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Edited by Susana Eisenchlas and Michael Haugh
School of Languages and Linguistics
Griffith University
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I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation to Michael Haugh and Susana Eisenclhas for the opportunity to edit this issue of Griffith Working Papers in Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication (Volume 3, Issue 2, 2010). The issue introduces the work of students in the School of Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University.

This issue presents contemporary sociolinguistic discussions on variations and change in the way we use the English language. Milinkovic, Rowen and Young focus on pragmatic and lexical peculiarities (and complexities) of Australian English and, Kinsella and Morrissey explore effects of online behaviour on how we communicate. As the English language is no longer homogenous and the dependence on technology has already created a generation who speak and write differently, these discussions are relevant and insightful.

There are six papers in this issue:
1. Btw its netspeak lol by Naomi Kinsella
2. Trolling is an art: Towards a schematic classification of intention in internet trolling by Lochlan Morrissey
3. Compliments on Possessions in Australian English by Tihana Milinkovic
4. How Socially-Sensitive Questions are Asked and Answered: A Pragmatic Act by Charlotte Young
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It is hoped that this issue will spur others into questioning what they hear and see around them, and use this linguistic inquiry to enrich the understanding of language, its uses and users.

Sophiaan Subhan

*Editor notes
Sophiaan Subhan is a sessional lecturer and PhD candidate from the School of Languages and Linguistics at Griffith University. He taught English Language at a government secondary school in Singapore prior to embarking on a research which investigates the use of language as markers of identity among male youths in his country of origin. Sophiaan hopes that his current research will contribute to the understanding of how and why language choices affect one’s identity especially for those trying to make sense of the world, and themselves. His other interests include ethnolinguistic explorations into minority, marginalised and maligned groups. Contact email: s.subhan@griffith.edu.au
Btw its just netspeak lol

NAOMI KINSELLA*

Abstract

Netspeak has been slowly, but surely, assimilating into how we use the English Language verbally. Looking at data gathered through observations and a Likert-scale survey, this essay explores two main uses of Netspeak and how different factors contribute to a successful communication among young Australians.

1. Using Netspeak in Verbal Conversations

1.1. Introduction

The act of speech is essential to one’s social world – without it, relationships could not be formed. The English language has consistently been altered through the use of slang words, dialects, and idioms or coded forms such as ‘1337’. This is an attempt for its users to create common ground in social interactions. Indeed, English language has evolved tremendously from its inception however, its transformation (and mutations) in the hands of technology has been the most rapid and able to affect large number of users. In particular, the use of technology in the forms of computers, mobile phones and the internet introduced numerous lexicons into the language such as Skype and IMed. Over time, the effects of this technology to guide communication became apparent and eventually, incorporated new and exciting ways to communicate efficiently and with speed. These users started shortening words (i.e. Wat up wit u?), incorporating numbers (i.e. l8r) and symbols (i.e. s@) to create a shorthand version of English. It did not take long for this form of shorthand known as Netspeak to establish itself as the trendy way to communicate online. As years passed, people have started to notice younger generations who have grown up with the internet to use Netspeak in verbal communications. It is true to say that a person’s language can alter their behavior and vice versa. But can we say that technology is altering language for our young generation? Are they incorporating Netspeak into their language as a serious communicative strategy or mocking the use of a computer-mediated language in verbal speech? The aim of this paper is to investigate the use of Netspeak in verbal conversations and look at the factors needed for successful communication. Therefore, an investigation into the incidences of Netspeak in young Australians’ conversations will be examined while comparing observable variations between sarcastic and serious usage.
2. Literature Review

Verbal Netspeak is the most current speech act to enter the world of communication with people of all languages, cultures and social standings noticing this in their everyday lives. Due to little evidence of verbal Netspeak in scholarly discussions, this paper will attempt to provide a plausible definition by looking at the differences between spoken and written Netspeak. Similarly, this action will be examined from a situational as well as a linguistic perspective. This will include looking at style, appropriateness, social constraints, and other linguistic factors.

2.1 Defining Netspeak

The definition of Netspeak, up until now, has been simultaneously connected to the computer-medium. For this paper, written Netspeak can be categorised as spoken clauses that are shortened or changed through phonetic, symbolic or abbreviated words to give more information to users that are normally found in face-to-face communication. In this respect, verbal Netspeak clearly emulates the way we write. Brb (be right back) is an example of this. In written Netspeak, brb tells the receiver that the writer has left the computer. In verbal Netspeak, the addressee is giving the same message, however, instead of saying ‘be right back’ (in which a person would do in most circumstances), the addressee uses burb – uttered exactly as it is spelt. Consequently, the addressee who attends to this information depends mostly on his/her knowledge of Netspeak.

Another important attribute is that Netspeak does not only consist of several sentences abbreviated into shorten words, it can be additional words added to clauses that add or replace meanings. For example, ‘OMG did you see that?’ or ‘yeah I did but …idk’. There are also some incidences in which Netspeak neither adds nor replaces meanings. In these cases, addressees are not meant to interpret Netspeak literally but to infer from the tone of utterance and context of interaction. The varied ways in which Netspeak can be incorporated into conversations makes it especially difficult to create a solid definition. Netspeak may be compared to a dialect since it is used by people of similar linguistic knowledge who shorten or changed English words for effective communication between the users. Even Crystal (2001) has difficulties establishing a solid definition for written Netspeak. Although Netspeak is continuously evolving, it will not take long before obvious attributes establish it as a norm.

2.2 Situational Perspectives

Society has the principal influence on our speech and, therefore, determines linguistic identity which gives people a sense of acceptance and understanding. In English-speaking societies, people are not expected to understand foreign
phrases or idioms. We understand that communication has always been restricted by certain conditions. Mey (2006:53; in Haugh, 2010) states that social context not only constrains language use, but is itself constructed through the use of appropriate language: social norms are (re)instituted through the use of language. For some, the use of Netspeak could be normal and natural like a first language, however, prescriptive linguists would find that Netspeak does not conform to purposeful communication. Nevertheless, Netspeak may in fact have a purpose of creating the tone of a conversation. The two noticeable uses of Netspeak, serious and sarcastic, bring about different intentions. In observing Netspeak in verbal interactions, one can see Netspeak used as sarcasm when the utterance is typically exaggerated to signal humorous and not serious intention. On the other hand, a less exaggerated and more sincere utterance indicates serious use of Netspeak. This sincere utterance signal to the addressee that the conversation may need to be quick. Still, how does one know when to use either?

Audience design plays a big role in Netspeak utterances. Clark (1996; in Gerrig et al, 2009) highlights that each time an utterance is produced, the audience to whom the utterance is directed needs to be taken into consideration, including shared knowledge they have with the one sending the message. Therefore, those who use Netspeak are constrained to their perceived judgments of a common ground. Language users make assumptions about what speakers are likely to know based on shared community membership. Likewise, teenagers believe that other teenagers understand Netspeak, therefore, they use it as often as possible to speed communication and create a stronger bond. Problems occur when the addressee of a Netspeak utterance does not share this knowledge. For example, if a teenager used Netspeak with a parent, there is a high probability that the adult would not understand what was said. Netspeak has become a code which parents cannot decipher. Many high school students, in particular, prefer to use Netspeak to their advantage. This coding of speech could also be the reason why some perceive Netspeak as a distant, emotionless way of communicating.

2.3 Linguistic Perspective

This section is dedicated to looking at linguistic features of Netspeak through style, appropriateness and implied meanings. Netspeak, as a linguistic code, has been developed by the young generation using innate knowledge of the English language and from theories and ideals. In written Netspeak, this can be seen in the alteration of words that are phonetically similar, like l8r for ‘later’. Other aspects of Netspeak fill in gaps of style and tone. For example, rofl (rolling on floor laughing) is a common term used to establish the style of conversation as well as create meaning. It gives additional information without having the addressee to neither directly express the humorous message nor complete the action of rolling on the floor laughing. This style does not only convey a common element of linguistic expression but connects the addressee and addressee with a common
characteristic that define future communications. Users of Netspeak understand its social limitations, restricting its use to those who share similar linguistic knowledge. Several theories may dispute the appropriateness of Netspeak. Grice’s (1975) maxims of conversation address the issues of relevance, manner, quality and quantity in conversations. One particular maxim queries the effectiveness of Netspeak in communication. The maxim of manner in Netspeak does not comply with Grice’s theory as it can be ambiguous and also obscure expressions. A term such as ttyl could mean numerous things to different people. Grice also illustrates other limitations when using Netspeak in verbal conversations. The cooperation principle explains the numerous ways in which language contribute to purposeful communication. It could be debated whether Netspeak conforms to these principles by including unnecessary information which would only be essential in a computer-mediated conversation. In the same way, Netspeak is rather similar to childhood games such as double-dutch. The game conveys meaning that has been concealed, forcing the addressee to decode before inferring the intent of the addressee. Similarly, some people tend to use omg (oh my gosh/god) to show surprise or shock. On the other hand, Netspeak can be used in a sarcastic manner. Users can only infer the intent of the utterance through intonation, manner and looking at the linguistic context of the conversation. Nevertheless, prosodic features of speech do not seem to dramatically differ between the serious and sarcastic use of Netspeak. Mey (2006:52; in Haugh, 2010) states, “words, no matter how well chosen and correctly joined and pronounced do not convey the entire message, or even the major proportion of what we intend to say”. This could not be more precise than with Netspeak.

3. Analysis

The data used in this analysis was collected by observing real-time conversations. The purpose is to get insights into processes involved in the use of Netspeak and its co-constituting meanings. The data was collated over a number of weeks and although evidence is not reported word-for-word nor transcribed in this paper, the author has ensured that the essence of the utterances have been presented objectively. Since Netspeak is a relatively new concept, an alternative set of data was collected via an anonymous student online survey from various educational institutions in Brisbane, Australia. Ninety-five students between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five responded to the survey which looked at internet use and incidences of Netspeak in verbal communication. The results were calculated into percentages and presented primarily to gain insights into the processes of pragmatic use of Netspeak (see Appendix).
3.1 Observations

Example 1
Tuesday 25th May 2010
(seeing a friend at work)
Naomi: Hey bff how you doin?
Bronwyn: Im good bff. How about you?

Example 1 shows a greeting act between two co-workers. According to Horn (1999:391; in Haugh, 2010) inference cannot be attributed to a particular utterance but to a specific context between two participants. At first inspection of the interaction in Example 1, it seems that a relatively casual conversation about the well-being of one of the participants has taken place. The term bff, which refers to ‘best friends forever’, has been used by both participants. Sarcasm can be established here since the two participants had only known each other for less than two weeks. The relevance of sarcastically using bff in this utterance creates a common ground for both participants. The common ground could be understood as their dislike of Netspeak in a way to establish friendship. Either way, this common feature of Netspeak when combined with social norms of greetings, create an interaction that is comfortable for both participants. Therefore, the meaning of bff is co-constituted by both participants creating a special understanding. The sarcastic manner can further be inferred as approval of the conversation.

