and* interactive" (1991: 25). The properties of computer-mediated communication are, first and foremost, conditioned by the actual medium – computer networks. With time and new technological developments in mobile phone technology, the realm of computer-mediated communication has expanded and now subsumes smart phone technology as well, with its abundant apps (various applications developed for various purposes, among other communication). This in turn means that the medium itself had to be adapted to communication, and communication now pertained to neither the traditional written nor the traditional spoken register. The new medium enabled communication through *typing*, which, as stated above, traditionally constitutes the act of writing, but the new texts that were formed were not necessarily the traditional written genres. The new medium enabled written communication *in real time*, the key feature of the new, emerging form – speaking through writing, or rather speaking through typing. Written communication became synchronous in the sense that the responses were almost immediate. The responses were often being written simultaneously among a group of users and the phenomenon of traditional turn-taking developed into a new, renegotiated version. The fact that the communication, whatever called – written, spoken, typed, hybrid – was seen on the screen provided understanding in the sense that a user could go back and check the succession of inputs if there were misunderstandings. The new medium did not offer though the elements of spoken communication, i.e the combination of verbal and non-verbal cues that help out immensely in interpreting and responding to a message. Nonetheless, this did not prove to be an insurmountable obstacle – i.e. emoticons were introduced, first as very simple graphic representations (i.e :-) :-(:-/), and with time these have developed into a very prolific realm of communicative creativity which more or less successfully replaced the missing gestures and facial expressions in this new medium of communication. Another regulation at the level of overall communication has been created – yes, synchronous real-time exchange of messages has become the norm, but over time asynchronous communication, i.e. the lack of immediate response, has not been disregarded as bad behavior, but has rather become a norm on its own. For whatever reason, if the person is not able to respond to a message instantly (text, email), the medium enables it to be stored and viewed later, and then the person replies to it when they have the time. In an actual spoken conversation there is no storage in that particular sense. One cannot utter a message into thin air and expect it to remain stored there to be relayed to the recipient at a later time. However, there is no need for a messenger or a postman to deliver notes and letters. The message is stored on a server and waits for the recipient.

We would claim here that the medium was rather easily adapted to our needs and objectives. This is shown through a wide array of research into CMC that focuses on developments in adapting the medium and adapting language and communication (Ferrara et al. 1991; Werry 1996; Yates 1996; Baron 2000; Ling and Baron 2007; Baron 2008; Tagg 2009; Dürscheid and Jucker 2012). Whatever setbacks occurred, the users worked on overcoming these obstacles through mutual activity and interaction, by negotiating the conditions on the spot, in real time, transferring efficient solutions from platform to platform and dismissing those solutions that did not work.

Over time listservs, newsgroups, discussion forums have changed, their purpose reconceptualized, the community changed as well and various other platforms rose to prominence, primarily various messenger services and social media. CMC has to a certain degree become more 'spoken' in the sense of quick exchange of messages, the format of which has dismissed various regulations of the traditional written register and orthography while being adapted to the affordances of the medium – abbreviations, acronyms, writing in all small letters, lack of punctuation marks, diacritics, inserting various audiovisual input, etc.

This paper focuses on the exchange of posts on a discussion forum in order to see at this point in time how this exchange is performed, what rules and regulations have been set out and adhered to, and to see how the coherence of the exchange is established having in mind that when reading the material it does sound like a *transcript* of an actual spoken discussion among users/speakers, which is actually provided in writing by the users themselves.

The study

The study has been carried out on 300 posts taken from forum.hr. Forum. hr is the largest online discussion forum in Croatia, established almost 20 years ago and is still highly active, with users engaged in discussing a wide spectrum of topics. According to Gemius, a company that focuses on web traffic, forum. hr is consistently in the top ten active Croatian websites (users and visits; via PC, tablet and phone)[7]. There are currently six sub-forums (Society, Culture and entertainment, Lifestyle, Sport, IT and Miscellaneous). Each sub-forum has a list of relevant general topics (Society 23, Culture and entertainment 10, Lifestyle 10, Sport 6, IT 8 and Miscellaneous 7). Each general topic then has numerous individual topic-related threads. The most prolific general topics are Politics (over 4 million posts), Women's Corner (over 2 million posts) and Television (almost 2 million posts).

