INTERACTIONAL PRACTICES BETWEEN REAL AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

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Abstract: Over the last period, the frequency with which new technologies are used to communicate, demonstrates the significant changes they make in the existing social life on the one hand and, on the other hand, it generates a development of possibilities and forms representation, which result in interpretative diversity. It has been stated that there is also a reconfiguration of traditional resources under the influence of new technologies and the emergence of new communication principles, both involved in the coexistence of traditional resources with new means of communication. In this framework, we aim to highlight linguistic and communicative aspects as updates of the influence of the environment in which the verbal exchange takes place on the individual's interactional practices. The premise of our approach is the finding that individuals "enter" the virtual space with a "luggage" consisting of the knowledge, experiences, representations, beliefs and social practices that they have acquired throughout their real existence. Our intent is to reveal how, depending on the environment in which the interaction takes place – either real or virtual – individuals set up verbal and non-verbal behaviours through which certain interactional practices materialize. To this end, we discuss two communication situations, taken from our didactic experience, while their interpretation is based on discourse analysis and the theory of computer-mediated communication. We believe that our analysis, which is able to highlight the particularities of the media in which the message is created and sent out, and their impact on socio-communicative practices, may raise our students' awareness of the implications of the relationship between the interlocutors arising from the adoption of one or another of communication practices.

Keywords: interaction, communication practices, face-saving acts, selective self-presentation, position, relationship.

Introduction

The new technologies have produced major existential changes with implications in all aspects of social experience, not only in the sphere of the individual, but also in that of the structures. Digital communication has gained considerable spread over the last decades, which has also consequences in the study of communication. Therefore, the interest of researchers is directed towards the diversity of forms of representation, generated by the particularities of the medium or towards the variety of processing modes and their transfer, made by means of the new media. Current communication situations testify to the coexistence of both direct and mediated interactions by means of new media. This fact implies the manifestation of certain interactional practices specific to each of the two types of interaction. The correct knowledge and application of the interactional principles, of the norms of verbal and non-verbal behaviour characterizing a certain interaction, prove to be of major importance in the preservation or development of human relationships. On the other hand, the reality of our everyday verbal exchanges reveals situations where the interactional principles are managed inadequately. In the literature, it is supported the idea that the medium makes its mark on individuals, on their verbal and non-verbal behaviour. In this respect, digital communication with its characteristics due to the transmission medium tends to put its mark on individual interactional practices, especially among young people. The construction of universalised messages by abolishing the communication framework produces a negative impact in some situations.

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Therefore, we consider that the attributes conferred by the medium should be correlated with the norms of the real interactional context, while the verbal and non-verbal behaviour, by which the interactional practices are updated, avoiding the de-textualized, autistic character of expression, should reflect a framing of the message that is adequate to the real environment. To illustrate and support our point of view, we will discuss a communication situation identified in our professional work. As a theoretical reference frame, the analysis we propose uses considerations regarding the digital medium and the characteristics of communication in this medium, on the one hand, and the traditional interactional principles, on the other.

Theoretical framework

1. Communication in the digital environment

The digital media is a world in which we enter with a luggage of knowledge, experiences, representations, beliefs, social practices acquired through the existence from the real environment, according to which we express, communicate. However, the influence of the environment is imminent, and our cognitive or factual parameters are redimensioned in the virtual one, while the generated social effects are altered.

The coexistence of traditional resources and new communication technologies also entails altering – i. e. remodelling – the former and creating new communication principles (Donald Weasenforth, http://llt.msu.edu/vol10num2/review2/, 2006: 25-28). The specialized literature notes that the virtual environment influences the communication process and the way in which it unfolds to a large extent, with everything it entails. The following aspects are noted: changes in communication practices, in the types of interaction and writing, in the communication content, and in the exposure to the public (through the adoption of a virtual identity, (D Weasenforth, 2006, C Beciu, 2011).

The medium puts its mark on communication, establishing a particular course of interaction, from the possibility of assuming an identity that is different from the real one, one of over self-presentation, to anonymity (E. Griffin, 2005). In this medium, the diminution of roles and social positions is favoured; it is a world in which masculinity merges with femininity, childhood with maturity, where political leaders become ordinary individuals.