Example 2
Saturday 22nd May 2010
(Saying goodbye after visiting for the day)
Naomi: ok I will see you next week
Ruth: ttfn lol
Naomi: haha ttyl
Ruth: What’s that?
Naomi: Talk to you later
Ruth: oh
Nathan: fon
Naomi: What’s that?
Nathan: Fuck off noodle
(All laugh)

The participants in Example 2 are seen to be using Netspeak to say goodbye. It is important to mention that the preceding conversation between the three participants included a story about a person using Netspeak and the participants’ opinions of its use. In one instance, Example 2 shows the limitations of Netspeak where one of the participants (Nathan) does not have a shared linguistic knowledge of the code used in the interaction. Similarly, humorous and sarcastic use of Netspeak is obvious when Nathan created his own term to participate in the conversation.
While catching public transport in Brisbane, some female teenage students from a private school were discussing a weekend party. During this conversation, the term *omg* stood out several times in the interaction. During the few weeks of observations this incident was the only time in which the author had witnessed serious use of *Netspeak*. The use of *omg* in this interaction seemed similar to the use of *OK* and, had not added other information to the utterance but primarily used to facilitate the group’s discussion.

### 3.2 Survey Results

The ninety-five respondents provided responses about their varied levels of internet-use and use of written and spoken *Netspeak*. Responses were collected using a Lickert-scale where respondents positioned themselves at a point across a range (i.e. as never, sometimes, often and always). The most interesting and most relevant questions are discussed below:

#### 3.2.1 Responses for Question 8:

**Would you use internet slang as a way to communicate with your friends?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 8 illustrates a high percentage of respondents who are young Australians and use either written or spoken *Netspeak* (or both) to communicate in their everyday lives. The data further illustrates the frequency of use among the respondents. Nevertheless, there are fifteen (out of ninety-five) respondents who never use *Netspeak* in their interactions – a considerably high percentage who either do not understand or do not wish to use *Netspeak*.

#### 3.2.2 Responses for Question 9:

**If so, would you use internet slang in a sarcastic manner?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Naomi Kinsella: Btw its just netspeak lol

Of the respondents who use Netspeak in their interactions with friends, there is a high number who would use it in a sarcastic manner. The high percentage of sarcastic Netspeak-use could probably be linked to the Australian sense of humour, though the author is unable to substantiate this.

3.2.3 Responses for Question 7:
Have you ever accidentally used internet slang in your verbal communications?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>61.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30.53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main objective of the survey is to discover incidences of Netspeak in verbal conversation used by the respondents, as data for Question 7 indicates. After interviewing students on campus, a reoccurring statement about using Netspeak accidentally was apparent. From this survey, it seems that these students are not the only ones. More than half of the respondents indicated to using Netspeak in their verbal communications accidentally. Data from the survey further suggests a possible correlation between the high frequency of internet-use and the phenomenon of Netspeak-use in verbal interactions. However, further research would need to be carried out to determine this.

3.2.4 Responses for Question 10:
Which of the following do you use in verbal communication?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LOL</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>67.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRB</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMG</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BFF</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROFL</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17.89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 10 was included for the purpose of collating information pertaining to specific Netspeak terms. These popular terms (see table above) rated higher frequency of use than the author’s expectations. In the survey, an additional section was created for respondents to list Netspeak terms that were not included in the list for Question 10. Respondents included terms such as wtf, blah, zong, hax, leet, rofl (personal joke), lmao, rofl, noob and ttyl.

Data from this survey can be interpreted in numerous ways and the author’s analysis is peculiar to this paper. There are other possible correlations that with more research and testing could be more apparent. Nevertheless, it is evident from these results that Netspeak in verbal communication is becoming popular with young Australians.
4. Conclusion

The shift from computer-mediated written Netspeak to its verbal use in everyday domain has slowly entered into the language used by young Australians. Predominately used by students, Netspeak has become a coded language to make communication more exciting. By looking at the linguistic and situational perspectives, there are many factors that need to be understood in order to use Netspeak successfully. Settling on a common ground, audience design and shared knowledge play vital parts in a successful Netspeak interaction. The observations and survey paint a clearer picture of its use and essential elements for successful communication. Looking at variations of Netspeak, it is used more in sarcastic or humorous utterances rather than in serious conversations. Findings subsequently show that there is a tendency to use Netspeak as sarcasm in order to create the common ground needed for conversations to work. However, this does not mean that serious use of Netspeak does not exist. Further research is necessary to fully understand this act. Only time will tell if verbal Netspeak is here to stay.

*Author notes:

Naomi Kinsella has long been interested in social interactions after watching copious amounts of The Simpsons. While teaching English in Mexico, Naomi’s interest in interpersonal communications saw her return to university. She is currently an undergraduate student at Griffith University with majors in Linguistics, Spanish and Psychology. Naomi hopes to work in the field of psycholinguistics.

Contact email: naomi.kinsella@griffithuni.edu.au

References

### Appendix: Tabulation of data gathered from survey

1. **Age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23.16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95

2. **Sex**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>75.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 94

3. **How long do you spend on the internet per week?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1 hr</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 hrs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 hrs</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 hrs</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 5hrs</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>70.53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95

4. **How often do you use internet slang when typing to friends on MSN/Facebook?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95
5. How often do you use internet slang in Academic writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>92.63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95

6. How often have you used internet slang in verbal conversations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>63.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26.32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95

7. Have you ever accidentally used internet slang in your verbal communications?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Often</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
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<td>61.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30.53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95

8. Would you use internet slang as a way to communicate with your friends?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
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<td>62</td>
<td>65.26%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95
9. If so, would you use internet slang in a sarcastic manner?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
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<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
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</thead>
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<td>11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
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<td>30.53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total non-empty responses 95

10. Which of the following do you use in verbal communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Absolute Qty</th>
<th>Relative Qty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lol</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>67.37%</td>
</tr>
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Total non-empty responses 95

11. Do you think internet slang is important for future generations?

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Total non-empty responses 95
Trolling is an art: Towards a schematic classification of intention in internet trolling

LOCHLAN MORRISSEY*

Abstract

The anonymity inherent within internet communication changes the communicative behaviours of users by allowing them to regulate the amount of identity revealed online. A widespread phenomenon that occurs within internet communication is the act of trolling, where an utterer produces an utterance that is intentionally false or incorrect in order to elicit a generally negative or violent response from the recipients, causing them to seem foolish in the view of the online audience. This article examines the pragmatic act of trolling and seeks to provide a schema for classification of intentionality within the practice. This analysis will consider Sperber & Wilson’s ostensive-referential model of intention looking at the archetypal trolling act – specifically at recipients’ incorrect identification and understanding of the informative and communicative intentions of the troll found on an internet archive.

1. Introduction

A lack of identity in computer-mediated communication (hereafter, CMC) throughout its various genres has led to the codification of communication behaviours that are not subscribed in face-to-face communication. An example of such behaviour is trolling, an act that has become increasingly prevalent in online communication. Trolls are often seen as destructive mischief-makers and the term carries with it negative connotations (Donath, 1999). Though there exist discussions on trolling within academic literature, they are scarce and look at it as an online sociological behaviour rather than documenting the complex and coercive constituents that form part of its pragmatic act.

Using an analytic framework based on Sperber & Wilson’s (1993, 1995) ostensive-referential model of communication to analyse the archetypal trolling act, this paper will examine ways in which identity plays a part in trolling. The analysis will further put forth trolling as a pragmatic act of the utterer rather than a sociological phenomenon.
2. Literature Review

Upon its emergence, CMC presented researchers with a problem of classification: whether to treat CMC as a (i) written form (ii) a form of ‘written speech’ or (iii) an intermediate form with constraints unique to the medium. Herring (2007:2-3) suggests that these early attempts at classification pigeon-holed all forms of CMC into a single genre, when in reality, each genre of CMC (email, forums, chat rooms, etc.) generates its own communicative norms which are dependant on a variety of factors.

Another aspect inherent in CMC, specifically in online communication, is identity. Contrary to face-to-face communication, online communication is epistemic and based on information, rather than matter. In the physical world, the body provides compelling and convenient definition of identity, whilst in online environment, identity is palpable and entirely constructed (Donath, 1999:29-31). Even in environments, such as online forums, where registration of some aspects of the identity (e.g. name, age, location) is required, a user can easily gain access to more than a single account and use different kinds of ‘identities’.

Does this anonymity lead to a change in the communicative behaviours of online users? King (1996:126) proposes that this anonymity allows users to converse about issues that would otherwise be too sensitive for face-to-face interaction. However, this breaking-down of inhibitions can also result to negative consequences such as in rejection of the norms of civil society that could lead to harassment, flaming and hate speech (Ess, 1996).

Grice (1967, 1989) identifies that intention within human interaction is communicated, based on the recognition of the utterer’s intention by the audience. The utterer, by meaning an utterance, necessarily has to attempt to cause the audience to take a certain response to this utterance. Is the intention behind any given utterance, therefore, merely the decoding, correct or incorrect, of a purely linguistic token? Sperber & Wilson (1993; cited in Arundale, 2005:53) posit that this encoding/decoding model is incomplete, arguing that this model cannot fill the gap that exists between semantic representations and cognition, rather, that inference, on the basis of optimal relevance to the stimulus, fills this gap. They argue that the intention within human interaction can be viewed as an ‘ostensive-inferential’ phenomenon; that the communicator aims to make a set of assumptions manifest to both the communicator and their audience by using a certain stimulus such as a linguistic utterance (Arundale, 2008:238). Therefore, “ostensive-inferential communication may be achieved without the communicators providing any direct evidence for the intended conclusion. All they have to do is provide evidence of the fact that they intend the addressee to come to this conclusion” (Sperber & Wilson, 2002:15)
Within each utterance, Sperber & Wilson (1995:29) argue, there are two key intentions: the informative and communicative. As demonstrated in the previous discussion, the informative intention is the “intention to make manifest... to the audience a set of assumptions” whilst the communicative intention is an “intention to make it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has a particular informative intention” (Carston, 2002:376-7). Taillard (2002:191) expands on this model of communication, by applying the notion of a ‘plan’ (originally attested to Bratman (1987)), a high-order intention that “is the driving force behind our interactive and communicative actions”. He explains that both communicative and informative intentions are subordinate to the plan, which is used “to coordinate one’s actions with others – it is the agent’s commitment to that higher-level intention which necessitates the fulfilment of the lower-level communicative and informative intentions” (Taillard, 2002:199).

Scholarly literature on the topic of trolling is scarce; the existing literature on focuses on trolling within the online community and its affects on the community, rather than seeing it as a pragmatic act. The literature defines trolling as diverting the topic of a discussion, causing it to descend into a heated argument. Donath (1999:45) suggests that “trolling is a game about identity deception... [t]he troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns”. Herring et al (2002:373) expand this further, defining trolling as “luring others into pointless and time-consuming [off-topic] discussions” and say that by “[starting] with a message that is intentionally incorrect but not overly controversial... the goal of a troll is to draw in particularly naïve or vulnerable readers”. Both definitions emphasise the destructive nature of trolling to an online community’s trust. Subsequently, as users become more cognisant of trolling, they will become suspicious of naïve, though legitimate, posts.