The 300 posts selected for analysis for this paper were taken from Women's Corner, from the topic thread *Nije mi jasno (životne misterije) XVII* (engl. *I don't get it (mysteries of life) XVII*), created in December 2016 (4th to 8th of December)[8].

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[7]   https://rating.gemius.com/hr/tree/domains

[8]   http://www.forum.hr/showthread.php?t=983997; XVII in the title means that this has been an on-going topic thread, which is at the moment at its 20th installment.

This topic thread was selected because it does not adhere entirely to the regulations of the forum set out in the first thread at the beginning of the homepage. The usual rule is that the topic of the thread should be maintained throughout the thread (the succession of the exchange of posts), wherein slight off-topic posts can be tolerated, but are frequently moderated and the users are asked to get back on track of the actual topic. The topic in question (further in the text as Mysteries) presents a succession of posts about a huge array of topics, in which users discuss whatever the current topic is, regardless of whether someone asks a question, or seeks advice, or just links their post to someone else's previous post because they wish to expand on it, or they found another topic of interest in that post and wish to ask further about it. The whole thread reads like an actual discussion or conversation. Topics are sometimes elaborated on, but at other times several topics can be rotated at the same time in a rather small number of posts.

In the 300 posts produced over four days over twenty topics were tackled, several in a very elaborate manner – beds and bed mattresses, book recommendations, self-help literature, hair and hairdos, volunteering, communicating with random people in everyday activities, behavior at concerts and in movie theaters, due date of one of the users, avatar of one of the users, reduced activity of one of the users, traffic circles, the origin of chocolates that the President handed out to children when visiting some school, cheerleading as Olympic sport, declension of the proper noun Lausanne in Croatian, cosmetics, shop assistants at cosmetic stores, Christmas in stores and malls, Advent in Zagreb, having kids without proper conditions for raising them, work contracts and work hours, charity associations.

The analysis will focus on the cues and strategies employed by the users in this exchange of posts, which hold the discussion together as it never descends into chaos and random intelligible exchange.

Analysis of cues and strategies employed by the users

Firstly, we will focus on *visual cues*, in this case emoticons and embedded pictures used for particular effect. Approximately 180 posts contained at least one emoticon. Emoticons are graphic signs or visual cues used to enhance the affective engagement of the author of the post (:-) or :-(or :-o). With the development of the medium they have developed into visual, often animated cues, the so-called emojis (i.e. ☺, 😁 🤔). Thurlow (2003[9]) sees emoticons as units in what he calls the sociolinguistic maxim of paralinguistic restitution, which serves the principle of sociality in the sense that emoticons redress the loss of socio-emotional features[10]. In line with this 'paralinguistic restitution' is Herring's description of emoticons as "compensatory strategies to replace social cues normally conveyed by other channels in face-to-face interaction" (Herring 2001: 623). It is interesting to note

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[9]   No pagination.
[10] Thurlow's paper (2003) addresses text messages (SMS), but draws an analogy with CMD as well (computer-mediated discourse).

that Herring only mentions „social cues" and does not explicitly introduce emotional or affective features of emoticon use. This is somewhat in line with how Dresner and Herring (2010) introduce a more focused explanation of emoticons, not as devices used for more or less paralinguistic input, but rather as conveying pragmatic meaning (2010: 250). Moreover, Dresner and Herring claim that there are some descriptions of emoticons which fail to account for a lot of their actual use (2010: 250). They claim that "in many cases emoticons are used not as signs of emotion, but rather as indications of the illocutionary force of the textual utterances that they accompany." (Dresner and Herring 2010: 255) For the time being, we will describe emoticons as visual cues that are used as intensifiers which better present the affective stance of the user regarding the topic they are posting on, or which can be used for comic effect, to ease the possible tension or to be more clear about the post, i.e. to circumvent any possible misinterpretation by others. For example, in post #33[11] the user uses the following emoticon:

> kako perete rukavice? kupila bih si debele rukavice (ne kužim se u rukavice pa ću opisati I to jadno ali nadam se da ćete me skužiti), izgledaju kao skijaške ali unutra imaju lijepo udobno toplo krzno I nisu baš tako jako glomazne kao skijaške a opet nisu ni kožne. e ali ja moram oprati sve prije nego obučem pa kako da to operem?

The emoticon shows a confused face. The user asks for advice on cleaning/washing instructions and is not sure how to proceed, so the confused face is there to clearly present this state of uncertainty, not an actual emotion. The post would work just fine without the emoticon, but the emoticon does not hinder communication, it intensifies the message – the use is pretty straightforward in relation to the textual proposition of the post.

In post #67, two emoticons are used:

> Ako hoces smijeh, Lawrence Durrell - Antrobus (u nas prevedena kao Pjevaci diplomatskog zbora)

> Tko je ono rekao da je film LOTR bolji od knjige?

Each emoticon follows the relevant part of the post. The first part is related to a book recommendation, with the emoticon showing a thumbs-up gesture, which can be interpreted as the author's sincere recommendation of the book. Again, there is no exact emotion shown here: the emoticon relays a positive reinforcement of the textual part and the gesture replaces any additional textual description of why that exact book is the best choice – thumbs up is enough of a positive emphasis. The second part of the post refers to someone's comment on the Lord of the Rings movie series being better than the book series, which the author clearly does not agree with. Without the emoticon this question could be read as a very straightforward question on who posed this question or such a claim because the author of the post might want to discuss the topic with him

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[11] Post numbers are in the top-hand corner of the post, see link in footnote 6. Numbers are marked by #number, i.e. #3.

or her. However, the emoticon which shows disbelief or dismay is what signals this clear disagreement. In this case, the emotional input may be interpreted or read from the emoticon, as the emoticon does reveal negative surprise.

In the following example the post is a direct answer to a quote (post #26):

(quoted[12]) *The expanse je i odlicna tv serija, za one cudake koji ne vole citat!*
+1
Jedva cekam novu sezonu

The author of the post agrees with another user on the topic of a TV series and expresses agreement both verbally (*Can't wait for the new season),* through the use of the high-five emoticon as well as by using the item '+1', which is shorthand for 'I agree with you.' (or 'I'm in.', depending on the context.) Again, the emoticon does not exactly convey a concrete emotion, rather a general positive disposition; it sets a positive friendly context.

Another post uses several emoticons to enhance the message (post #180), i.e. the description of a situation in traffic as response both to the current topic as well as to a concrete quoted post:

(quoted) *Kod nas se svasta i naziva rotorom* *onaj prometni uzas na ulazu u Vodice, recimo.*
"Rotor"
Raaaaaajt

Ja sam vidjela da na ovo na Lanistu/Kajzerici planiraju napizditi semafore *Koji je prometni strucnjak na tu ideju dosao?*

Idem jučer na posao, prolazim kroz jedan manji kružni tok(onaj kojemu je svrha valjda slična kao ležećem policajcu, da uspori promet) i u 6 ujutro baba, pješke, u pola kružnog Ono, vidljivost s te točke odakle je ona krenula u kružni je valjda kilometar, nemam kud s autom, nego u rotor.

