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The medium is the metamessage: Conversational Style in new media interaction

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In this chapter I demonstrate that the discourse of digital media interaction is characterized by written linguistic phenomena analogous to those I have identified as constituting conversational style in spoken interaction.

All the examples I present and discuss are of naturally occurring electronic discourse exchanged among friends and family. They were provided by students in my classes who gave permission for their use and who, along with the interlocutors in their examples, are identified (or not) according to their preferences.

That is, metamessages communicate how a speaker intends a message, or how a hearer interprets a message.

young people have a tendency to send and receive text messages while engaging in face-to-face interaction. Most of my peers consider it self-evident that an individual's attention is owed to the people present, and diverting attention to a handheld device is self-evidently rude. I also frequently hear the parents of teenagers or young adults express disapproval, incredulity, and distress because their children often fail to return phone calls promptly—or at all.

For many members of one generation it is rude not to return phone calls, whereas for many members of the other, it is rude to make phone calls in the first place.

A student in my class found evidence of a kind of cross-cultural miscommunication in an instant message (IM) exchange she had with her younger brother, who was attending a college situated midway between their hometown and Washington, DC, where Georgetown University is located. The exchange began when she sent her brother the following IM:

—Hey! So, I have an idea for President's Day Weekend!

Her brother responded,

—Oh God, you and your ideas . . . what is it?

The student did not react explicitly to her brother's use of sarcasm, a rhetorical device identified by Herring (1995, 2003) as more common in men's computer-mediated

communication than in women's. She simply went on to explain her idea: to visit him on her way home.

I'm gonna go home from Saturday to Monday, but what do you think of me coming to visit you on the way back? I can take the train and stay over Thursday and Friday night. We can do something fun during the day on Friday, it's supposed to be really nice out!

Her brother replied,

—Okay cool. Thursday is fine, but I have a club baseball tournament I'm leaving for Friday.

Her next message said,

—Oh . . . okay. Well we can get dinner and go out on Thursday then??

Her brother responded,

—Dinner sounds good. I'll pick you up at the station.

Her next response showed how she had been interpreting her brother's messages thus far. She, too, used sarcasm:

—Wow . . . good thing you sound excited . . .

Her brother denied that he had intended to communicate indifference:

—What? Sorry, sorry, I am. I am.

Not only had he repeated "sorry" and "I am" in his reassurances, but, more important, his actions communicated enthusiasm, as he called her repeatedly on the phone and talked about wanting her to meet his friends. Note the significance—the metamessage of enthusiasm—communicated by his choice of technology: the telephone rather than email.

This example shows that the siblings shared certain assumptions about new media use, such as the enthusiasm entailed by making telephone calls, but they differed in expectations of how enthusiasm should be communicated in digital discourse.

Herring and Zelenkauskaitė (2009), who found that women tend to use more nonstandard typography, including repeated letters and punctuation. Waseleski (2006) found a similar gender pattern in the use of exclamation points.

Example 2, provided by Kimberly, demonstrates how an enthusiasm constraint operates in digital media discourse among young women. It is a text message exchange between Kimberly and her friend Jillian, who had previously lived in the same dormitory. Jillian wrote,

—Hey so I haven't seen you the ENTIRE week and I reeeally miss you!

What are you doing tonight/tomorrow for meals?

Sorry I had to miss lunch yesterday!

Here is Kimberly's response:

–I miss you too!!!!!!!

R you going to Justin and Lance's tonight??

Slash wanna do din tomorrow??

I can't wait to catch up on life!!

In analyzing this exchange, Kimberly noted a range of enthusiasm markers, including multiple exclamation points. Even question marks were reduplicated. Kimberly observed, however, that these markers of enthusiasm were not meant literally. Rather, they are expected—unmarked in the linguistic sense. Had she not used them, it would have been marked.

When we discussed this example in class, several women commented that they regularly repeat the final vowel in the salutation “Hi,” so it reads, for example, “Hiiii.”

A single-i “Hi,” they explained, comes across as cold, even sullen.

One student reported that she had to tell her mother to please add “i’s” to her salutation to avoid this impression—even though she knew that her mother did not intend it.

Because reduplicating word-final vowels is *unmarked*, single vowels in that position take on negative metamessages for those who have become accustomed to letter repetition as an enthusiasm constraint.

Example 4:

This example demonstrates a use of intensity markers that is parallel to their use in service of the enthusiasm constraint. Example 4, provided by Jacqueline Fogarty, illustrates the use of enthusiasm markers in the issuing of an apology.

Jackie and a number of friends had gathered in order to go somewhere together. As everyone in the group piled into taxis, only Jackie was left awaiting a last member of the group, who had been delayed. Finding herself alone, Jackie sent the following (sarcastic) text message to a friend who was among the group:

–Thanks for waiting for Melissa with me thats cool

The friend responded,

–JACKIE I AM SO SO SO SORRY! I thought you were behind us in the cab and then I saw you weren't!!!!!! I feel soooooooooo bad! Catch another cab and ill pay for it for youuuuuu

The friend conveyed the sincerity and depth of her apology (either actual or represented—it is neither possible nor necessary to distinguish) by capitalization, multiple exclamation points, word repetition, reduplication of word-final vowels.

Throughout this example, the friend uses expressive spelling, capitalization, repetition, and reduplicated punctuation to send a metamessage of intensity along with her message of apology.