3. Classification of intention in trolling

The definitions provided above by Donath and Herring give a functional description of trolling within an online community. For the purpose of pragmatic classification, I will posit an extension to the definition: that trolling is an utterer producing an intentionally false or incorrect utterance with high-order intention (the plan) to elicit from recipient a particular response, generally negative or violent (with some exceptions which we will see further in the discussion). Considering the extended definition, let us take the following hypothetical online forum posts (examples (1) – (4)) with no particular aim, topic or special interests:

(1) Trolling is a art.
At first glance, the above utterance would seem to include an innocuous spelling error. Whether intending to be helpful or condescending, a user might respond with a post:

(2) Don’t you mean an art?

This is a very simple example of a trolling practice. The troll has uttered an intentional fallacy with the high-order intention of causing the recipient to correct the apparent mistake that is achieved through the use of a stimulus. The ‘form’ of the trolling practice, in this example, a spelling error, attracts the recipient’s attention.

Another hypothetical example is a post containing an image of a recently deceased public figure (an actor, musician, politician, etc.) with some form of a ‘rest in peace’ message, using the name of someone who looks similar, or is otherwise associated with the public figure. For example:

(3) (Next to a picture of Brittany Murphy):

Brittany Spears, 1977–2009
Goodnight sweet princess.

The intended response to this stimulus is to elicit correction to the identity of the deceased; informing the troll that the image was of Murphy and not Spears, and possibly, a more negative, insulting or retaliating response.

Within the practice, there is generally a third actor, the audience (usually constituted of a number of users). While not always directly involved in the practice, the audience are usually more aware of trolling techniques, thus, avoid being trapped by trolls. This awareness of trolling techniques is generally a result of the audience’s previous experiences with trolls, allowing recognition of certain patters, norms, and ‘standard’ trolling stimuli (examples (1) and (3) are commonly used simple trolling acts) or the audience themselves being experienced trolls. They often provide a meta-pragmatic account for the preceding practice, by alerting the recipient that they have been ‘trolled’ (this meta-pragmatic account is often given in an impolite way). Using the examples in (1) and (2):

(4) T: Trolling is a art.
R: Don’t you mean an art?
A: [quote] Don’t you mean an art? [/quote]
Haha, you got troll’d.
The practice, thus, can be broken into three basic constituents: (i) the informative intention (ii) the high-order intention and (iii) the stimulus. How does the troll use these three constituents to cause the recipient to follow the trolling intention and comply with the intended response? Taking example (1); the informative intention of the utterer would seem to be positing an idea in order to instigate a discussion on that idea. Whilst the idea may be valid, the recipient would see the spelling error and correct it. The troll’s high-order intention, then, is to cause the recipient to correct the ‘mistake’. However, using the stimulus (the spelling error, in (1)), the troll coerces the recipient into recognising only the informative intention. The audience, on the contrary, recognise both the informative intention and the high-order intention, and is able to recognise the trolling act. This schema can be applied to all trolling acts; for example in (2), the informative intention is the pay respects to the deceased individual, the stimulus is the incorrect identification of the public figure in the image, and the high-order intention is to elicit a correction response.

To what purpose does the troll perform this complex act? The motive lies within the desire of the troll to make the recipient seem foolish, generally in the view of the audience, thereby embarrassing the recipient. Causing the recipient to elicit an immediate, visceral (sometimes, violent) reaction to a seemingly innocuous error makes the recipient seem unthoughtful and naïve. The audience’s meta-pragmatic response highlights to the recipient that they have been fooled, increasing the troll’s effect.

4. Analysis

For this analysis, transcripts from a website of a self-confessed troll are used. The website is managed by a troll who responds to online advertisements with replies that are often outrageous or controversial. Whilst this does not conform to the archetypal trolling act as the troll responds to the recipient, rather than the troll ‘luring’ the recipient into the trolling act (as demonstrated in examples (1) and (2)) the constituents of a trolling practice are still visible.

(5) (a) Original ad:

   hi there i am a 22 year old female babysitter looking for a job. i am available pretty much all the time so if you need someone to look after your kid, let me know!

(b) From Timmy Tucker [troll] to *********@*******_.org [recipient]

   Hey,
   I saw your ad about babysitting and am very interested. My grandmother is in the hospital and is probably going to die. She is never awake when I am there, and the doctors say she is only awake for about 5
minutes every couple of days. The problem is, I need her to sign a re-drafted will I wrote so I can get all of her stuff when she dies. Right now she has all of her money going to my bitch sister and her family. I don't have the time to sit there and watch her all day because I have better things to do. I need you to sit at the hospital and watch her in case she wakes up, and then make her sign the will. I will pay you $10 an hour for this job.

Thanks,
Tim

(c) From **********@gmail.com to Me
no thanks that is sick! show some sympathy you prick!

Example (5) shows a trolling practice similar to examples (1) or (3). The troll presents his informative intent – hiring a babysitting service using his dying grandmother as the stimulus. The recipient sees only this intent and without realising the presence of high-order intent, gives a reaction that the troll anticipated.

(6)  
(a) Original ad:
litter of 6 kittens up for adoption! they are all 3 weeks old and are looking for a good home. contact if interested.

(b) From Mike Hunt [troll] to **********@**********.org [recipient]
Hi,
I am interested in taking all six kittens off of your hands. How much do you want for them?
Mike

(c) From Shannon ******* to Me
Mike,
Are you going to take care of all of these kittens? I want to make sure they all find a good home, and was expecting to sell them one at a time. Are you able to house all six of them?

(d) From Mike Hunt to Shannon *******
Shannon,
To be honest, I own a pet Bengal Tiger and he is on a strict diet of cats. I usually feed him one cat every couple of days, so this litter should hold him over for a while. Don’t worry though, I'll take good care of the kittens until I feed them to him.
Mike

(e) From Shannon ******* to Me
That is horrible! You will not get a single kitten from me. I really hope you are not serious.
Example (6) shows a much less subtle trolling pract, although the troll uses a much longer set-up than in any of the previous examples. Interestingly, in both (5) and (6), the members of the audience are invisible and not part of the interaction. The troll is, however, ‘performing’ for the audience, as he knows that there will be an audience in the future (i.e. when these transcripts are posted on the website).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the objective is to set out an ostensive-inferential framework for analysing the trolling practice. The anonymity inherent within CMC, such as trolling, allows users to engage in behaviours they would otherwise be reluctant to carry out in face-to-face interactions. Literature on trolling has emphasised the sociological implications of a troll’s actions, rather than studying the complex intention and planning embedded in the act. The troll achieves his desired outcome, making the recipient seems foolish for reacting viscerally to such an obvious or foolish troll, by projecting an informative intent using a stimulus (which is generally a fallacy, and is used to attract attention). This act coerces the recipient into not recognising the high-order intention of the troll (that is, to elicit the intended reaction). A third party in the form of an audience, because of prior experience or other situational factors, can recognise both the informative and high-order intentions of the troll and, therefore, does not produce the response that the troll had intended.

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Compliments on Possessions in Australian English

TIHANA MILINKOVIC*

Abstract

This report explores compliments in Australian English, focusing on complimenting possessions. The author’s main interests were to analyse the components and characteristics of this type of compliment. Data collected analysed a scene from an Australian drama ‘Packed to the Rafters’. This situated data was further used as a basis for interviews conducted with 4 Australians. Compliments on possessions most often consist of the main head act without additional information in support of the compliments. The report suggests that compliments should be expressed with clearly positive adjectives for successful transmission and to avoid ambiguities. According to research data, when compliments are made on personal possessions, compliment-givers tend to be very reserved but extremely polite. Similarly, compliment-givers would pay a brief compliment on the possession regardless if they like the possession and irrespective of the power distance, and types of relationships between them and compliment-receivers. Overall, the report concludes that compliments on possessions are inherently polite speech acts consisting only the main head act in most cases.

1. Introduction

Giving and interpreting compliments may be as problematic as it is responding to them. Although it is shown that compliments, as speech acts, possess poor semantic and syntactic structure, and that they are mere formulas (Holmes, 1986; Wolfson, 1983), what is said in addition to that base formula often determines the success and appropriateness of compliments. Moreover, compliments often have additional implicit meanings that make their interpretation more difficult. As Taavitsainen & Jucker (2008:199) observe, we often cannot be sure whether the compliment-giver gave us a routine compliment or a sarcastic comment, since the “speaker’s illocutions may vary from sincere and honest to playful, ironic and sarcastic”.

Appearance is one of the most frequent complimenting areas and compliments on possessions belong to that category (Wolfson, 1983). Since people frequently compliment each other on their personal possessions, this report looks at the nature of compliments on possessions in Australian English order to analyse their components and characteristics.
Firstly, the report will present results of previous research on giving compliments, followed by the methodology used for data collection. The final section of the report is an analysis of data from which the conclusions are drawn. This report suggests that compliments on possessions consist of head acts alone and that they are inherently polite speech acts.

2. Literature Review

According to Holmes (1986:485), “a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer”. In addition, a compliment is an expressive, interlocutor-centered and polite speech act, typically followed by the hearer’s response (Dumitrescu, 2006).

Mannes (1983) explains that compliments primarily serve the establishment or reinforcement of solidarity between the compliment-giver and receiver. Moreover, Wolfson (1983:86) concurs with Mannes by stating that compliments are “social lubricants which create or maintain rapport”. Holmes (1986) agrees that the primary function of compliments is affective and social, stating that other functions are praise, encouragement and gratitude, to open a conversation or to enhance greeting, thanking and apologising.

According to Wolfson (1983), there are only three syntactic structures that occur consistently in complimenting speech acts (‘NP is/looks (really) ADJ’, ‘I (really) like/love NP’ and ‘PRO is (really) a ADJ NOUN’). The most frequent adjectives are ‘nice’, ‘good’, ‘lovely’, ‘beautiful’, ‘great’ and ‘neat’ and the most frequent verbs are ‘to look’ and ‘to be’. The findings were remarkably similar in American and New Zealand English data which confirm the formulaic nature of English compliments (Holmes, 1986).

3. Methodology

In order to collect data about compliments in Australian English, the following methods were used:

a. situated data analysis
b. semi-structured interviews

Firstly, an analysis of a scene from the Australian drama ‘Packed to the Rafters’ was conducted. The situated data was subsequently used as a reference for the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with 4 Australians (2 females and 2 males). Prior to the interviews, all interviewees viewed the scene from ‘Packed to the
Rafters’ that showed 3 characters and, where a compliment speech act was present. The viewing was to enable the interviewees to interpret what constitute compliments more accurately. Since the compliment speech act in ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene is rather problematic, the aim of the interviews was to investigate how Australians would interpret compliments and, more importantly, what they regard as appropriate or inappropriate when complimenting others on their personal possessions. The interviewees’ responses were analysed in terms of the essential and extra components of compliments. Also, the analysis investigated compliments on possessions in relation to politeness/impoliteness and relations between compliment-givers and compliment-receivers.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Situational data analysis

Given below is the conversation extracted from the scene in ‘Packed to the Rafters’ where it is possible to recognise the problematic complimenting speech act and its elements. The scene’s complimenting speech act is not a representative compliment, nevertheless, it provides a short analysis as a basis for the interviews and to draw conclusions about features of compliments upon its faults. (For the component analysis of the ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene, refer to Table 1 in Appendix 1).