Osim toga sam imao iznenađenje navečer, na križanju gdje glavna cesta skreće lijevo, 90% ljudi skreće lijevo prema gradu, ali ja samo prolazim. Stariji čiča naslobodno prelazi cestu, dok nije vidio da dajem desni žmigavac (dakle, idem u tu sporednu ulicu). Umjesto da stane, krene pretrčavati

Imao sam dva fantoma još, između dva sela, na neosvjetljenom području, jedan na biciklu bez ikakve rasvjete, drugi pjehe (ali to je bilo unutar zadnjih dva tjedna). Ajd, od ovog svega još i kužim ovog pješaka, ali ovih troje kao da prociraju da ih netko zvekne

The quoted post contains emoticons as well, but what is interesting to notice in CMC is that there is no fixed rule that emoticons require emoticons in response. Of course, one can argue that emoticons may elicit emoticons from the recipient, but it is not an automatic reaction and depends very much on the habits of a

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[12] My insertion. Please note that the medium *italicizes* quoted posts.

person and their own style in CMC. In this post it may have been the situation itself that called for the use of emoticons as intensifiers in the description of the situation that took place. The user could have used capital letters or profanities or both to express frustration and anger, but they selected emoticons: 😨 to show sarcasm (although :o usually expresses shock or surprise; in this case it is most likely used with a sarcastic tone), 🐞 to express frustration (the animated version on the forum contains a GAAH!! in block letters - 🐞) and 🤦 as the facepalm emoticon used to express complete disbelief or disappointment. The frustrated or angry emoticon and the facepalm emoticon do convey emotional input towards the actual situation that was described; the red emoticon conveys somewhat of a sarcastic overtone, and reads more as a pragmatic device than a signal of straightforward emotional reaction.

With regard to embedded pictures as visual cues only two were used, a picture of a cat and a picture of a traffic circle, as simple additional visual comments to ongoing topics.

We would therefore agree that emoticons do not necessarily convey emotions, but they also bring forth additional pragmatic meaning, or as Dresner and Herring put it (2010: 250), they indicate the illocutionary force of the textual message. In the examples above, not all emoticons show a straightforward connection between the text and the emotion implied by the emoticon – it seems like the emoticon sets out the overall tone of the post, or saves space so the user does not have to literally spell out the whole situation, but rather relies on the emoticon itself to convey the context, stance or feelings. What is more, Derks et al. (2008) claim that emoticons are more frequently used with close people than with strangers. This is a particularly interesting point if we consider our material in this analysis. The authors of these posts perhaps know each other, were introduced at some point, or remained anonymous. However, it is the actual community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), more precisely of discussion forum practice, the consistently communicated and shared contexts, views, beliefs and experiences that have brought them together. Again, we stress individual communicative styles as well, but it is rather impossible not to connect, minimally at least, with the community you communicate with so intensely.

Secondly, we will focus on the use of *external sources*. In total, 19 hyperlinks were used, i.e. hyperlinks were inserted in posts as additional metadata material that lead to other sources of information the authors deemed relevant for the topic of the post. In their paper on the DiDi Corpus of South Tyrolean CMC Data, Frey et al. (2015) emphasize, among other, hyperlinks as valuable enrichment of linguistic data. In line with this claim we find a related description in Beiβwenger and Storrer's account of compiling a CMC corpus (2008); with regard to hyperlinks, they explicitly state that "The reconstruction of the content of these resources may be important for the corpus-based analyses of the respective contributions." (2008: 298). The succession of posts was well understood in this case without clicking on the actual links as the links were usually briefly introduced. Nobody checks whether other users click on the link; there are no sanctions if the links

are ignored[13]. However, to reiterate Beiβwenger and Storrer, one should bear in mind that hyperlinks can be essential in reconstructing coherence relations in a corpus (2008: 299). The following example shows the opposite though (post #82):

> Kad smo kod CBT-a, meni je u mladosti dosta koristila ova knjiga: http://images.gr-assets.com/books/1391316844l/2222.jpg
>
> A ako nekoga zanima, stavila bi ovdje intervju sa dr Aaronom Beckom https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron_T._Beck
>
> ...ciji se rad na CBT nadovezuje na racionalno emotivni pristup i zacetak kognitivnog, dr Alberta Ellisa https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Ellis
>
> Dugacak je intervju, ali meni ga je bilo zanimljivo pogledati https://youtu.be/POYXzA-gS4U