This reconstruction of identity, possible through both the technological specificities of the medium and the language, has consequences at a relational level, such as, for example, the impression of depth concerning the relationship between the interlocutors.

Selective self-presentation, the absence of the context of coexistence, involving the physical absence of the individual, the geographical / physical distance between the interlocutors, the control of the affirmed identity, as features of the medium of interaction, induce special verbal behaviours. Performing the interaction in these terms generates the feeling of improbability about any consequence in the real life of the actions taken by the individual in the virtual environment. This leads to the minimization of social risk: when the individual feels that her/his virtual representation is "threatened" in any way, she or he has the possibility of abandoning it and of building another one (thus, even the name and the effort invested in the social establishment of the old identity are lost). This leads to uninhibited behaviour of the individual, which involves free expression, without constraints) (Em Griffin, in L. Suciu, 2014).

2. Language in the digital media

As far as language is concerned, it is considered to be a deliberate practice of the interlocutors, involving aspects that do not correspond to those of the standard language. Susan Herring motivates the use of other linguistic forms by the desire of users to save effort

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(in typing), to reproduce aspects specific to oral communication or to express themselves creatively (Denise Murray, 1990, in S. Herring, 2001).

Another peculiarity of language in the digital medium is the conversational aspect of the verbal exchange. Although the sender and receiver are not in the same physical context, the sender addressing to a receiver whom she or he does not see, or just does not know, apparently, their verbal exchange leaves the impression of direct, even "private" interaction, in the opinion of Storm King (1996: 119-27). In the literature there is the concept of *talking in writing*, meaning the use of language in a virtual medium discussion group, as if it were a conversation (it designates the situation in which message is perceived by the interlocutor / interlocutors while it is written). It is important to note, in this case, that the interlocutors are less interested in the signs / sounds (as the interlocutors in the real world are), but rather in aspects specific to the environment in which they interact, as, for example, synchronicity (Rodney H. Jones, 2004: 30).

The oral character of digital communication also resides in the textual representation of onomatopoeia, laughter, and various sounds present in oral communication [5] (S. Herring, 2001). This textual translation of paralanguage (eg, *ha ha*, *ew*, *wow*) confers the written text the aspect of a direct interaction. The presence of the elements of orality contributes to defining the position of the interlocutors in the interaction and, consequently, to establishing a certain type of relationship between them.

3. Constructing the message in the digital environment

One aspect of creating a message, both in the virtual and the real environment, is the degree of formality. Whatever the medium in which verbal exchange takes place, the decisive factor that shapes the formal character of the message is the immediate interactional context (S. Herring 2001: 618).

The degree of formality is updated in the level of standardization and structural complexity (subordinate sentences, passive voice, specialized lexicon, refined language register), although there are situations in digital communication that prove the relativity of these criteria. According to the author, the explanation of the fact that the messages in the virtual verbal exchanges do not reach the level of formality particular to written communication, despite their high level of standardization and syntactic complexity, consists in the purpose of the message itself (in itself, an email is not meant for the completion of the act of communication, as in the case of a letter), as well as in the relative "relaxation" of the digital messages in relation to the rigid norms of written communication. What is important to note in the case of digital communication is the possibility of establishing a set of rules of verbal exchange that somehow emerge from the formal – informal axis and are tangential to the cultural aspect, being created in and through interaction (L. Suciu, 2014: 168-171).

The informal character of the message implies the non-standardized use of language and materializes through abbreviations, omissions in terms of spelling, punctuation or grammatical function of words or phrases or fragmentation of the phrase.

4. Interactional principles

It is a well-known fact that, in any interaction, the progress of the procedure of refinement defined by E. Goffman around the notion of face: each participant in the interaction aims to display a valorising self- image, representing the positive social value that the individual claims, through acts performed during the interaction; thus, face loss is "a symbolic defeat" (D. Roventa-Frumuşani, 2004: 45, E. Goffman, 1987). Consequently, each tends to carry out acts that do not involve either the loss of their own faces or the threat to the interlocutor's face. Based on the Goffman's theory of face-work (face-saving acts), Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson have articulated the politeness theory, which was further developed by C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, among others (1990, 1992).