1  P1 (Julie): …and then† we added this↑ bit on…about (. ) well ten years [ago]
   =
2  P2 (Trish): [mmh]
3  P1 (Julie): = with three↑ teenage kids we needed an extra room (. ) and there
   was no way I was gonna pack up and move↑ again ha[hah] =
4  P2 (Trish): [ha]hha
5  P1 (Julie): = mind that I have to say that renovating did have its moments
6  P2 (Trish): ohh it looks lovely↑ (head act-direct compliment) (. ) Tony and I
   started off in a tiny place like this (problematic extra information in support of
   the compliment) (. ) it’s very cosy↑ (head act 2-direct compliment; ‘cosy’ is
   ambiguous)
7  P3 (Sammy): °mum don’t start°
8  P2 (Trish): I’m not↑ starting anything↑ I mean it (. ) in fact↑ it’s a palace
   compared to what your father and I started out in (extra information in
   support of the compliment, problematic indirect compliment)
9  P1 (Julie): (0.5) ok well uhm make↑ yourself at home (. ) I just gotta get ready
   for work
4.2. Semi-structured interview analysis

As mentioned earlier in this section, complimenting on personal possessions was investigated through interviews with 4 Australians. The aim was to find common ways in which this speech act is conducted in Australian English. The findings of the interviews will be discussed in the following sections: (i) compliments - essential and extra components (ii) compliments and (im)politeness and (iii) compliments and relationships between compliment-givers and -receivers.

4.2.1. Compliments – essential and extra components

In order to determine which parts of compliments are essential, the interviewees were asked to identify them in the speech act from the ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene.

All four interviewees agreed that the statement ‘it looks lovely’ is a compliment. According to Wolfson (1983), the most frequent syntactic structure of compliments is ‘NP is/looks (really) ADJ’. (‘It’ is a pronoun not a noun, however, we can subscribe the compliment ‘it looks lovely’ in this category because we know that ‘it’ refers to the house in this context). Moreover, Wolfson (1983) includes the adjective ‘lovely’ as the six most common complimenting adjectives. There is no surprise then that all interviewees acknowledged the statement ‘it looks lovely’ as a compliment and recognised its necessity in the communicative event. There is another compliment with the same syntactic structure in the scene – ‘it’s very cosy’. However, not all interviewees acknowledged that ‘it’s very cosy’ as a real compliment. This is what one of the female interviewees (aged 30) said:

“…uhm (...) very cosy: (...) it could be a compliment yeah... but† cosy can mean also very cluttered† I believe (0.5) it depends how you take it cosy can be warm as a compliment but cosy could:: also mean small like she’s saying that it’s small†... which is not a compliment really…”

This signifies that compliments should be expressed with positive adjectives, since they are inherently positive and polite speech acts. Even then, compliments may be sarcastic, ironic or deceptive and their meanings would need to be clarified (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2008). However, as we have also seen in the example ‘it’s very cosy’, if the meaning of a compliment adjective is ambiguous rather than positive, the compliment speech act becomes ambiguous and may not be considered a real compliment.

The parts the interviewees did not consider essential in this particular speech act, and any other compliment speech acts, are the parts where extra information is
added in support of the compliment. Below was a response from one of the male interviewees (aged 50):

“... it would be↑ enough to say it’s lovely↑ (.) you don’t have to give any reasons why↑ you think like that (.) or to compare it to something else to prove ↑that it’s lovely↑...”

This suggests that use of grounders or softeners in real compliment speech acts are not essential. Male interviewees support this claim, however, female interviewees do not. One of the female interviewees (aged 45) observed:

“... well:: clearly↑ in this case trish ruins the whole compliment but↑ (.) if she said that↑ (.) for example that her house is not so big or comfortable then the compliment could have been stronger↑...”

According to this data, men tend to give simpler compliments while women tend to add additional information in support of the compliment. However, this data is not sufficient to make any definite conclusions about the difference between the way men and women pay compliments.

Overall, all interviewees agree that statements like ‘it looks lovely’ represent the essential part of any Australian English compliment (head act in compliment speech act), while grounders, softeners or any information in support of compliments are not essential. The crucial elements of compliments on possessions could be seen as the target of the compliment (possession), a target to whom this possession is attributed (addressee) and a positive evaluation (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2008).

Since the compliment made in the scene from ‘Packed to the Rafters’ is not a real compliment but a sarcastic comment, the interviewees did not notice that the compliment response is missing. Although analysis of compliment responses is not part of this research, when asked about responding to compliments about possessions, the interviewees said that ‘it is nice to say something in return’. This confirms the way compliment speech acts are usually carried out – first, a compliment is made (head act) and subsequently, an appropriate response to the compliment (Wolfson, 1983).

4.2.2. Compliments and (im)politeness

In relation to the concept of face, Spencer-Oatey (2008) points out that people always wish that others evaluate them positively and acknowledge their positive values. There are no better speech acts than compliments to serve this function; however, Brown & Levinson (1987) describe compliments as inherently face-threatening acts,
besides being face-enhancing speech acts. Compliments may be experienced as face-threatening when they are perceived as too personal, patronising, offensively flattering, sarcastic or used to express envy and desire for hearer’s possession (Holmes, 1995).

All interviewees thought that the compliment from the ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene is not appropriate. Moreover, they do not perceive that it is a compliment at all. As one of the male interviewees (aged 28) said:

“no: no that’s not a compliment hahaha (. ) she’s just being bitchy↑ yeah (. ) and sarcastic”

When asked why they do not consider P2’s comment (refer to the transcribed conversation lines 6 and 8 and Table 1 in Appendix 1) to be a compliment, the representative response came from one of the female interviewees (aged 45):

“well: she’s obviously putting her down saying that her house is tiny↑ and yeah she’s boasting↑ about herself like: maybe she’s suggesting that she had that kind of a house when she was younger but she later achieved something much better and bigger↑ (. ) no that’s not complimenting”

As Holmes (1986:485-486) explains, “compliments normally attribute the valued ‘good’ to the addressee, and even when a compliment apparently refers to third person, it may well be indirectly complimenting the addressee”. In this regard (and with reference to the interviewee’s response above), it could be said that the appropriate compliment on the house is an indirect compliment to the addressee, since it indirectly attributes credit to her, for example, good taste or even an achievement to have her own house.

Thus, caution has to be practised when complimenting others’ personal possessions. When asked what is appropriate and polite to express in situations similar to the scene from ‘Packed to the Rafters’ yet avoiding offending the addressee, all interviewees said that it would be sufficient to say that the house (or whatever possession) looks lovely. Sarcastic comments as in lines 6 and 8 (refer to the transcribed conversation lines 6 and 8 and Table 1 in the Appendix) are neither polite nor appropriate.

Concerning politeness, the interviewees were asked what they would say if someone proudly shows them a personal possession but they personally do not like it. These are the answers of the male interviewee (aged 50) and the female interviewee (aged 30):

“…well: I would say it’s nice and probably: stop yeah I wouldn’t say anything else…”
“… uhmm (. ) I’d say something like oh↑ wow↑ it’s lovely↑, it’s so: beautiful… and stop there (.) but I guess if I really really don’t↑ like it I would react differently (. ) I wouldn’t sound so enthusiastic and shocked… for example my friend painted her wall green I mean really green and I said oh, yeah, it’s very nice, it’s very you…”

From the interviewee-responses, it could be concluded that people are very careful when giving compliments on personal possessions in order not to offend the addressee. They would even provide a positive response even though they do not like the possession in question. Even if they like the possession, they would most often stop at the basic compliment head act.

Finally, to confirm the politeness of people when giving compliments, interviewees were asked whether they would engage in conversation about the possession if they felt that the addressee would like to continue talking and boasting about it. All interviewees answered positively that they would allow the person to continue. They would initiate questions, for example, “What do you like most about your new car?” or “Where did you find that green color? The following section will discuss whether these opinions change in relation to familiarity and relationship with the compliment-receiver.

4.2.3. Compliments and relationship between compliment-giver and compliment-receiver

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), power and distance of relationships are considerations when conveying speech acts. The interviewees were asked whether the power and distance differences between them and the addressees influence their way of giving compliments.

In the case of unequal role relations, all interviewees said they would always give a short compliment to someone with more power whether they like the possession or not. The interviewees would behave similarly in social settings. All interviewees stated they would give only very short compliments, usually without any non-essential parts.

Therefore, the interviewees would give compliments when they feel the addressee expects it, regardless if the addressee is an acquaintance or a friend or whether they like the possession. Based on these responses, it can be concluded that compliments on possessions are given with politeness in mind. Furthermore, the features of compliments on possessions do not change in relation to power distance and types of relationship.
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, compliments on possessions in Australian English are usually short and formulaic in nature. They consist of the compliment head act and are rarely followed by any other supporting information. The complimenting adjective should be positive and not ambiguous. Compliments often need interpretation in context, since sarcasm may be disguised within the compliment speech act. Compliment-givers are very careful to be polite when giving compliment, in order not to offend the compliment-receiver. The compliments on possessions may offend the compliment-receiver if the possessions reflect his/her taste. People would rather compliment the possession than admit not liking it, irrespective of the relationship between the compliment-giver and -receiver. This confirms that the function of compliments is to build or maintain rapport (Wolfson, 1983). However, given the small scale of my research data, these conclusions are not definite and further research on the nature of compliments on possessions would be of benefit.

*Author Notes

Tihana moved to Australia during her final year of Professor of English Language and Literature diploma at University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Australia, she resumed her studies at Griffith University. She is currently in her last semester of BA in Languages and Applied Linguistics, majoring in International English. Her academic interests include languages, linguistics and intercultural communication. Contact email: Tihana.Milinkovic@student.griffith.edu.au

References


### Appendix 1: Component analysis

**Table 1. Component analysis of ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene**

<table>
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<th>Component</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose or Function</strong></td>
<td>Rapport building and self-boasting. P1 wants to make P2 (who is the first time in P1’s house) feel welcome by talking about the house. P2 is patronising and putting P1 down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
<td>P1’s living room, early morning. Women are standing while talking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional tone</strong></td>
<td>P1 creates a friendly, sincere and polite emotional tone. After P2’s compliment in a sarcastic key, there is a confusion and unpleasantness in the air.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
<td>P1 (Julie): middle-class woman, pleasant and friendly, happily married with a big family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P2 (Trish): high-class woman, full of herself, looks down at other people, divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P3 (Sammy): Trish’s only daughter, middle-class woman, polite and considerate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Message content</strong></td>
<td>Description of house and sarcastic comment about its appearance and size.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Act sequence</strong></td>
<td>1 P1: explanation of an added bit of the house (providing the compliment base)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 P2: expression of understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 P1: giving reasons for renovating (fishing for the understanding of hearer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 P2: expression of understanding and amusement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 P1: stating positive sides of renovating (desire not to cause the hearer’s pity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 P2: head act 1 (direct compliment on the house appearance) + extra information in support of the compliment (sarcastic and patronising comment) + head act 2 (another direct compliment, ambiguous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 P3: recognition of compliment wrongs and desire to prevent any further harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 P2: disagreement with accusation and confirmation of a compliment sincerity + broadening of extra information in support of the compliment, sarcasm continuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 P1: expression of confusion + hospitality offer + giving reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rules of interaction</strong></td>
<td>A compliment should be a polite speech act that enhances the addresses face and it usually requires a response from the addressee in the next turn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Norms of interpretation</strong></td>
<td>P2 is not necessarily being sincere, but rather sarcastic, self-oriented and tactless. ‘Cosy’ could mean comfortable but also small.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Interview questions

1. Do you think that what P2 said is a compliment?

2. If so, why do you think that it is a compliment?

3. If not, why do you think that it is not a compliment?

4. How is politeness reflected in this communicative event?

5. What parts of this communicative event could be considered complimentary?

6. Which parts of P2 is statement, regardless of the actual meaning of her statement, are the necessary parts of every compliment? Which parts are not essential?