This post provided both the links and the short introductions for each. One link shows an image and others are more elaborate content about authors of self-help literature. What is interesting to notice is that there was no direct reply to this post or to parts of it, but this type of behavior, as stated previously, is not considered to be rude, especially in a relatively quick, on-going exchange of posts. The post itself contains no direct question or request for comment on the information provided, it is more of a presentation of interesting topic-related content. What is also important to mention regarding links as sources of additional content is that links are not stable sources – they can be removed, or other content can be added to them, so if someone were to look up the links at a later point, it might so happen that the material is gone. This again is not regarded as disregarding the user or the communicative process, it is a common occurrence of the online medium. Users cannot be held responsible for such developments.

The next item of interest, or rather ***a strategy used to enable the coherence*** of the exchange is ***quoting*** other posts, i.e. quoting specific posts that the author is interested in, wishes to respond to or comment on them. Quoting was used in almost 200 posts of the 300 posts analyzed. This goes to show that users pay very close attention to the coherence and the clear flow of the discussion in question (in this case it may also have to do with the abundance of topics at disposal).

Users can quote only one particular post they wish to respond to (post #80):

> (quoted) *Probaj čitati Hobita, pa kad ti razrađuje obiteljsko stablo na 50 stranica, ne znaš više ko ti glavu nosi.* 😵

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[13] This is also pretty similar to actual spoken conversations. We do not pay the same amount of attention to every single thing, piece of information, emotion expressed, any minute detail within a conversation. We might follow up only on topics or information relevant to us at that given moment. A person can be tired, under stress or the actual setting might be noisy and not appropriate for a focused conversation; hence, we select what we focus on. Furthermore, there are people who talk a lot, who produce a lot of spoken content that is not easily associated, or where a thread is easily lost, and it takes a lot of effort to see the conversation through and respond to it.

Zapravo, Hobita sam probala čitati i odustati.
Odustala sam valjda od 15 knjiga u životu, zaista ću svašta probat pročitat do kraja, al nije išlo.

Nor is it uncommon to quote several posts in one post, from various users in order to respond to each (post #189):

(quoted) *Kod nas se svasta i naziva rotorom* 🌐 *onaj prometni uzas na ulazu u Vodice, recimo.*
"Rotor"
Raaaaaajt 😵
Ja sam vidjela da na ovo na Lanistu/Kajzerici planiraju napizditi semafore 🫣 *Koji je prometni strucnjak na tu ideju dosao?*

Semafore stavljaju na najveći rotor, u Remetincu 😵
na Laništu su manji, posipani ko da je neki dekorater imao par viška.

(quoted) *Jeste probali ovo Croatia Reads? Predobro mi zvuci da bi bilo istinito. Sva se najezim od srece na pomisao, ali se bojim prepustiti osjecaju* 🤕

jesi ti to vidjela? 🔴
pa barem da radi do pravoslavnog Božića! 🌐

Quoting other posts can be considered as a type of turn-taking, or rather, of what is traditionally observed and analyzed as turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). Herring states (2011: 2) that "It has long been observed that normal face-to-face (F2F) patterns of turn-taking are disrupted in CMC systems that transmit messages as wholes without moment-by-moment feedback, resulting in disrupted turn adjacency and overlapping exchanges (Garcia & Jacobs, 1998; Herring, 1999)." As seen in the examples above as well as the overall succession of the 300 posts analyzed, this 'disruption' is handled and resolved skillfully by the users. This *quoting strategy* is in line with McMillan's model of "mutual discourse" (McMillan 2002), which he posits with regard to the direction of communication and describes as a model of cyberdiscourse in which the sender and the receiver become virtually indistinguishable in environments such as chatrooms, bulletin boards, etc. as the two roles are performed almost simultaneously. *Quoting strategy* may also be, to a certain degree, compared to addressing participants in spoken interaction. This would not mean addressing in the sense of calling out the name of the other person, but rather as an explicit concrete reference to the actual words they said – i.e. "Hey, remember when you told me that you'd…". This may be irritating in an actual conversation as people often dislike having their words repeated to them or at them verbatim, especially if in a conflict or some overall negative affective situation. However, in a forum discussion *quoting* can be observed as a valuable strategy of sustaining coherence in the succession of posts in a thread and addressing a particular user in the group of users with a message aimed precisely at that person.