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To transpose behaviours / acts that mark the face-saving / face-work process in the linguistic plane one needs to use certain structures adapted to the communication situation that are designed either to minimize personal contribution and to increase the partner's contribution to interaction or to avoid or compensate for an act threatening the face of the addressee, the sender's own face or both. This state of affairs reflects in fact the tendency to maintain a relational equilibrium, which is always "relative" and "precarious" in the opinion of the specialists (C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, in P. Charaudeau and D. Maingueneau, 2002: 443).

Both in written and in oral communication, there are well-defined rules and interactivity norms concerning the composition and editing of messages specific to each of the two types of communication. The introduction of new media of communication and, especially, the frequency with which communication has been used over the last period of time have directed our attention to the way in which messages are built in the new communication practice. In addition, current verbal exchanges that occur in the professional life, both online and offline, have generated reflections on the interactional practices used in the digital medium and on the influence the latter exerts on the way the message is built.

The peculiarity of digital communication lies in the mix of features that belong both to the written and the oral verbal exchange. Although in most of its forms of upgrading, digital communication is characterized by asynchrony, at present, we speak about the conversational aspect, the oral character, or about talking in writing, as we have shown before.

Therefore, the interlocutor's threatening related to the formulation and sending of a message in the digital environment involves: absence of the form of address, absence of beginning and closing forms, grammar, spelling, punctuation errors, excessive or inappropriate use of emoticon symbols, inappropriate tone, time and place of sending the message.

Some of these elements, which reflect linguistically face-threatening acts against the interlocutor, are also found in written communication. Therefore, from this point of view, we can dissociate an axis of continuity and another one, of discontinuity in the real-virtual relationship.

On the real - virtual continuity axis, one may include the absence of the form of address, of the beginning and closing forms, the grammar, spelling and punctuation errors, the tone of the message, and on the real- virtual discontinuity axis - excessive or inappropriate use of emoticon symbols, of time and space. If in the real environment the choice of the moment and the place of sending a message plays an important role in the perception and establishment of its meaning, in the digital environment we no longer witness this situation, as long as we deal with forms of asynchronous communication.

Case study

Two communication situations, one in the virtual environment, the other in the real one, have allowed us to observe in parallel the interactional practices at work. We need to specify that the verbal exchanges in discussion are taken from our professional activity, they have taken place successively and share both the participants (the teacher and the student) and the formal framework in which they occurred.

Description of communication situations

Communication situation I

Following the announcement of the results obtained at the exam in the academic discipline Introduction to Communication Theories, we received an e-mail from a student whose final score we miscalculated. By the message, the student reclaimed this error (which we assumed and corrected) as follows:

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Hello, teacher! I am writing this message because I think there was an error in calculating my final score.
1) If the in the exam represents 2/3 of the final average and the remaining 1/3 is the average in the seminar, the calculation should be done as follows:
(7 × 2/3) + (8.5 × 1/3) <=> (14 ÷ 3) + (8.5 ÷ 3) = 7.5

2) My colleague B has obtained the same scores as me at both disciplines (average 7 for the course and 8.5 for the seminar). The difference between us is that my final average is 7, while Miss B's is 8.
I'm also sending you in attachment to this message the calculation of the average score performed on my personal phone. I apologize if my calculation method is not the right one. But I still wait for a reply from you where everything should be made clear for me. Thank you! Have a nice remainder of the day!
Respectfully yours,
XXX
... Year 1

As receiver, we interpreted the e-mail as offensive, the answer being focused on the acknowledgement and assumption of the calculation error, on the commitment to correct it, but also on the inappropriate manner by which it was signalled.

The description of the communication situation reveals:

- Interaction type: mediated (computer);
- Form of communication: e-mail;
- The framework for verbal exchange: formal;
- Interactants' positions: unequal (unequal status, teacher-student relationship);
- Type of message: verbal.

Communication situation II

During the course lectures and seminars following the above verbal exchange, the student had a non-verbal behaviour in which he showed involvement, a somewhat exaggerated zeal, attending all the lectures and seminars without exception, constantly trying to take the floor, respond to questions, intervene, express his interest during the applied activities. If he was invited to answer or express his opinion, he seemed embarrassed, in discomfort.