7. When would you use those non-essential parts?

8. If someone is showing you something personal and is obviously proud of it, what would you say?

9. How do you compliment other people on their possessions? Do you use non-essential parts?

10. Would you say that the possession is nice, because you know that the other person wants to hear that, regardless of your personal opinion?

11. Would you give a compliment even though you do not like the possession?

12. Would you ever admit you do not like it and to whom might you say that (to an acquaintance/a close friend)?

13. Would you ask for more information about the possession and in that way enable that person to brag about it? If yes, why? If not, why?
How Socially Sensitive Questions are Asked and Answered: A Pragmatic Act

CHARLOTTE YOUNG*

Abstract

How socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered between people at different stages of friendship (or closeness) is an important and necessary study in the field of face and face threatening acts (FTAs). This paper largely focuses on how these types of questions are asked and answered between close friends by examining previous research on face and (im)politeness and analysing two face-to-face interactions. By examining research conducted on the closely-related field of face and (im)politeness, it can be concluded that socially-sensitive questions are nearly always only asked in the presence of close friends, where the likelihood of losing face and an FTA occurring is significantly reduced.

1. Introduction

There are a number of potential problems that arise when one asks or answers a socially-sensitive question. Many of these usually occur when the participants do not know each other very well. However, issues can also arise when socially-sensitive topics are brought up between close friends. Some of the most common problems are related to face and face threatening acts (FTAs).

The aim of this paper is to examine how socially sensitive questions are asked and answered during face-to-face conversations. This will occur through a review of some of the many research related to face and (im)politeness, and the analysis of two extracts. The analysis will largely focus on the broad topics of face, and (im)politeness in order to illustrate how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered.

2. Literature Review

While previous research into this particular topic has never been completed, there have been many research papers on the extensive topics of face, and (im)politeness. These topics are both related to the pragmatic act of how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered. The author has focused on a small number of researches that have been published by selected linguists and the following review is by no means exhaustive.
2.1 Face

According to Lee & Renzetti (1990:511), any topic has the ability to be considered “sensitive”. This ability is dependent on the relationship between the participants (Arundale, 2006) and the culture(s) they have been exposed to in life (Culpeper, in press:2). Usually, one would not bring up an extremely sensitive topic unless they know the other participant(s) very well and are close friends. Arundale (2006:203) notes that interpersonal relationships are characterised by:

- openness (sharing), and closedness with one’s partner,
- certainty about the relationship, and uncertainty about it, and
- connectedness with the other, and separateness from them.

If a particularly sensitive topic is introduced into a conversation between acquaintances, there would be a higher risk of an FTA occurring for the participants. Having said that, an FTA can occur no matter how close the participants are. This is because an FTA is “any action that impinges to some degree upon a person’s face” (Culpeper, in press:7-8). What usually constitutes an FTA depends on whether it is the hearer’s or speaker’s face that is threatened (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press). Actions that threaten the hearer’s face usually include “orders, requests, threats, criticism, contradictions, and the mention of taboo topics” (Culpeper, in press:8), whilst actions that threaten the speaker’s face usually consist of “expressing thanks, unwilling promises and offers, apologies, the breakdown of physical control over one’s body, and confessions”. This paper will mainly focus on the former, that is, actions that threaten the hearer’s face.

Positive and negative output strategies are commonly used in order to reduce the possibility of an FTA (Culpeper, in press:10). Some such strategies (not exhaustive), given by Brown & Levinson (1987) are listed below (in Culpeper, in press:10-11):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Politeness Output Strategies (PPOSs)</th>
<th>Negative Politeness Output Strategies (NPOSs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Avoid disagreement (token agreement, white lies, hedging opinions)</td>
<td>• Question, hedge (address hedges to illocutionary force, Grice’s Maxims, politeness strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Joke that utilise shared knowledge to put the hearer at ease</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give (or ask for) reasons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2.2 (Im)politeness

Each participant’s perspective on (im)politeness varies according to their individual cultural upbringing and relationship between each other (Arundale, 2006; Culpeper, in press). What is considered impolite in one country or culture may be considered polite in another, and vice versa. Due to this fact, there are many different definitions and approaches to politeness (Culpeper, in press). A pragmatic approach, employed by Leech (1983:82) claims that there is a Politeness Principle, and the role of this principle is “to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place”. This is further illustrated by Brown & Levinson (1987 in Culpeper, in press:8) who claim that “in general, people cooperate (and assume each other’s cooperation) in maintaining face”. In general, face, especially FTAs, and (im)politeness are strongly linked because impoliteness can result in FTAs and these possible FTAs can be resolved by undertaking one of the many politeness strategies (Culpeper, in press).

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Extract One

In extract (1) below, the two participants are close friends, catching up in the campus grounds before a class starts. Jane (a pseudonym) is eighteen years old, while Claire (again a pseudonym) is nineteen. Both participants are in their second year of university and are both native Australian English speakers. This extract is from a much longer conversation that occurred in the one sitting.

The extract below is an example of how Jane asks a fairly sensitive question and how Claire acknowledges and answers it.

(1) GCSAusE29: 4:22 - 5:15

1 Claire: I remember once: (0.4) u:m:, (1.1) like (1.0) grade one or t:wo, (0.5) mum driving us to school in Sydney, (0.4) and there bein:g (0.3) like a huntsman or something on the roof;
2 Jane: °mhm°=
3 Claire: and then it- it would crawl under the carpet that was li[ning the roof,]
4 Jane: [°oh yep° ]
5 Claire: ↑(hh)I(hh) was like (   )
6 Jane: °mhm°=
7 Claire: (9.2)
Charlotte Young: How socially sensitive questions are asked and answered

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12 Jane: [Yuk ] um (. ) I can’t (0.6) °mmm°
13 Claire: [·hhh]
14 (0.3)
15 Claire: I can’t- _ huntsmans I can’t st[and.]
16 Jane: [I ca]n’t deal with them they’re too bi:gi:a[nd s]cary and ugh:.
17 Claire: [Yeah]
18 (0.4)
19 Claire: It’s horrible.
20 (0.3)
21 Jane: mmm um: (1.5) are you superstitionious?
22 (3.0)°
23 Claire: yes and no:. there’s a _bloo:dy bird<
24 (hh)ther(hh)e.
25 Claire: Hhhhh
26 Claire: °ye[s-]
27 Jane: °h°ow small is it, it’s the smallest ibis I’ve ever seen°
28 (0.7)
29 Claire: <why::>.
30 Jane: °um: well becau:se° (1.7) I think I’m >kinda like yes and no like you know some things I’ll believe in and then other things I’m just like nye:< h[h ]=
31 Claire: [ye] [ah: ]
32 Claire: (=you kno)w like
33 (1.7)
34 Claire: I think,
35 (2.2)
36 Jane: °but u[m:]°
37 Claire: [li]ke if you mean like (0.5) u:m (1.3) for instance walking under a: (1.0) >a [sign or something< I’m]=
38 Jane: [hh yeah that’s (just) stupid ye-]
39 Claire: =not super(hh)stitious bu- and like the black cat and walking under a ladder and that sorta thing,
40 (0.3)
41 Jane: °<d’you believe in ghosts°?
42 (2.5)
43 Claire: not really.
44 ()
45 Jane: °well see (. ) I’m the- sorta the same right? (0.5)
46 anyway° (1.9) I have _come to the _conclusion
Line 22 in extract (1), Jane asks Claire if she is superstitious. Initially, this looks to be the primary sensitive type question. However, if we look at line 49, we see that the question in line 22 has been used as a Pre-First Pair Part (FPPpre) to the Base-First Pair Part (FPPb) (Schegloff, 2007a:13-14). Given this, the abrupt change in topic (line 22), and the fact that the introduction of any sensitive type topic into a conversation has the ability to result in an FTA, line 22 can be referred to as a hedging question to ascertain, in this instance, Claire’s belief or possible response to the main question in line 49. Claire’s initial response (line 24) to this possible FTA is to avoid disagreement by hedging her opinion (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:10-11). This reaction can thus be considered a dispreferred Second Pair Part (SPP) (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008:46-47; Pomerantz, 1984:64; Schegloff, 2007a:13-14). Claire then follows this response with another PPOS in line 31 by asking “why” and thus asking for a reason behind the question in line 22 (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press). Jane’s reaction to this politeness strategy is, initially, hesitation (line 32 - “um well”), however she continues, after 1.7 seconds, with her thoughts and beliefs on superstition (lines 32-35). An important thing to notice here is, in comparison to her other speech, she rushes through these thoughts and beliefs (indicated by the > and <). At this point, it seems as though the roles have changed between the participants. Jane answers Claire’s counter question (line 31) as though Claire was the one who initiated the possible FTA. By hesitating and then rushing through her own thoughts and beliefs, Jane utilises the same PPOSs of avoiding disagreement (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:10-11) that Claire used in line 24. Amazingly, as Jane utilises this politeness strategy, she also performs another PPOS, namely putting Claire at ease by putting forth her (Jane’s) own ideas on the matter (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:11-12). Claire accepts this, and expands her initial response (line 24) by providing more information in lines 42-44 and 46-47. Both of the participants make use of the PPOS of putting Claire at ease, as seen by the laughing in lines 45 and 46 (indicated by the “hh”) and Jane’s teasing (or joking) in line 45 (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:10-11).

From this extract, we can conclude that sensitive topics and questions are, in this case, brought into the conversation rather abruptly, as opposed to a naturally flowing conversation and topic change. We can also suggest that these types of topics can be initiated through the use of hedging questions, as in the use of pre-invitations, to ascertain how the FPPb will be received to avoid the possibility of an FTA (Schegloff, 2007a:13-14, 2007b:29-31). The decision to continue with the sensitive topic is dependent on how the FPPpre is received, and establishing

(Young, 2010)
whether the face of both participants would be maintained (Brown & Levinson, 1987:60-61 in Culpeper, in press; Schegloff, 2007a:13-14). Once the topic is continued (in this case), politeness strategies are used, mainly positive, in order for both participants to save face.

