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An analysis of expressive speech acts in online task-oriented interaction by university students

Marta Carretero^{a*}, Carmen Maíz-Arévalo^a, M. Ángeles Martínez^a

^aUniversidad Complutense de Madrid, Facultad de Filología, Madrid, 28040, Spain

Abstract

This study explores the use of Expressive speech acts in a corpus of online interaction involving three groups of university students in the area of English Linguistics. The analysis focuses on the relative frequency of occurrence of different subtypes of Expressives across the three subcorpora. The influence of certain contextual variables such as multiculturalism, age, linguistic proficiency and group size seems to have a strong bearing on the Expressives employed by each group.

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1. Online collaborative writing

Online collaborative writing is the term used to refer to the computer-mediated joint production of a text by two or more authors with shared ownership of the product (Storch, 2011). The use of online collaboration for pedagogical purposes is connected to collaborative learning theories (Dillenbourg, 1999), in turn deeply linked to socio-cultural and interactionist views of the learning process (Piaget, 1928; Vygotsky, 1978). Among the many benefits of collaborative learning we could mention stronger learner motivation and improved social dynamics (Neumann & Hood, 2009, p. 383), as well as higher involvement (Cole, 2009) and enhanced learner autonomy and control over the learning process (Blake, 2011, p. 25; Leeming & Danino, 2012, p. 54).

Blended learning environments, now frequent in higher education settings using a virtual campus, are those that combine face-to-face and computer-mediated interaction. From the point of view of discourse organization, online

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +3491-394-53-83. Fax: +3491-394-57-62.

E-mail address: mcarrete@ucm.es

written interaction differs from face-to-face communication in several main respects. One is related to the asynchronous nature of computer-mediated communication (Herring et al., 2013). Secondly, online interaction cannot rely on many of the multimodal resources used in face-to-face settings, such as eye-to-eye contact, prosodic features, gestures, or body language (Herring et al., 2013), and this endows the ongoing written production with a strong dependence on linguistic organization, particularly when the conveyance of emotion is concerned. Finally, many computer modes –wikis, e-forums, or blogs –imply the permanent recording of the interaction in the form of a history log which allows privileged access by analysts to the complete transcription of the linguistic production of the participants.

These specific features of online communication are particularly relevant to the present study, which focuses on the online written collaboration of three groups of undergraduate and post-graduate university students interacting in pedagogical e-forums for the subjects Discourse and Text (D&T), Pragmatics (Pr), and Seminar on English Linguistics (SL), at the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain. Although the language used is strongly task-oriented, the analysis of the e-forum logs and their resulting three written sub-corpora reveals a high presence of Expressives that seem to perform the communicative function of making up for the absence of face-to-face resources, in terms of smoothing transactional and task-oriented communication, and building rapport among participants. The research questions are the following:

- a) Are Expressives equally frequent across the three sub-corpora, and are they similarly distributed in terms of sub-types such as Apologies, Thankings, Compliments, and so forth?
- b) If this is not the case, which are the contextual variables with a bearing on the choices made by participants?

2. Expressive speech acts

Expressives are one of the basic speech act types proposed in Searle's (1976) seminal classification, together with Representatives, Directives, Commissives and Declaratives. Searle gives Apologizing, Congratulating and Thanking as examples of Expressives. A preliminary study of the data uncovered the need for the scope of Expressives to be enlarged, since many speech acts were considered intuitively as expressive but did not fit into any of Searle's types. Hence, other references were consulted: Bach & Harnish (1979), Thomas (1995), Verschueren (1999), and especially Weigand (2010), who proposes a speech act classification based on the notions of belief and desire. We adopted as a criterial feature the concern with desire, or the predominance of desire over belief.

The resulting corpus-driven taxonomy included Expressives of two general types: self-centred, pertaining to the speaker / writer's feelings; and other-centred, focusing on the addressee's feelings. Self-centred Expressives include: Likings, which express positive emotional reactions (1); Concerns, which express worries (2); and Wishes, which claim that the truth of the proposition should (or should not) be the case (3):

1. I really like the classification. (SL)
2. I cannot recognize PCIs nor GCIs... It is difficult to see them... the easiest are the presuppositions xD (Pr)
3. I wanted to answer to the last part of question two and question three but I really cannot think any longer. (Pr)

Other-oriented Expressives include Apologies, Compliments and Thankings, which correspond to Searle's expressives mentioned above, as well as other subtypes: Reassurances, which aim at comforting the addressee by diminishing his/her feeling of guilt (4); and Reproaches, which may be seen as the negative counterpart of Compliments (5):

4. Don't worry because everything is finished and sent (D&T)
5. I feel like I'm having pretty much of a monologue here... (D&T)

Finally, our scope of Expressives also includes speech acts of other kinds that focus on the speaker/writer's emotional involvement by linguistic or typographical means, concretely interjections such as *oh*, exclamation marks, emphatic *do*, accumulation of evaluative expressions, repetition of a letter or of a question mark, capitalization, and the use of emoticons (Yus, 2011). Utterances containing any of these marks have also been considered as

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