Discussion note

# Adaptability and affordances in new media: Literate technologies, communicative techniques

## Martin Gill

*Åbo Akademi University, Department of English Language and Literature, Fabriksgatan 2, 20500 Åbo (Turku), Finland*

**Abstract**

This special issue arises from the panel organized by Tuija Virtanen at the 2015 International Pragmatics Association conference in Antwerp, for which I was invited to act as discussant. The aim of this paper is to draw together some of the dominant themes that emerge from the varied contributions collected here, and to offer a number of reflections on them. In particular, it focuses critically on the notions of adaptability and affordances, and the relations between them in the context of new media. It also highlights the need to understand these phenomena as developments in a longer tradition of literate practice and communicative interaction with changing mediational means. The conclusion considers the implications of an increased emphasis on the related concepts of practice and technique, to which human agency is central, and which, it argues, would help to provide a clearer link between the kinds of adaptability discussed in the individual papers and broader historical and theoretical perspectives.
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## 1. Introduction

However used we may be by now to more or less continuous innovation in communications technology, it is hard to escape the impression that these are remarkable times. To judge from the coverage they receive and the discourses that surround them – of technical advance, increasing mobility and flexibility, but also of increasing centrality to many aspects of everyday life, along with a host of associated fears and threats – the rapid global take-up of 'new media', particularly interactive social media, is widely regarded as more than just the latest and smartest stage in the evolution of microchip technology. We are, it seems, witnessing little less than a transformation of the once familiar landscape of sociability, its apparently stable features, the genres and patterns of interaction that have long served to organize and orientate our selves and our understanding, and structure our relationships, now reconfigured in ways that tend to erase the usual points of reference. Where commercial interests have a role in shaping these discourses, it is of course wise to approach them with some scepticism; new media are not only convenient platforms for managing networked interaction in a multiplicity of forms, but huge, profit-generating operations – often, as with Facebook and Twitter, under the control of a single company – where 'newness' is no doubt good for business. Though not pursued further here, the interaction of commercial interests and forms of mediated language use runs as a subtext through many of the papers in this special issue, in the sense that the affordances of the online world are, in part, just what such interests allow them to be. In that sense, the landscape in question is, as Barton and Lee note (2013:29), not so much a blank sheet as a "designed space", one in which aspects of the design are quite likely to be revised without warning.

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*E-mail address:* martin.gill@abo.fi.

Nonetheless, the presence of new media is apparent everywhere, and the descriptive and theoretical challenges their growing influence presents are real ones. In keeping with the discourse of 'newness' just discussed, it might be tempting to suggest that the objects of interest in this case are wholly novel, especially as they often involve forms of mediated interaction that have no precise precedent. In fact, one challenge for pragmatics research here, as in CMC more generally, is to tease out the genuinely new and medium-specific phenomena and set them in relation to the constancies of human communication; for while clearly novelty grabs most attention, communicative practices trace a much longer history, and reflect deeper aspects of socially constructed and negotiated activity. In this context, the transitory forms of one or another new medium, or its dominant modes at a particular moment, such as Twitter, matter less than the ways in which they serve to realize these continuities. Verschueren's notion of adaptability (see, for example Verschueren and Brisard, 2002), around which this collection was conceived, could be said to bridge exactly this divide, with its emphasis on the endlessly creative adaptive responses of language users to shifting and diversifying social, material and technical circumstances, and the potential these responses may have to solidify into regular patterns, genres, and communicative practices. In such work we can, moreover, expect to find both the convergence of communicative practices – that is, the use of different, in some cases novel, means to achieve familiar communicative goals; and the divergence that occurs as practices emerge unpredictably in different ways in different contexts with different media, giving rise to specific, often local, communicative forms and possibilities (cf. Herring et al., 2013:11).

The contributors to this special issue all, in different ways, explore aspects of the emergent forms to which the present state of new media gives rise, and their provisional, possibly ephemeral nature. They make clear how centrally dependent these forms are on the technical arrangements prevailing at a given moment, in all their specificity, while the diversity of topics studied indicates both the scope of the concept of adaptability, and the great range of phenomena it can help to illuminate, at macro- and micro-levels: from the structure and dynamics of communicative events, interpersonal alignments, the construction of audiences, identity work, the realization of speech acts and the formation of genres, to the frequently ludic and self-reflexive nature of human linguistic creativity itself.

My aim in this concluding discussion is to reflect on these broader pragmatic issues, and in particular to examine two concepts central to the papers collected here, that of affordances, and practices. The former has been widely discussed, notably by Hutchby (2014; see also Virtanen's introduction to this special issue); the latter perhaps less so in this context. In doing so, my intention is to connect the investigation of pragmatic adaptability in relation to new media more securely with the longer history of technologies of literacy and their associated practices.

## 2. Researching adaptability in the context of rapid change

For those attempting to chart this rapidly shifting landscape, one part of the challenge is the absence of any privileged vantage point from which to observe its outlines: as human interaction flows unpredictably into new channels, there is no sure means to distinguish what formations it may eventually carve out, or how durable they may be. One area in which changes in contemporary mediated practices are strikingly evident is that of political discourse, where the boundary between activity online and offline is increasingly blurred: government announcements are issued on Facebook, traditionally reliable news media find themselves challenged by a proliferating confusion of blogs, vlogs, forums, alternative news sites and the like, political campaigns are waged almost more passionately in the Twittersphere than on the streets (cf. Coesemans and De Cock); on the streets, meanwhile, crossing lights are installed in the pavement to prevent pedestrians whose eyes are fixed on their mobile devices from inadvertently stepping into the traffic (Hern, 2017). As employed by an already thoroughly mediatized political figure such as Donald Trump, Twitter is now acquiring a prominent role in the articulation of United States government policy. In place of, or at least in advance of, statements mediated through usual White House channels, tweets seemingly afford him a means of reacting to events in real time, in his own authentic voice. How this may affect the negotiation of complex policy goals in a volatile world remains to be seen; as an instance of pragmatic adaptability in relation to new media, however, it highlights several pertinent themes.

For example, we could note the almost perfect co-adaptation of voice and medium: far from acting as a constraint, Twitter's 140 character requirement enables Trump to achieve effects that precisely express – in fact, seem to embody – his trademark off the cuff style. As such, Trump could hardly stop tweeting and continue to be the man for whom many of his supporters voted, the man who ''tells it like it is''. Then again, this use of Twitter, projecting Trump's backstage, vernacular self into the clearly 'public' sphere of official business, ignoring the traditionally distinct boundary between the two (cf. Hill, 2001), poses a challenge to the conventional genres of presidential communication. Previous holders of the office have of course also regularly used vernacular idioms: in this sense, the discursive demarcation of private and public spheres has long since been strategically eroded by the need to connect with 'ordinary' citizens. Likewise, Trump is not the first president to communicate via Twitter. What makes his tweets potentially significant, however, is the use he makes of the medium's affordances (though with what degree of metapragmatic awareness remains unclear) to achieve specific pragmatic/discursive ends: the projection of a persona – unpredictable, often impulsive, irascible, and rude (cf. Ott, 2017), but, above all, apparently uncontrived – perhaps imported from an 'old' medium (television) but now precisely tuned to the