



Introduction

Adaptability in new media



Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on “Adaptability in New Media” defines the pragmatic concept of adaptability, relates it to affordances of various kinds, and touches upon the notion of new media. Adaptability is constitutive of Jef Verschueren's theory of pragmatics as a perspective. The concern of the special issue is with language as an adaptable phenomenon in new media environments and beyond. Starting with micro-adaptation or macro-adaptation, the contributions highlight different aspects of pragmatic adaptability and identify metapragmatic traces of adaptation processes. They deal with a range of new media modes and several languages. The studies included are exploratory in nature and methodological decisions are therefore considered in some detail.

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Adaptability is of central concern in studies of linguistic pragmatics: it is pervasive in all aspects of language use (see [Verschueren, 1987, 1999](#); [Verschueren and Brisard, 2002](#)). Language is an adaptable phenomenon, allowing people to engage in discourse practices that have a bearing on the construction of their communicative goals, conscious or not, and that of identities and attitudes, both at micro-level and macro-level uses of language. Language as an adaptive tool enables people to come to grips with communicative situations of various kinds: it equips people with ways of embarking on ever-changing communicative contexts by adapting to them and thus helping to construct them. Adaptability is an overarching phenomenon, with consequences for the form and function that language is given in and across particular contexts. Individual communicative situations manifest micro-adaptation, and macro-adaptation runs in parallel, drawing on, establishing and breaking conventions of communities of various kinds and society at large. People leave traces of adaptation processes in the linguistic outcomes of such processes, for the benefit of interlocutors navigating through particular discourse events jointly and individually.

This special issue explores adaptability as manifest in the choice of linguistic, and in some cases visual, elements in new media of various kinds, across languages. The aspects of adaptability involved concern micro-pragmatic or macro-pragmatic issues, and the phenomena under investigation range from particular items and expressions to structures pertaining to digital discourses in a broad sense. The focus is on the medium: while strictly avoiding technological determinism, the studies included ask what effects of technological mediation can be traced in particular linguistic phenomena, in and across modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC, including mobile telephony; see [Herring et al., 2013](#)). Examining developments from technological to communicative affordances (see [Hutchby, 2001](#)) is, in turn, instructive in light of the reflexivity involved in adaptability phenomena, as traces of metapragmatic awareness are identified in the data under investigation.

This introductory article defines the concept of adaptability, relates it to affordances of various kinds, and touches upon the notion of new media, before presenting the individual studies included in the special issue. The present collection of studies is exploratory in nature and adaptability is therefore approached from a number of different perspectives. The studies deal with a range of CMC modes and languages, and they display different methodological decisions. The concluding discussion note draws on the themes of the contributions and suggests further dimensions for the study of adaptability in new media.

1. Pragmatic adaptability

Verschueren's theory of pragmatics as a perspective is based on three fundamental concepts manifest in the use of language: 'variability', 'negotiability' and 'adaptability'. These can be interpreted as relating to one another like the layers of a Russian doll, adaptability being the outermost one that includes the other two. Pragmatic adaptability, or adaptation, is constitutive of Verschueren's theory, raising the two fundamental issues of "how we adapt to language (or, in other words, how humans developed a predisposition for language) and how language adapts to us, once we have a linguistic repertoire to choose from", the two issues concerning biological and socio-interactive adaptability, respectively (Verschueren and Brisard, 2002: 2). The second of these questions, related to the use of language, constitutes the topic of this special issue. Language as an adaptable phenomenon allows people to opt for particular linguistic realizations of the actions that they are performing in particular communicative situations and the discourse practices that they are thus engaged in. According to Verschueren (1999: 61), adaptability is

"the property of language which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs."

The ingredients of a pragmatic perspective, for Verschueren (1999: 65–69), lie in the (i) locus (i.e. context/structure), (ii) processes (i.e. dynamics) and (iii) status (i.e. salience) of meaningful functioning of language. To investigate language as an adaptable phenomenon, it is thus necessary to (i) identify the contextual correlates of adaptability and situate them in relation to various structural objects of adaptability, including principles of structuring; (ii) account for the unfolding of adaptation processes in interaction, their development over time; and (iii) consider the salience of adaptation processes.

In the present collection of studies, the locus is found with users, virtual communities, commodifying environments, technological mediation, CMC modes, multimodality, online and offline practices, languages, genres, styles, text structuring and other aspects of language use. The dynamics of adaptability in these environments arises from users communicating on a one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many basis, through language as action. And its salience is manifest in reflexivity made apparent as users leave linguistic traces of 'metapragmatic awareness' (Verschueren, 1999: 67; Verschueren, 2000) of adaptability in these contexts. As concerns 'reflexivity', the contributors were referred to Bauman and Briggs (1990: 69): "Contextualization involves an active process of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance in the speech itself." Of importance to the present collection are the continua of micro-adaptation and macro-adaptation, as well as the Darwinian notion of multidirectional 'co-adaptation', featuring already in Verschueren's early work (e.g. 1987).

Several notions can be viewed through the lens of adaptability. Hence, Verschueren and Brisard (2002: 18) draw attention to the relation between pragmatic adaptability and accommodation theory in sociolinguistics, suggesting that 'accommodation' in this sense might account for the 'inter-adaptational' character of the processes involved. Further, Heyd and Puschmann (in this issue) suggest that their use of 'appropriation' could be translated into 'adaptation with an agenda'. A section is in order on 'affordances', a term that figures prominently in studies of what is variously labelled as CMC, digital discourse(s), social media and the like.

2. Affordances

Psychologist James J. Gibson coined the term for his theory of affordances, primarily concerned with (visual) perception:

"The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, whether for good or ill. . . . I mean by [affordance] something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment." (Gibson, 1979: 127; italics in the original)

The notion has been subsequently appropriated, in a simplified form, for use in the study and design of the human–computer interface, including mobile media (see e.g. Norman, 1999; Schrock, 2015). It has also been adopted in many other fields of enquiry; for the present purposes, it is of interest to note its prevalence in the study of mediated communication, commonly in the technological sense of the complementarity of the user and the medium (see e.g. Barton and Lee, 2013; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Myers, 2010; Tannen and Trester, 2013). Herring et al. (2013: 8–9) point out in their introduction to the handbook of the pragmatics of CMC that

"new expressive needs and forms arise from and adapt to specific conditions of the new medium. Such new functions result from the specific 'faceting' structure (Herring, 2007) – the affordances and the communicative situation – of the medium, together with an enhanced metapragmatic awareness arising from the textual nature of most CMC [. . .] However, unlike in technological determinism, these effects are variable rather than categorical, manifesting differently in different languages and cultures."

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