Computer-mediated communication and linguistic issues in French University online courses. [Proceedings, Online Educa, Berlin, December 2003]

Rachel Panckhurst

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Rachel Panckhurst

FRE C.N.R.S. 2425 "Discours, textualité et production de sens", Praxiling,
Université Montpellier 3, Route de Mende, 34199 Montpellier cedex 5, France
Tel./Fax +33 4 67 14 24 28
rachel.panckhurst@univ-montp3.fr

Introduction

This paper examines the ways in which language is evolving in certain online courses within French higher education. In particular, it addresses usage of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and various linguistic issues associated with discussion and chat groups. WebCT, a commercially available virtual learning environment (VLE) is used as a basis of the study. Previous research (Panckhurst and Bouguerra 2003, Panckhurst 1999) suggests that CMC issues are of particular interest in relation to linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects. In our view, the discourse which occurs when one uses the computer for electronic mail (email), discussion groups (DGs) and chat groups (CGs) ("Netspeak" as Crystal terms it or *mediated electronic discourse (MED)* in our terminology), emerges specifically because the computer is in use. The computer becomes a sort of new mediator, creating new methods, new styles, and new "genres".

Mediated electronic discourse and corpus analysis

In this paper, asynchronous DGs are compared with synchronous CGs in the context of a solely online distance-led first year course at the University of Montpellier 3, France[1]. We are interested in comparing several novel aspects of our current research on MED in French, among other aspects: lexical and syntactical linguistic features such as grammatical categories, lexical items, verb tenses, pronoun usage, used in DGs and CGs, as differentiated from email, which was analysed in recent articles, and other written *vs.* oral forms; pragmatic issues including greetings and farewells, abbreviations and dialogal forms. We chose two natural language processing tools for French, Cordial (Synapse, France), and Nomino (UQAM, Canada) in order to conduct the textual and discourse analysis and provide some insight into linguistic and extra-linguistic structures contained in this sort of MED.

The corpus included a discussion group and three chat sessions spanning from January to May 2003 with first-year solely online distance students learning usage of a word processor and general computer skills within the University context. Statistics for both computational tools showed that discourse in CGs and in DGs is lexically dense and grammatically sparse (*cf.* Figure 1 below), i.e. verbs have a fairly low quota whereas nouns have a high ratio. These findings concur with other research comparing written text and oral discourse (*cf.* Gadet, 1996, Haliday, 1989, Herring, 1996) and our own research on MED in the electronic mail context (Panckhurst, 1999). But it is interesting to note that the figures for the CGs (types) have a slightly higher ratio for verbs and lower for nouns than other forms of MED (DGs or email) on average.

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[1] Due to space restrictions, we intend to publish results of a comparative study between distance-led courses and on-campus courses in a forthcoming study (2004).

	Nomino				Cordial	
	Occurrences (tokens)		Forms (types)		Forms (types)	
	DGs	CGs	DGs	CGs	DGs	CGs
Verbs	990 15.9%	1057 15.4%	202 16.5%	202 20.2%	182 13.4%	192 18.9%
Nouns	2219 35.6%	2344 34.2%	683 55.7%	487 48.6%	806 59.4%	478 47.1%
Adjectives	220 3.5%	179 2.6%	102 8.3%	98 9.9%	105 7.7%	105 10.4%
Adverbs	418 6.7%	410 6%	64 5.2%	57 5.6%	77 5.7%	77 7.6%
Others	2379 38.3%	2861 41.8%	175 14.3%	157 15.7%	**Articles** 89 6.6%	61 6%
					Pronouns 53 3.9%	51 5%
					Prepositions 24 1.8%	26 2.6%
					Conjunctions 21 1.5%	24 2.4%
Total	8040 100%	6851 100%	1226 100%	1001 100%	1357 100%	1014 100%

Figure 1 : Morpho-syntactic tagging results for CGs and DGs

Among the verbs frequently used in our corpus, auxiliaries and semi-modal auxiliaries are in frequent use (33.3% of overall verbs for the DGs, 42.6% for the CGs). Yates (in Herring, 1996, p.⊠3) noted that "the usage of modals in computer-mediated communication is significantly higher than that of either speech or writing, with the writing having the lowest usage of all three". In previous research (Panckhurst & Bouguerra, 2003) auxiliaries and semi-modal auxiliaries were in lower usage (26.6% of overall verbs), but the corpus corresponded to conventional electronic mail; in Panckhurst (2001) student DGs were also analysed: 38.9% of overall verbs were auxiliaries and semi-modal auxiliaries. Of the semi-modal auxiliaries used in the study here, *pouvoir*, *devoir* and *savoir* are the most frequent in both DGs and CGs, followed by *falloir* and *vouloir* and finally *croire*. This could suggest that obligations and constraints are important ('je dois vous quitter') as are possibilities and achievements ('je pourrai bientôt vous l'envoyer') and these aspects are combined with some knowledge of the situation ('je sais, mais comment on le code?'). However, when checking the context carefully, one notices that negative or interrogative forms frequently combine with these verbs to indicate, on the contrary, hesitation ('oui, mais je ne sais si c'est juste') or questioning ('Est-ce qu'on doit vous envoyer les exercices?'), which is of course typical of the pedagogical relationship between student and instructor. The current research indicates that DGs and especially chat sessions tend towards an increasingly important usage of modals in MED.

Other linguistic results include pronouns, sentence types and tense: first and second person subject pronoun specifications are extremely high compared with third person subject pronouns, which is typical of MED in all situations encountered in previous research, and very different from both other written and oral situations. Not only does the speaker/writer anchor his/her discourse to the online situation, but it is also very strongly linked to the addressees. Such anchoring and linking may be a consequence of the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues present in ordinary conversation. Of the overall sentence types, 36.4% are interrogatives in the CGs, compared with 7.2% in the DGs. Although the same people communicate within both groups, needs are obviously radically different: the CGs are synchronous, immediate and require quick answers in a situation where one expresses opinions clearly and briefly; in the DGs, students take more time to convey positions and express facts. This is also indicated by average sentence length: 11 words per contribution for the chat on average; 25.9 for the DGs. The present tense is predominant: 70.1% (DGs) to 72.6% (CGs).

From a more pragmatic viewpoint, openings and endings vary from DGs to CGs. More often than not, students use no overtures or closures in the DG as their name is automatically posted with the message in WebCT. When logging onto the CG, if students arrive on time for the virtual appointment, they quite often launch into the session with no greeting, but they inevitably use

openings and/or launch directly into an explanation if they are late. All participants sign out using a traditional ending form but they usually wait for their peers and instructor to respond before logging off. Normal written abbreviated forms are used and ellipsis is abundant, due to lack of typing space on the screen. As Crystal remarked (2001, p. 148), CGs lack some of the most "fundamental properties of conversation, such as turn-taking, floor-taking and adjacency". Sometimes, misunderstandings arise due to these new principles, i.e. messages need to be "disentangled", but people continue to appreciate CGs for their social value.

Conclusion

In this concise paper, we have attempted to provide tutors, lecturers and students with a better understanding of the ways in which language is currently evolving in discussion groups and chat environments. In up-and-coming research (Marsh & Panckhurst, 2004), we intend to focus on some pragmatic issues, i.e., how students evolve online from just being group-members to becoming part of a real social community (*cf.* Davis & Brewer, 1997, p. 163, Crystal, 2001, p. 150; p. 168). Much research still has to be accomplished in this era of online communication and MED, and we agree with Crystal (2001, p. 241): "the sheer scale of the present Internet, let alone its future telecosmic incarnations, has convinced me that we are on the brink of the biggest language revolution ever".

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