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Pragmatico-Linguistic and Semiotic Tools in Analysis of Electronic Conversation

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Abstract:

In the paper I show that the tools of pragmatical analysis of face-to-face conversation can be easily used also and developed in researches concerning e-conversation.

CMC-studies researchers do not pay their attention on methods of pragmatics (here theory of conversation) probably because the Internet in its communicative aspect is treated as textual medium or hypertextual one, and because communication via the Internet is often seen as 'impersonal' (Wood, Smith [2005]). Users of the electronic communication channel usually do not see each other, hence there is no non-verbal communication between them – they send text messages constructed and displayed with the use of given software. Pragmatico-linguistic analyses have been developed in an area of philosophy of language (J. Austin, J. Searle, H.P. Grice) and psycholinguistics (H.H. Clarke) and those scientific disciplines did not (and obviously could not) deal with online communication/conversation, and they were out of the scope of interest of CMC-studies scientists.

Pragmatists analyse face-to-face conversation and in their concern there are 1) different contexts of such conversation (namely: linguistic, situational, interpersonal, cultural and cognitive ones), 2) processes of conversational negotiation of meaning, 3) presuppositions (hidden assumptions of conversation) and 4) the structure of conversation. The rich and complicated tools of pragmatics at first glance seem to be unuseful in any analyses of e-conversation in which interlocutors do not see each other and quite often do not know each other as well, and moreover CMC-studies researchers point to asynchronicity of electronic communication or conversation, that means existing of time periods between some sent messages. In other words in e-conversation a synchronical exchanging of messages is rare and there are some technological constraints that do not allow the Internet users to send their messages in e-conversation at the same time (whereas talking people can utter their sentences simultaneously): texts that are sent are displayed on screens in chronological way, one after one.

However when we take into account that 1) e-conversation is performed to reach the same goals as our usual conversations in real world, 2) in its textual layer and its informal shape e-conversation is similar to 'talking', 3) interlocutors themselves 'record live' their exchange of written utterances (e-utterances), we can try to reconstruct the structure of online conversation. Every interpersonal communication should have some elements that can be discovered no matter which medium is used by interlocutors in their communication process. Those elements are reconstructed by linguistic pragmatists.

And what about the impersonal feature of e-conversation? We can generally assume that there are some elements of nonverbal communication which belong to the set of meta-textual signs (emotional icons, gifs, pictures etc.). Those signs function more less as discourse markers but also

as short comments or remarks sent to receivers to 1) simplify processes of interpreting messages and meaning-negotiations, 2) weaken the communicational 'rawness' ('impersonality') of pure text. In netiquette when a user writes his messages using capslock it is common to interpret it as his 'shouting' online. When he 'floods' (sending lots of texts just to cover the screen when other users chat) it is treated as wordiness or even 'trolling' (disturbing/interrupting of communication). Interlocutors can change colours of signs etc. We should remember however that those iconic means are very poor in comparison with cues of nonverbal communication. It would be better to understand emoticons etc. only as meta-signs that are used by interlocutors on meta-conversational level and which express a sender's attitude to a message rather than to a receiver (in contrast to intentions that matter in any natural conversation and can be expressed with someone's mimic or gestures).

Since the 'non-verbal' layer of e-conversation is simply iconic, then it can be analysed by the means of semiotics. The sign :) does not make any communicative or interpretative problems for the Internet user, it is also one of the most popular (in its emotive function) icons which help a receiver of a message interpret the message accurately. We should bear in mind that although the signs like emoticons are not linguistic expressions at all, they are treated by interlocutors as necessary elements of e-conversation. In that way those signs can be apprehended as some kind of analogs of our eye or face expressions. But we should not see any analogies or similarities where they are absent. The whole meta-conversational layer of emoticons etc. is a highly conventional and arbitrary code, whereas in our ordinary talks the nonverbal layer is often quite natural which we do not have to learn before we start communicating face-to-face with someone else.

In pragmatics we distinguish following elements of the structure of conversation: 1) adjacency pair of utterances/sentences, 2) pre-sentences, 3) discourse markers and 4) grounding. Any conversation is possible when two people exchange each other one sentence at least – hence a pair of sentences is the smallest unit of conversation. Pre-sentences are to initiate a conversation or one of its topic, they also may establish a goal of the conversation (pre-requests, pre-invitation, pre-announcements). If a conversation is to develop fluently, dynamically, interlocutors during turn-taking use discourse markers to fasten or slow down a tempo of the conversation. The most important is grounding however, since any fruitful or effective conversation requires from its participants to make conversational moves on their common ground of cognition, knowledge, experience, beliefs cultural context etc.

The semantical and contextual spheres of conversation are not the end of story. Pragmatists say that every conversation has a hidden layer which is communicated but not expressed verbally. Even a speaker or a listener both make assumptions intentionally connected with uttered/heard sentences by them, thus every conversation is accompanied by some conversational inferences (performed by interlocutors) which deal with what is communicated 'between the lines', what is communicated 'at the back' of uttered expressions, what is unsaid but somehow communicated. The layer consists of presuppositions implied by the sentences exchanged during the conversation.

The presuppositions (accordingly to Yule [1996]) are existential, factive, non-factive, counter-factive, structural and lexical. Since our conversations usually refer to real people, things, events etc. we tacitly assume that referents/designates/states of affairs etc. of the sentence uttered or heard by us exist actually. Thus when someone says: *Dorothy lives in an exclusive block of flats in Krynica*, we tacitly assume (and these are the existential presuppositions) that 1) the Dorothy is a real person, 2) the block of flats actually exists, and 3) Krynica as a Polish town, as well. The factive presupposition here is that Dorothy really lives in that block. When we hear someone speaking: *I didn't know that Kate had changed her job*, we infer from the sentence that Kate changed her job (the factive presupposition). When someone says: *I dreamed about being a wealthy man*, we assume that the speaking person is not wealthy (the non-factive presupposition). When we hear: *If the Smiths had loved each other, they would not have divorced last year*, we assume that the Smiths did not love each other, especially last year (the counter-factive presupposition). When we ask: *Why hasn't Helen come to the party?*, our interlocutor assumes that Helen has not come to the party, because the structure of the uttered question itself implies such (structural) presupposition.

When we say: *Paul quitted smoking*, the expressions used in the sentence imply (the lexical presupposition) that Paul used to smoke some time ago.

Usually there are a couple of presuppositions connected or correlated with every uttered sentence, but there can also be such conversational situations wherein a sentence implies different presuppositions of the same type at the same time. It can happen for example when we use a verb which has different meanings in different co-texts and contexts – when someone says: *Tom has found the CD at last*, we can simultaneously draw conclusions (here the conversational presuppositions or entailments) that 1) Tom had been looking for the CD (in music shops, in the Web etc.) before, 2) Tom had lost the CD (during his tidying or removal to another house) until he happily found it. In the case of simultaneous implying different presuppositions by one sentence the way to find the right interpretation of the sentence is to get to know the contexts (especially linguistic and situational ones) which can help us eliminate inaccurate presuppositions.

The tools of pragmatical analysis of face-to-face conversation can be easily used and developed in researches concerning e-conversation, moreover, in CMC-studies we can find a few advantages that do not exist in situations of ordinary talks: 1) e-conversations are recorded by their participants themselves during communication (hence it is easy to use them as an empirical (and electronically archived) material for further analyses), 2) a researcher can easily observe interlocutors (as an anonymous chat user who does not participate in a given e-conversation) and they do not mind their being observed (in contrast to natural situations in which people do not want to be observed or when observed they talk artificially or stop freely talking at all), hence 3) there are no ethical constraints to such participant observation.

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