3.2 Extract Two

The 4 participants involved in extract (2) below are young native speakers of Australian English. The main participants involved in this extract are H, L, and D. The extract is based on what happened during an argument that H had with her boss over the phone. L and D are trying to get her to tell them what happened but H is, initially, not interested in answering their questions.

(2) GCSAusE19: 0:00 - 0:31

1 (noises coming from kitchen throughout recording))
2 L: s:o what are you doin?
3 (1.2)
4 H: °i don’t know.°
5 (0.9)
6 L: you don’t know
7 (3.5)
8 H: ((clears throat))
9 D: s:o what happened?
10 (1.3)
11 H: °a lot of stuff°
12 (0.5)
13 M: sounds like she’s being a righ:\t-
14 (0.9)
15 H: ṣ:Bitch:
16 M: Pain in the butt.
17 (2.5)
18 M: u:mm
19 (1.9)
20 H: >what happened is I told shirl I couldn’t work today n she
21 forgot bout it n blamed it on ṣ:Me<
22 (0.6)
23 D: mmm.
24 H: <parently didn’t happen: it’s my word against Hers
25 (0.7) so
26 she’s obviously righ:\t [0.9] Never HAPpened it’s
27 (1.3) [·hhh ]
28 D: all
29 H: in my hea:d.
30 (McLeod, 2010)

In this extract, the sensitive topic has nothing to do with a particular belief, as in (1), but is still considered sensitive due to H’s initial refusal in explaining

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what transpired with her boss during the telephone interaction. Originally, \( L \) asks her \( (H) \) “so what are you doing?” (line 2) and receives a dispreferred response (line 4), indicated by the pause in line 3 (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008:47) and the softer tone of voice (shown by ‘). We can also assume that \( H \)'s response is dispreferred because of the pause in line 5. This pause seems to indicate that \( L \) was waiting for \( H \) to elaborate on her “I don’t know” response (line 4). Not satisfied with \( H \)'s response in line 4, \( D \) asks her “so what happened?” (line 9) which is a more direct question that requires a more specific response. Even so, \( H \) again provides a dispreferred response (line 11) by pausing (line 10) and using a softer tone of voice. It is not until line 20 that \( H \) expands on her response in line 11. This expansion, as in (1), seems to be rushed (indicated by the > and <), in comparison to \( H \)'s other responses. This may suggest that she is reluctant to talk about what happened because she lost face during the argument with her boss.

This extract shows us how interpersonal relationships play an important role in how sensitive questions are asked and answered. It is evident that \( L \) and \( D \) are close with \( H \) and are indicating to her that they want to know what happened. It is this connectedness (Arundale, 2006:203), or closeness, that determines how questions, that can be considered sensitive for any reason, are asked and answered. If these participants had not been close, the repetition of questions (lines 2 and 9) and \( H \)'s unreceptive responses (lines 4 and 11) to them, that initially indicate that she does not want to talk about it, could have turned into an FTA for \( L \) and \( D \). Given that it is of “mutual interest for interactants to cooperate by supporting each other’s face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987:60-61 in Culpeper, in press:8), this topic, usually, would not have been continued after \( H \)'s initial response (line 4) if they were not close friends.

4. The Process of Asking and Answering Socially-Sensitive Questions

From the analysis of the two extracts, we can make assumptions about the process that underpins the asking and answering of socially-sensitive questions. Because only a small number of extracts have been analysed, the following assumptions are by no means concrete and further analysis would be required.

4.1 The Assumption - Asking

Given the results of the analysis, we can determine that socially-sensitive questions are, usually, only ever asked in the presence of person(s) that are close to the speaker. This is due to the vulnerability of face (Brown & Levinson, 1987:61 in Culpeper, in press:8) and the larger threat of an FTA occurring between the participants if they have only just meet or are merely acquaintances, as opposed to if they are close friends.

One can also say that sensitive topics are generally introduced into the conversation rather abruptly by initially using a hedging question to ascertain
how the topic will be received, as in (1). However, this is by no means the only way that sensitive topics can be introduced into conversations, and thus would require further research and analysis.

4.2 **The Assumption - Answering**

In answering socially-sensitive questions, we can conclude from the results of the analysis, that there is a specific method usually, undertaken by the participant who is called upon to answer the question. This method involves providing an initial dispreferred response and then, expanding that response later in the conversation. This expansion, as in (1), can be assumed to occur because the threat of losing face has been reduced by Jane expressing her beliefs before Claire exposes her own (lines 32-35).

5. **Conclusion**

The way in which socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered largely depends on the closeness of the relationship between participants. This in turn determines whether the topic will be considered (im)polite and whether there is a substantial risk of an FTA occurring. The dependence upon the closeness of the individual relationship between participants to how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered is demonstrated by the two extracts examined in this paper. However, due to the limited data that has been analysed, the author would not be able to conclude that socially-sensitive topics are never introduced in the presence of acquaintances or others with different degrees of familial relationships. This paper, as the author has explained earlier, only provides a brief look into how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered. Further research and analysis would be required to confirm (or even perhaps, disprove) the assumptions that the author has drawn.

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I Took The Mickey But Now I'll Take The Piss: The Marking of Jocular Mockery in Australian English

ROSLYN ROWEN*

Abstract

Australian English has evolved as a language in which the ability to relate both socially and individually comes from a universal understanding of the ways in which individuals are able to make fun or take the piss in social interactions. Jocular mockery has been identified as a conversational strategy that acts as a means of modulating involvement in conversation and a way of maintaining a joking relationship. This paper will analyse how jocular mockery is marked within spoken social interactions. In particular, it will focus on what constitutes jocular mockery and how this has evolved from what research more broadly defines as teasing and biting. This report will present an analysis of interactional data, identify the ways in which jocular mockery is framed and interpreted and observe corresponding connections that exist between participant-roles within a social interaction.

1. Introduction

Australian English has evolved as a language in which the ability to relate both socially and individually comes from a universal understanding of the ways in which individuals are able to make fun or take the piss in social interactions. Jocular mockery has been identified as a conversational strategy employed in interactions to modulate involvement and as a means of maintaining joking relationships between participants (Norrick, 1994). This report will analyse the pragmatic act of jocular mockery and how it is marked in spoken social interactions of Australian English. This paper will explore what constitutes jocular mockery and how this has evolved from what research more broadly defines as teasing and biting. In particular it examines how jocular mockery is constructed through conversation. Based on an analysis of interactional data, the ways in which jocular mockery is framed by the speaker and interpreted by recipient(s) will be identified and corresponding connections that exist between the two participant-roles will be presented.

2. Literature Review

Research conducted thus far in the field of linguistics has mainly pertained to the vernacular acts of teasing and biting in interactional conversation with limited research focusing specifically on the pragmatic act of jocular mockery.

The term ‘mockery’ is used to denote the occasions in conversational interaction where the speaker makes some kind of teasing or mocking remark, often in response to a mistake or faux pas in the target’s performance (Everts,
2003:374). This was first noted in the research conducted by Drew (1987:250), who stated that in order for such mishaps to become an invitation for a tease, it must occur within a sequential nature through the participants. He goes on to imply that teases are specifically structured so as to identify the speaker’s scepticism with the previous speaker’s exaggerated version of claims, therefore essentially using the tease as a means to expose such claims. Interestingly, Drew (1987:248) also highlights that such a structure also acts as a functional element in social control, which is interdependent on the participants’ social positions (male/female; brother/sister; nurse/patient). The social positions of participants then, by sharing in the joke or tease, “simultaneously express their positive communality or conjunction” and in turn allow for the responses to mockery to be classified in three general categories; (i) rejecting the mockery as untrue or exaggerated, (ii) going along with or making the pretence of accepting the mockery, (iii) ignoring the mockery (Drew, 1987:248).

Following on from this, works by Norrick (1994, 2003) on the involvement of joking in conversation suggest that there are key issues concerned with conversational joking. These must be understood in order to successfully analyse their relevance and construction in such conversation. Norrick (2003:1333) proposes that such elements consist of: (i) humorous discourse structure, (ii) interpersonal functions of conversational humour and (iii) single and multi-stage processing of humour. It is claimed that such elements pertaining to the construction of joking must be considered in conjunction with knowledge of the participants’ relationship. Norrick (1994:411) states that “some people seem to joke anytime with anybody, while some pairs or groups maintain what I call a ‘customary joking relationship’ whereby they always joke when they are together in various forms”. Such views, as presented by Drew and Norrick reconstitutes that the ways in which teasing is both constructed and received in conversation, is interdependent on both participant relationships and knowledge of the structural boundaries that underlie the construction of a tease.

Boxer (1995:282) identifies conversational joking in terms of two the ways in which it can be potentially receipted by participants; as either biting or bonding, dependent upon by interlocutor variables. Her data suggests that if the joke and/or tease is constructed in a manner where it is aimed toward a present participant in the conversation, this then has the potential of biting. The other, if directed toward an absent other, has the potential of bonding (Boxer, 1995:275). Her ideas fit almost identically with that of Norrick’s and Drew’s, although termed differently. This signifies the notion of a conclusive and commonly present ‘structure’ and consideration of participant-relationships, as part of the key elements involved in the construction of conversational joking and mockery in conversation.

Moreover, such structural constraints, particularly the ways in which interlocutors interplay in the construction of jocular mockery is theorised by more recent literature. Goddard (2009:32-33) describes jocular mockery as
involving, “an element of humour that the feelings of the target person are disregarded, and an expectation that others present will approve of the performance”.

Following on from such research, that conducted by Haugh (2010) is thus exceptional – in that it focuses on the analysis of spontaneous conversation, with specific focus on jocular mockery. Haugh (2010) describes jocular mockery as the, “complex array of simultaneously face-threatening and face-supportive speech practices that are framed and interpreted as non-serious and joking, and which can be directed at self, other, third- influencing a participant’s interpretation of evolving relationships. Like Norrick and Drew, he suggests that participants generally employ such use of various combinations of formulaic cues, lexical exaggerations, topic shift-markers and prosodic cues as a way of framing the mockery, so as to be projected as joking to other interlocutors.

3. Analysis of interactional data

The following analysis will examine the construction of jocular mockery in three examples of interactional data. This will be analysed in terms of key linguistic framing and response cues exploited by participants and the corresponding connections that exist between the participant-roles will be established.

(1) GCSAusE23: Three friends, two female and one male are talking about recent events in a college dormitory room.