The communication situation is defined by the following parameters:

- Interaction type: direct;
- Form of communication: dialogue (form of oral communication updating verbal and non- verbal aspects);
- The framework for verbal exchange: formal;
- Interactants' positions: unequal (unequal status, teacher-student relationship);
- Type of message: verbal and non-verbal.

Analysis of communication in both situations

Beyond the unfolding of the exposed verbal exchanges, it is notable how the e-mail message was constructed, which the receiver interpreted an offensive. By including several categories of mistakes, we consider that the interlocutor's injury occurs because of their interpretation as updates of threatening acts. We detected the following categories of mistakes:

Content mistakes

- Inclusion in the body of the message of a part intended for the calculation; the position of the receiver in the interaction (member of the teaching staff) involves both the knowledge of the arithmetic mean calculation formula and of the calculation itself.

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- The explicit request I expect, however, a response from you where everything should be clarified (in obvious contradiction with the position of the sender).
- Excessive argumentation (reference to colleague's score, whose calculation was correct).

Structure mistakes

- The presence, in the attachment, of the final grade calculation made with the mobile phone.
- The absence of spatial marking of the address and the beginning forms, of the body of the message and of the closing form.

Expression mistakes

- The address form is quasi-inadequate (Hello),
- Use of the exclamation mark after the address form,
- Failure to observe spelling and punctuation rules,
- Absence of diacritics,
- Excessive use of exclamation marks,
- Absence of spaces between words

We note that the position of the interlocutors and the context in which the verbal exchange takes place are the same in both situations. The difference between them lies in the form of communication and the type of interaction.

In the first situation, the unequal status of the interlocutors is explained by the inferior position of the student and the superior position of the teacher, positions given by each one's status, knowledge, and experience. In this interactional context, the firm, clearly and explicitly formulated claim in the student-sender's message, contradicts the status actually held by him, suggesting rather his superior position. The ardour and insistence with which the calculation error was pointed out, the intensity of its argumentation, which are apparent at the formal level of the message, as mentioned above, translate into a belligerent attitude, that is justified only if it has encountered a refusal or indifference on the part of the receiver of the message. Instead, this request of the sender has the effect of imparting a superior tone to the message, which makes a discordant note against the participants' rightful positions in the interaction. If we add the flawed construction of the message, in view of the exposed errors, we find inappropriate verbal behaviour, inappropriate for the context, including here the perspective of the receiver. Although, in general, the real interactional context is preserved in the virtual environment, too, we notice, in this case, the reversal of the real positions in the virtual interaction.

One explanation of the choice made by the sender relates to the particularities that the transmission environment confers to the message, namely, in the absence of risks, in the impression of the absence of real, concrete consequences of actions taken in the virtual environment.

The second communication situation reveals a changed behaviour of the protagonist (the student), a change marked by the type of interaction. It is a face-to-face interaction that bears the mark of the manifestation of classical interactional principles, especially face-saving acts. The spatial distance, functioning to blur the interlocutors' status, disappears in direct interaction, so that the positions of the interlocutors become "visible". The placement of the verbal exchange in a common space, moreover, in an institutional framework (the classroom / seminar room at the college) produces the phenomenon of effective contextualization, which defines and delimits the positions of the participants in the interaction. The context of coexistence not only makes it possible, but also favours the control of identities affirmed in interaction, and the creation of messages is, in these circumstances, appropriate.

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Conclusion

The analysis of communication situations has led us to the finding that an individual's communication practices can undergo changes under the influence of the environment in which the interaction takes place. In spite of the identification of certain constants in the architecture of the message, there are cases in which it changes under the pressure of the environment. The individuals "enter" the virtual space endowed each with a "luggage" of knowledge, experiences, representations, beliefs and social practices acquired throughout their real existence. In some communication situations, however, this arsenal gets the mark of the environment and, consequently, we are witnessing the manifestation of other interaction principles.

It is important to note that communication practices have implications for the relationship between the interlocutors. Adherence to a certain medium to create and send the message should not be a sign of violation of principles designed to balance the relationship and/or to avoid conflict. From the perspective of the relational equilibrium, we consider that our endeavour is relevant and useful, especially in the didactic activity. The approach from the perspective of discourse analysis and communication sciences has allowed us to reveal the characteristic features of the medium and their intervention in updating socio-communicative practices, as well as the consequences that may arise in the relational plane.

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