One additional interesting example is using the @ symbol to quote, or to be more precise, to address another user:

(post #92) **@velo**, vidi ovo

and

(post #86) **@xiang**, dobro ti je i na amazonu pogledati ako cujes/vidis za neku knjigu, imas onu opciju "look inside". nekad vec po temama u sadrzaju vidis jel bi te knjiga zanimala ili ti bilia korisna, pa onda procitas izvatke koji su dostupni i - voila!

In both posts, the aim was to address the two users, not necessarily by using a particular quote with their statements or questions because the concrete statement or question is not important and is implied in the answer that was given. The focus is on providing information for the two users. The @ symbol is used because it has become a relatively frequent feature in messaging. The symbol was first used on social media, or more precisely, this type of use of the symbol originates from Twitter. The combination @username is used on Twitter either as a reply or a mention, depending on the intention of the Twitter user who is doing the addressing (by replying or mentioning). The addressing function of @ then transferred onto other social media as well as other online communicative platforms.

Another strategy employed in order to maintain coherence to the topic is the use of *the 'edit' feature*. In the 300 posts in the analysis 'edit' was used five times. 'Edit' is clearly marked in the text of the post (posts 16 and 219 respectively):

Hvala puno!

Edit: uvalila sam se u govna vidim 😵 Prosječno jednom tjedno ću izgledat normalno 😵😵 Ili ću morat skorz promijenit uređivalačke navike 🎂

 Or,

Definitvno trebaju most do dva.

Edit: al niš ja to više ne pušim. Idu lokalni izbori pa ono.. i nama su tu cestu kakti počeli rekonstruirat, 3,5 km kroz jedno naselje a pričaju o kompletnoj rekonstrukciji kroz 2 naselja i političari su stalno na radiju, dok pouzdano znam da ovaj drugi dio nije u planu.

'Edit' may be explained as an additional comment or unit of information that the user considered to be important for the post and the message they wished to relay so they returned to the post and edited it (this procedure is, again, enabled by the actual medium). Of course, this 'edit' feature immediately reminds us of what was previously discussed in this paper (see pp. 82-86). The user may even remove the post if they deem it necessary. In speaking, there is no such option, what has been said is out there, but an afterthought or a side comment can be articulated and explained within the context of the conversation, as well as with reference to the particular point in the conversation.

And last but not least, we would like to mention an interesting example of a user explicitly intervening into a long succession of posts on one topic which she deemed to be too long, even within the framework of this "loose" thread.

The topic on book recommendations was, in her opinion, getting out of hand and she states openly that this feels like reading a separate topic that already exists about book recommendations (post #85):

> Kad čitam zadnjih par strana ne znam jesam li na misterijama ili na onoj temi gdje se preporučuju knjige.

The example could be interpreted not as a signal that the thread has become incoherent, but rather that it is losing the looseness envisaged for that particular thread. It is the rotation of topics, questions, advice, comments that makes up the thread; the looseness of the thread is realized through the explicitly permitted *off-topicness* that the moderators and the users agreed upon, as well as the strategies employed by the users to keep this dynamic going (the thread is now well into its 20th installment). This is all in line with Herring's claim (1999) that:

> "a concern for topical coherence is reflected in the organization of asynchronous discussion groups on the Internet.(...) The practice of 'threading' on Usenet, or sorting messages into a 'thread' based on the fact that they share **a common subject line** (...) defines discussion topics, albeit in a mechanistic way. In addition, discussion groups often have **'moderators' or 'listowners'** whose functions may include **seeing to it that discussion remains "on topic"** (..) These **structural mechanisms mitigate the tendency towards topical fragmentation in extended exchanges.**" (emphasis mine)

The explication of the example and the citation might not seem complementary at first glance, but if we read between the lines, it is exactly the underlying principle of mutual shared agreement that holds the forum thread as a whole. We are aware of the existing regulations and conventions, but they are not set in stone. Communication is, after all, a dynamic and interactive negotiation process among the participants. *Being off-topic* is a convention that the participants agreed upon for this particular thread.