33 R: [I think it’s [mo:re(0.6) aimed at like the 
              football kind of= 
34 J:  =yeah that are like just like(.)↓du:hhh
35 R:  mm yeah [hhhhh
36 J:  [hhh
37 S:  The what
38 J:  .hh ↑Footballers hhh
39 S:  ↓du:hh
40 J:  I play ↓football[ll=
41 R:  [hhhh
42 S:  =I’m telling Troy you said that=
43 J:  =uh ha I throw the ba:ll (0.3)
44 R:  hhhhh(.) and I ↑catch too
45 S:  very stereotyp (0.2) typical of you
46 J:  [o:hh
The following excerpt provides an example of jocular mockery at an absent third party (Haugh, 2010). The excerpt begins with Rachel saying that a talk that they had recently listened to was not beneficial for anyone apart from the stereotypical football jock group. In line 2, Jane first frames her mock by using a dead-pan intonation on the word “duhhh”, as if meaning to highlight the stereotype of footballers further (Drew, 1987:226). The mock is then received by laughter from Rachel in line 3. The other participant, Sam, unsure of the joke in line 4, then seeks to clarify by asking a question. Once this has been clarified, he then acknowledges the initial mock through repetition of Jane’s “duhhh” (line 2).

The mockery is again continued and built upon in lines 11 and 12 by Jane and Rachel. It is here that Rachel appears to be-aligning her response to the follow-up mock by latching her mocking, “and I catch too” onto Jane’s (line 11). Through this framing and response construction, it suggests that Jane and Rachael are also displaying affiliation with each other, by using joking as an instrument through which social identity and relationships are displayed (Boxer & Cortes-Condé, 1997:275). It can also be seen that mockery can be interactionally perceived as jocular in certain social, sequential contexts, given the nature and understanding of the social relationships (Haugh, 2010).

The data also presents another example of jocular mockery that uses the mocking of an absent third party as a means of initiating further mocking, but at a present participant. Sam begins framing the mock by using dead-pan intonation to highlight that he thinks Jane is being very stereotypical in her mocking. It also suggests that there has been an affiliative shift between the two participants (Jane and Sam) and that Sam is now in mild opposition of the initial mocking.

This is a shift to a more disaffiliative relationship and it is reinforced when Rachel (in line 15), shows support by agreeing that Jane has overdone her mocking and is in fact, being mean. Rachel, in this instance, is more equivocal in aligning her response with Sam. While Sam employs only dead-pan intonation to state that Jane is being stereotypical, Rachel here uses prosodic intonation, while also giving an account as to why she should be mean to footballers, given the current stereotype (Norrick, 1994:414). The use of dead-pan and prosodic intonation by the two participants in this case is interpreted as joking where Jane receipts both comments by giving a po-faced response, “I was only joking” (line 16). Drew (1987) argues that po-faced receipts occur even if the recipients recognise that the tease was meant in humour. They will then attempt to deny or correct the tease, as this is directly interlinked with the sequential environment in which teasing occurs (Drew, 1987:219). In this case, the mock is abandoned and
Jane goes on completing the conversation with her po-faced correction, with an explanation for her previous mocking as being only a joke.

(2) GCSAusE23: Three friends, two female and one male are talking about recent events in a college dormitory room.

148 S: [um when we went to the casino there was this guy out the front playing steel drums(1.5)
149 R: yeah (0.2) [on Saturday night
150 J: o:h ↓ ye[:ah he’s there like everyday
151 S: he’s there- yeah he is(.) there everyd-
152 J: like all day ever(h)iday
153 S:yeah um we were paying him o:ut (0.1) and then [u:m (0.2) when we came
154 J: [↓oh
155 S: yeah like actually paying him out like saying to him like oh: you’:re(0.5) look at that idiot.
156 J: oh
157 S: we were just like ↓o:h°
158 J: (.04)
159 R: And then we were comin out and he had like money is his thing and I was like he’s got more money than me.
160 J: hhhhhhh
161 R: hhhhh

In contrast to the previous excerpt, example (2) highlights a construction of jocular mockery that is not specifically interlinked with the fostering of group solidarity but more so interpersonal solidarity (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997:282). In this excerpt, the participant, Sam, begins with a story preface about when he was at the casino the previous night. The other two participants then show an understanding of what Sam is talking about (lines 2, 3 and 5 demonstrate that they know the person whom Sam is implying). They then add to the story preface started by Sam in line 1, by making the observation of when they have also seen the person playing drums at the casino. It is then in lines 6 and 8 when Sam continues his story by saying that he was paying out the man busking, that the other participants begin to show disapproval of his actions. This is suggested (in line 7) through a falling intonation of the word “oh” and then by an extended pause in line 11, following Sam repeating that he was paying out the busker.
Following this extended pause, Sam uses mocking intonation in line 12 to frame a self-mock (Drew, 1987:230). Here, Sam mocks himself by implying that as a result of gambling, he is now worse off financially than the busker he was originally paying out. Also, the mocking intonation used by Sam acts as a possible account for his story preface and that this was not meant to discredit the busker but as a means of accounting for the jocular irony in his final utterance (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997:282). The laughter following this by the other participants (line 13) authenticates that it had been receipted and accepted as self-jocular mockery.

Consequently, despite that in this example, self-jocular mockery is used, it is evident that the speaker is still attempting to affiliate himself with the other participants in the conversation. As Haugh (2010) argues, “in the case of jocular mockery, it appears that both affiliative and disaffiliative stances may be interactionally achieved”. In this instance, Sam has affiliated himself with the other speakers by using jocular mockery to divert from what he seems to be framing as an account of paying out a busker. Instead it can be inferred, that due to the initial responses from the other participants, that it was in fact offending such participants. Therefore, by employing self-mockery, Sam shows that he is aligning his response to agree with the other participants. Through the alignment of these various responses to the initial story preface and subsequent jocular mockery, the participants are able to “concurrently index affiliative stances with other participants in this local sequential context” (Haugh, 2010).

(3) GCSAusE01: Two mature-aged students talking at lunchtime at university

64 H: yesterday we talked wi- there was this girl I don’t know what her name is but she was in (.) second semester Chinese classes? (0.2) really good at languages she was already doing Japanese↑ (0.4) biggish giːrl
65 (0.4)
66 S: >what was that?< (0.2) like I would know her?
67 (0.3)
68 H: you miːght know her=
69 (0.4)
70 S: "oːh"
71 (0.4)
72 H: she was saying that she that has a- (.) a mental illness and she took last semester off.
73 (0.2)
74 S: it’s not me
75 H: no no [it’s a: ] not you=

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In the final data example, jocular mockery occurs between two mature-aged students who are talking about a girl who is also studying the same degree. One participant is attempting to describe the girl to the other participant as she is unaware as to who it is. In line 76, following an extended pause and after an explanation stating the unknown third party had a mental illness, Sarah responds defensively with an account claiming “it’s not me” (line 76). This account suggests that a disaffiliative response has been created and that there is also subsequent loss in social solidarity present within the conversation. This is a result of Sarah interpreting the pause as a provocation rather than a reasonable pause in the conversation (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1994:285). However, through further sequential progression of the conversation, jocular mockery is constructed and accepted and the group solidarity is re-affirmed (Norrick, 1994:415).

Group solidarity is achieved when Helen provides an account, stating that she was not implying that the student in question has a mental illness (line 77). The account is then countered with a mock of the absent third party, “she probably does a spazo ‘n exams (line 79) and in the succeeding lines is receipted with laughter (line 78). Jocular mockery is therefore occasioned by the ambiguity of the student Helen was describing. This then acts as a means to exploit the ambiguity through exaggerated lexical choices, thus making it jocular in nature (Drew, 1987:250). Such construction, resulting in the mock being deemed jocular, has also allowed Helen to realign her response with Sarah. In doing this she also reconfirms the solidarity in the conversation that could have been potentially lost, due to misinterpretation within the conversation (Norrick, 1994:415).

4. Conclusion

This research has attempted to demonstrate increased depth of understanding surrounding the construction of jocular mockery in conversation, while also establishing connections that exist between dis/affiliation within conversational relationships. Based on the analysis of the interactional data, it reaffirms previous literature findings. This highlights that through the use of differing framing and response cues, jocular mockery can be constructed in various ways so as to solidify or remove participants from aspects of the relationships established as a part of the conversation (Drew, 1987:231). This data also demonstrated that the nature of the relationship can also affect the nature and interpretation of jocular
mockery. Jocular mockery although appearing somewhat candidly in conversation, nevertheless occurs as part of a well-constructed, sequential environment (Norrick, 1994:428; Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997:290). Consequently, above all, jocular mockery has been evidenced as an effective means to building and maintaining individual and group solidarity within conversational interaction.

*Author notes*

Roslyn is currently a 2nd year linguistics student at Griffith University. She has found a particular interest in the area of Pragmatics while working toward her degree. With a year remaining in her degree, she hopes to continue studying in this area, with the prospect of later extending into a more research-based focus.

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References


Intercultural Miscommunication and the Noun ‘Girlfriend’

TIHANA MILINKOVIC*

Abstract

This report investigates possible intercultural miscommunication due to linguistic differences between Australian English and Serbian in relation to the noun ‘girlfriend’. In order to clarify the meanings, understanding and use of the noun ‘girlfriend’, three Australian corpora were explored and interviews were conducted with Australians and Serbians. According to corpus data, Australians usually use the noun ‘girlfriend’ to refer to a close female friend of a man, to emphasise female friendships or to differentiate close friends from acquaintances. However, even corpus data shows that the meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’ could be ambiguous and cause misunderstanding. Both cultures recognised the ‘lesbian partner’ meaning as problematic and they use the noun ‘girlfriend’ with care in order to avoid any misunderstanding. However, Serbians are more often unsure about the lesbian implications because in the Serbian language the noun ‘girlfriend’ does not cover the ‘female friend’ meaning and Serbians are more familiar with the ‘partner’ meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’. Consequently, intercultural miscommunication may be possible.

1. Introduction

People across cultures tend to be very sensitive when talking about personal relationships. Scollon & Scollon (2007:7) state that “language is ambiguous by nature” and we carefully choose words e.g. girlfriend, boyfriend, friend, partner, in order to express ourselves and avoid misunderstanding. When you are speaking in a second language, the selection of the right word becomes even more complicated. As there are no true counterparts in Australian English and Serbian in relation to the noun ‘girlfriend’, it is worthwhile to clarify its meaning. Let us look in the following sentence:

She is my girlfriend.

If spoken by a man, the meaning of the sentence would be clear to the author. The man is referring to a woman who would be his close friend with whom he has an emotional relationship. However, the meaning becomes ambiguous to the author
if spoken by a woman. Is the woman referring to her female friend or a lesbian partner?

According to House (2000), inappropriate linguistic comprehension can be a cause of intercultural miscommunication. Considering that intercultural miscommunication is possible if native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English perceive the same word differently, the aim of this research is to investigate how Australians and Serbians understand and use the noun ‘girlfriend’. This investigation will further explore whether word ‘girlfriend’ could form a basis for intercultural miscommunication.

First, the report will present research findings in the field of intercultural miscommunication, followed by the methodology used for data collection. The report will conclude with analysis of data, which would lead to the conclusion. This report claims that intercultural miscommunication is possible due to perceived meanings and use of the noun ‘girlfriend’.

2. Literature Review

“Intercultural communication involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event” and might become difficult or impossible due to cultural diversity, since our cultural presuppositions, values and worldviews are reflected in our use of language (Samovar & Porter 2003:12). Hopper (1981) agrees that members of different cultures possess dissimilar ‘taken-for-granteds’ and Fitch (2002) further explains that the ‘taken-for-granteds’ complicate language use and cause miscommunication. House (2000) also observes that cross-cultural differences in communicative preferences cause mismanaged rapport and miscommunication.

