‘Making Conversation’: Sequential Integrity and the Local Management of Interaction on Internet Newsgroups.

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Abstract
This paper argues for a detailed empirical investigation of newsgroup interaction. It presents a framework for analysis that emphasizes the machinic and human character of newsgroup activity with the concept of ‘(human) orientation to the (machinic) default’. By problematizing the notion of newsgroup ‘conversation’ the paper reveals the ‘sequential integrity’ of newsgroup practices through the detailed investigation of participants’ ‘local management of interaction’.

Newsgroup interaction is a-synchronous: participation does not occur in ‘real time’ and participants are geographically dispersed. Potentially, therefore, participation could be chaotic and disordered. Yet observation reveals it to be a highly ordered activity. A fundamental question, then, is how this interactional order is achieved; and achieved as conversational.

Newsgroup activity is characterized by sequential integrity. Messages are constructed in such a way as to exhibit both relational (between messages) and internal (in the text of messages) features that mimic and respect sequential ordering.

Introduction
There is a growing literature concerned with the nature of electronic textual interaction [2] [6][14] [18][27]. One view conceives of computer mediated textual interaction (CMTI) as part written and part spoken – or as Danet [5] puts it, ‘attenuated speech’ and ‘attenuated writing’. A second view conceives of CMTI as a natural development in language. Baron [2] for example, talks of the ‘creolization’ of language in the new media, denoting an historical development that parallels other language forms. A third view regards CMTI as a new linguistic form. Ball-Rokeach and Reardon [1] differentiated between monologue (one way mass communication), dialogue (interpersonal communication) and teleologue (dialogue among people at a distance via electronics), with email and newsgroup interaction falling into the latter category. Ferrara et al [7] talk of ‘interactive written discourse’ as a new ‘emergent register’ (p.8).

Implicit within all these approaches is a comparison of text based computer mediated interaction and face-to-face communication. A consequence of this is that the geographical distance between participants and the temporal dispersion of messages is seen to play a pivotal role in determining its character. Black et al [3] note, for example, that unlike spoken interaction between co-present actors, ‘non-real time’ computer interaction allows for parallel message development in ‘threads’ (see also McCarthy et al, [15]). Further the ‘temporal delay’ between messages results in a lack of strict topic sequentiality. Both these features are quite unlike face-to-face communication.

Sequentiality can be thought of in a different way as the achieved relatedness of a message to one that preceded it (what ever the topic1). In this regard the threaded-ness of messages becomes an issue for study. Specifically the question is asked about what mechanisms are utilized in the human achievement of threaded-ness. A partial answer to this question is that various quoting mechanisms - the selective inclusion of text from the immediately preceding message - are actively used by participants to achieve a sense of context and conversation [25]. As Severinson Eklundh et al [25] have noted quoting can also denote the textual relationship of old and new text, where for example the total text is included from a previous message but the new text is interspersed within it (pp. 199-200). With this specific mechanism, the quoted text gains an immediacy and relevance, in relation to the new textual elements, in each new turn at participation. This mechanism allows for the development, over a series of turns, of a curious and media specific textual formation.

1 ‘topic’ adherence in computer mediated communication is a contentious issue. In the corpus of messages collected for this study, the sense of one single topic laid down in the first message and followed in subsequent messages was not perceived. The ‘topic’ (if one was perceivable at all) was an emergent and amorphous aspect; one might say retrospective consequence, of the messages. ‘The relevant topic’ through all its twists and turns was a matter for the participants to determine, criticise, argue about and the like (see Reed 1999).