Conclusion

All of the examples can be considered to be examples of **medium-adapted** or **medium-appropriate cues and strategies** employed by the users in order to communicate clearly, to enhance the messages created in their posts, to respond precisely to particular posts, and to intensify the affective input of their post. These cues and strategies have their equivalents in the *traditional* written and spoken register or rather, they are *translations* or *transfers* of particular cues and strategies already employed and in a successful manner. As stated previously, it was only a matter of time when and how these would be renegotiated, adapted and introduced in the new medium. The discussion forum was used as the source of data because it has presented very vividly the interaction of properties of written and spoken register as well as the relatively new emergent register that takes what it needs from both *traditional* registers either in integral form or adapted to its own medium and objectives. Furthermore, forum discussions do

resemble actual conversations to a certain degree, but in spoken communication a lot can be lost in the noise or glossed over. The actual medium of these discussions provides the interactivity and the dynamics of an actual conversation, but at the same time it gives certain stability and grounding exactly in the *written properties* it supports – posts can be typed and sent, can be edited while typing or at a later point, or erased altogether. The focus of the paper was not on more elaborate, almost narrative posts that are created on other threads on the forum, which in a way almost carry a confessional tone, or resemble a well thought out brief essay (clear arguments, logical succession, linking various credible sources). It is only a guess at this point, but these might lean even more into the written properties on all levels of linguistic analysis.

The regulations of the forum state that the posts are publicly available; forum. hr can be considered to be an overview of the social and cultural context it is embedded in, and the language through which these contexts are communicated and *performed*. In a way, it is a huge narrative that belongs not only to its users, but to the community and the society they participate in through this type of activity as well.

To conclude, computer-mediated communication is still an engaging and challenging realm of various research data, varying from linguistic to cultural, social, ideological issues. The technology is developing rapidly, various platforms for communication are still being developed, apps are launched by the minute, but the use and the survival of those are still in the hands of the users and their communicative objectives and intentions. Forum discussions, of general type or those more specialized collaborative forums, are both a stable and dynamic source of various linguistic, social and cultural patterns and models.

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Obilježja i strategije u računalno posredovanoj komunikaciji: prikaz teme na hrvatskom forumu

U ovome radu analiziraju se strategije kojima korisnici na forumu održavaju neometanu i uspješnu razmjenu ideja i stavova u relativno novome mediju. Računalno posredovana komunikacija već je dugo vremena plodno područje za različita istraživanja. Jedna skupina tih istraživanja usredotočena je na uporabu, rekonceptualizaciju i prilagodbu obilježja tradicionalnog pisanog i govorenog registra u novim komunikacijskim tehnologijama. Cilj je rada uvidjeti postoje li još uvijek nedoumice u vezi s konkretnom uporabom novog, nastajućeg registra i njegovih obilježja, uzevši u obzir čovjekovu jezičnu prilagodljivost i kreativnost kao i podatke i iskustva iz relevantnih istraživanja. U analizi je korišteno 300 postova (poruka) s jedne od tema na najvećem hrvatskom forumu. Vizualne oznake, hiperlinkanje (umetanje poveznica), citiranje postova i uređivanje postova glavni su mehanizmi koje korisnici upotrebljavaju kako bi ostvarili i održali koherenciju u komunikaciji, što jasniji slijed misli i konkretnih postova, kao i interaktivnost i dinamičnost same diskusije.

Ključne riječi: računalno posredovana komunikacija, forum, pisani registar, govoreni registar, emotikoni, hiperlinkovi, oznake i strategije, nastajući registar