Example 5 shows the potential ambiguity inherent in a one-word text message. Fiona wrote the following description of the complex potential metamessages that she and her friends took into account when considering how to interpret a missive composed of a single word:

On Thursday evening, out to dinner with several friends, one of my friends, Lauren, received a text from a boy she was interested in that read simply: “Hey.” To which she wondered: what did he mean with “hey?” Did he really mean just hey? Was he checking to see if she was busy? Was he actually interested in her like she was interested in him? Was he bored? How should she respond—should she assume that there was something implied by his text, address the frame of the conversation, or just respond on the message level he had set up?

#### Example 6: An Electronic Link as Indirectness

Greg Bennett provided another example of indirect meaning interpreted, and possibly implied, by a common new media discursive practice: providing a link in the form of a URL to be clicked on. The participants in this exchange, a young woman and young man, were friends, but the woman was beginning to develop a romantic interest in the man.

One day, he posted a link on her Facebook wall to a YouTube video that featured a song with rather romantic lyrics. Pleased that the video seemed to imply that his interest in her was also becoming romantic, she sent him an SMS message saying, “Saw the video. Were you trying to say something?” He replied, “ummmm . . . i just thought it was a cool video. why?”

This reply brought her back down to earth with a thud. She concluded that she had misread his intent: he was not romantically interested in her after all. This example illustrates both the communicative potential and the inherent ambiguity of posting a link to another medium or message, such as a YouTube video—a form of indirect meaning that is particular to electronic interaction.

A linguistic feature of new media discourse that parallels conversational style in spoken interaction is relative **pacing in the exchange of turns** (mirrors the question of overlap. Overlap happens in texting too).

Elsewhere I demonstrate at length (Tannen 2005) that there are cross-cultural and cross-subcultural differences in pacing and pausing, and that these differences lead to mutual negative evaluations and frequent misinterpretations.

In the exchange of electronic messages, it is clear when a sender's turn has ended, but interactants must still decide how quickly to respond to messages they receive, and speed of response carries metamessages with regard to intentions. My students tell me that they frequently confer on the appropriate way to respond to electronic messages, and have advised friends, "Don't respond right away; you don't want to seem desperate." This advice is predicated on the assumption that a speedy reply indicates enthusiasm, and that when it comes to the delicate negotiations of romantic interest, too much enthusiasm equates with desperation. In the same spirit, a lengthy response time could indicate a lack of enthusiasm.

A student reported that when her boyfriend did not respond quickly to a text message she sent, she concluded that he was angry at her. It turned out that the reason was merely technological: his cell phone battery had run out. The interference of such purely technical phenomena—all electronic equipment can malfunction, break, or run out of battery power—introduces the risk of unintended meaning that may be seen as a kind of indirectness particular to electronic interaction.

### **The Medium Is the Metamessage**

In the multiplatform environment of electronic discourse, the choice of medium itself sends metamessages.

Another example of a metamessage communicated by the choice of medium was recounted by Caitlin Sudman. Caitlin noticed that the Facebook status of a friend, Sue, had changed from "in a relationship" to "single." This status change alerted her Facebook friends that Sue and her boyfriend had broken up. Predictably, many of those friends posted messages of support and sympathy on Sue's Facebook wall.

Caitlin noticed, however, that none of those messages were sent by Sue's close friends. Caitlin was certain that this did not mean that her close friends cared less about Sue than did her Facebook friends. She surmised that Sue would have contacted her close friends by another medium—a private one, such as email or telephone—before making the information about her breakup available on the public medium of Facebook.

Learning an important development in a close friend's life on Facebook would be distancing, even rejecting—a sign that one was not, in fact, a close friend. Awareness that choice of medium sends metamessages is not a new phenomenon.

The dilemma posed by sorting through the potential metamessages associated with each medium was described by a student in my class:

I recently had to contact someone for the potentially awkward purpose of asking him to be my partner for an upcoming ballroom dancing competition. The message I had to convey to him was to let me know ASAP because registration had to be in, ideally at the end of the same day. He had earlier told me he would let me know well ahead of time, but he didn't. I had several steps

to take and decisions to make along the way in contacting him and they were all tied to issues of which medium to use. The first step was to decide which medium to use to contact him. The message needed to be prompt, but I also wanted to avoid the face threatening act of contacting him by phone or in person because that would make it harder for him to say no. I wanted to give him an out if he wanted to decline. I rejected email as too formal. Such a tone would have seemed odd and possibly demanding, even desperate. My remaining choices were texting or Facebook. While texting would have been ideal in terms of time and tone, I didn't have his phone number. So, I turned to Facebook. The first thing was to check whether he was on Facebook Chat. Unfortunately, he wasn't. I had to then decide whether I wanted to post my question or subtle reminder about the deadline on his wall or in a private message. A wall post would have better conveyed the idea that I was not being pushy and was simply reminding him that he agreed to give me an answer before the deadline. A private message would make it less awkward for both parties involved if he preferred to dance with someone else. I picked the private message.

But I had one final choice: what to fill in as the subject. Now, this just may be me being weird, but I wasn't sure where to proceed from there because the subject is what introduces the reader to the message. It's the first thing the reader sees. It sets the tone. I solved the dilemma by getting right to the point and asking about the competition in the title and adding the point about the deadline in the body of the message. Since I was at my computer for a long time after, I did check for a reply, but more than that, I checked to see if he was on Facebook to see whether he had gotten the message.

This eloquent articulation of the factors the writer had to take into account in choosing a medium for her brief query dramatizes how each new medium entails both new opportunities and new liabilities with regard to potential metamessages entailed in the choice of medium.