As Samovar & Porter (2003) point out, language differences may not be influenced deeply by cultures, but they do account for intercultural miscommunication. Bazzanella & Damiano (1999:821) have also included “troubles caused by the use of a foreign language” in their list of triggers that cause misunderstandings.

In order to avoid communication breakdown and handle linguistic misunderstandings, at least one speaker should reorganise his/her mental structures and processes (Rehbein, 2006). According to Bazanella & Damiano (1999), either the speaker or interlocutor can reconstruct what caused the wrong interpretation and indicate the meaning more clearly. Difficulties with communication can also be resolved through awareness of the structure and analysis of meanings (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1988).
3. Methodology

The following approaches were chosen for data collection in this research:
   a. corpus analysis
   b. participant interviews

   These were chosen with the aim to clarify the meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’, to find out how native speakers (NS) of Australian English and non-native speakers (NNS) of English (NS of the Serbian language) use the word and, explore the possibilities of intercultural miscommunication in relation to its understanding.

3.1. Corpus Analysis

Three corpora of Australian English were used:
   a. Australian Corpus of English (ACE)
   b. Australian ICE Corpus (a component of the International Corpus of English)
   c. AUSTGRAM Corpus (Australian talkback radio)

   The Australian Corpus of English (ACE) was used in order to explore the use of ‘girlfriend’ in Australian written literature. Entries were found in the following categories: press – reportage (4), popular lore (4), letters, biography and essays (2), general fiction (2), adventure/western (bush) (1) and romance/love (1). The other two corpora (Australian ICE Corpus and AUSTGRAM Corpus) were used to explore the use of the noun ‘girlfriend’ by Australians in private dialogues and general conversations.

3.2. Participant Interviews

There were ten interviewees conducted with 5 Australian (NS) and 5 Serbian (NNS) participants. The interviewees were of different ages and consisted both males and females. Thus, the data represents the use of ‘girlfriend’ among different age groups and perspectives from both genders. The interviewees were contacted beforehand to agree on the time for a one-on-one interview. The focus was on the female friend of a female person meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’. The aim of the interviews was to collect data about the salient meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’, context and frequency of use, forms of use and possible intercultural miscommunication. The interviews were recorded and later analysed. The interview questions can be found in the Appendix.
4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of Corpus Data

“A corpus is a collection of pieces of language text in electronic form, selected according to external criteria to represent, as far as possible, a language or language variety as a source of data for linguistic research” (Sinclair, 2005:19). Using corpora in speech research is important because it provides broad and naturalistic samples of speech (McEnery & Wilson, 2001) and we can draw conclusions based on attested language use rather than on our intuitions (McEnery & Gabrielatos, 2006).

The noun ‘girlfriend’ can mean a close female friend of a man, with whom he has a romantic or sexual relationship, or a female friend of a woman (Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995). Although not included in dictionaries, in contemporary social contexts, the term ‘girlfriend’ can be used to refer to a lesbian partner. In order to condense the two uses of the noun ‘girlfriend’, for the purposes of analysis and discussion, the first meaning will be marked as a girlfriend/boyfriend meaning and the second meaning as a female friend meaning. Through analysis of the selected corpus data, this paper looks at the noun ‘girlfriend’ and the frequency, context and forms of use.

4.1.1. Frequency

Table 1. Corpus entries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corpus</th>
<th>Total entries</th>
<th>female friend meaning</th>
<th>girlfriend/boyfriend meaning</th>
<th>undetermined meaning*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian Corpus of English (ACE)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian ICE Corpus (AIC)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUSTGRAM Corpus (AC)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* ‘undetermined meaning’ refers to ambiguity in the use of ‘girlfriend’ – whether it was used to refer to a female friend of a man, a female friend of a female person or a lesbian partner.
Of the 32 entries (excluding undetermined meanings), only 7 represent the use of the noun ‘girlfriend’ to refer to a *female friend of a female person*. According to these results, the noun ‘girlfriend’ is used much more often to refer to a *close female friend of a man*.

### 4.1.2. Context

All seven entries for the *female friend* meaning were analysed with the aim to clarify the context of use. In the following examples (1) – (3), ‘girlfriend’ was used in general conversations to refer to a person who was not present at the moment of speaking.

1. F05 911: When I was about seven months pregnant with Ry I was support partner for a *girlfriend* who gave birth with the aid of acupuncture
2. S1A-048(B):220 Oh dear I had my *girlfriend* and her five children stay with us
3. S1A-033(D):227 Do you know um did I tell you you know that *girlfriend* that lives up at works at the um Swiss embassy

In example (4), if a ‘married friend’ was used instead of a ‘married girlfriend’, we would not get the complete message of this sentence – that the person who might suspect something in this case is a woman. Therefore, we might use ‘girlfriend’ to emphasise the female friendship.

4. F06 1035: If the divorcee has left her partner and not been deserted by him, a married *girlfriend* may suspect that the divorcee is chasing after other men, regardless of the reasons for the breakup.

In examples (5) and (6), we notice that women might not use the noun ‘girlfriend’ easily; they would have to refer friends that are close. Therefore, the noun ‘girlfriend’ can be used to differentiate close friends from acquaintances.

5. S1A-018(C):15 A *girlfriend* well she’s not really a *girlfriend* of mine she’s an acquaintance through work she worked for my brother-in-law at the Station Master’s Cottage
6. S1A-046(A):215 I I recently had a um I s’pose a *girlfriend* a close *girlfriend* of mine who’s now actually my sister-in-law ’cos she introduced me to her brother-in-law
In the following example (7), the noun ‘girlfriend’ is used more generally. It does not refer to two close friends, which could suggest that it is easy for a person to call two other women ‘girlfriends’. On the other hand, a woman would only call her close female friend a ‘girlfriend’.

(7) ABCnat2:[E1] I won’t pass the verb the the oral I just know it. Um but it’s it’s very odd um it’s really I guess the only equivalent wuh would be be y’know an old photo album of y’know how you looked at school ‘n’ your daggy haircut ‘n’ the **girlfriend** who y’know only spoke to you for nine minutes of your entire life y’know it’s a <> it’s such a long time ago. I mean I wrote this book in the nineteen-eighties. And I had a I had a y’know a toddler uh who’s now <> twenty years old <P1 laughs> so it’s it’s y’know and and he has brothers and sisters so <> so it’s a y’know it’s a very long time ago and it’s it’s almost as though <> it was written by somebody else but I have to say y’know hearing Ramona uh r read it uh I there was a flicker of recognition <inaudible> <all laugh>.

The examples with undetermined meanings were separated to show that if we do not know the context, it might be difficult to conclude the meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’. In examples (8) and (9), ‘girlfriend’ can refer to a close female friend of a man or a female friend of a woman. Alternatively, it can also refer to a woman’s lesbian partner.

(8) F10 1847: So says the **girlfriend**

(9) F22 4315: All my **girlfriends** did the same; some still do

Moreover, in example (10), it is not certain whether ‘girlfriend’ refers to a female friend of a woman or a lesbian partner.

(10) S1A-010(A):259 I know I know I know So if if she had um she was inclined to have a **girlfriend** sort of sort of thing and move in then she’ll just tell her parents you know I’m moving out and that will be OK and you’re mine

4.1.3 Forms

‘A girlfriend of mine’ is the only form that stands out in the examples of the ‘female friend’ meaning, like in examples (5) and (6). ‘A ... of mine’ form implies there is more than one. Since women usually have more than one girlfriend, it is very appropriate to use that form. On the other hand, it eliminates the meaning which is that of a lesbian partner, because usually women do not have more than one partner.
Among the examples of *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning there are the following consistencies:

(11) S1A-060(B):186 I wouldn’t want to have a *girlfriend* now It’s so bad
(12) S1A-060(A):181 Ahyou wish Have you got a *girlfriend*

Examples (11) and (12) indicate the expression ‘to have (got) a girlfriend’. Men use the expression in order to refer to their close female friends with whom they have emotional or sexual relationships. If a woman uses the expression, it sounds strange and seems as if she is referring to her lesbian partner. Therefore, it seems as the expression ‘to have (got) a girlfriend’ is reserved for the *girlfriend/boyfriend* and *lesbian partner* meanings of the noun ‘girlfriend’.

In addition, examples (13) and (14) show expressions ‘new/ex girlfriend’ where women can use ‘new/ex girlfriend’ to mark the beginning or the end of their female friendships, but the expression is usually reserved for men in relation to the *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning.

(13) K28 5365: He was becoming very involved with a new *girlfriend* whom he had met at a political meeting
(14) S1A-095(B):119 And then there’s all these ex-*girlfriends* and things Oh yeah so they sat him down and

In the example below (15), it becomes obvious that the noun ‘girlfriend’ is ambiguous.

(15) COMe8:[Caller 5a: Leigh, F] Yeah fantastic. I have my *girlfriend* with me Sarah <P1 oh s> she’s not my *girlfriend* she’s my friend.

In example (15), a man probably wanted to emphasise that his friend is a woman. Then, he had to clarify the meaning of ‘girlfriend’. Thus, the first understanding when a man uses the noun ‘girlfriend’ is the *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning. That is not surprising and the example suggests that only women can use ‘girlfriend’ to refer to their female friends. However, in contemporary use, women can use ‘girlfriend’ to both refer to their friends or lesbian partners.

Therefore, according to the corpus data, the primary use of the noun ‘girlfriend’ is to refer to a close female friend of a man. Women use ‘girlfriend’ to refer to their female friends who are not present at the moment of speaking, in order to emphasise the female friendship or differentiate close friends from acquaintances. It is not possible to draw any conclusions about the *lesbian partner* meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’ through corpus data. However, there are evidence to indicate that the noun ‘girlfriend’ can be ambiguous. In order to clarify further the meanings and uses...
of the noun ‘girlfriend’ and to explore the Serbian perspective in this matter, participant interviews were conducted.

4.2. Analysis of Participant Interviews

The analysis of data collected from the interviews starts with the most salient meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’.

4.2.1. Salient meaning

From the 5 Australian interviewees, 2 said that the female friend meaning comes first into their minds when they hear the word. The other 3 Australian interviewees stated the opposite, that is, the girlfriend/boyfriend meaning would be the first they would think of when they hear the word ‘girlfriend’. After explaining that the noun ‘girlfriend’ can also been used to refer to a lesbian partner, they all agreed to the possibility of this reference. However, they did not connect ‘girlfriend’ with a lesbian partner meaning on first hearing. Since the opinions were divided, it can be concluded that NS consider the two meanings of ‘girlfriend’ equal and more salient than the lesbian partner meaning.

In the following example, an Australian woman (aged 40) did not just choose the ‘female friend’ meaning, she also added an adjective ‘good’. In that way, she confirmed the observation from the corpus data analysis that women use the noun ‘girlfriend’ to refer to their really close friends.

1 T: …when you hear the noun [girlfriend]↑… what is the first=
2 NS: ↑[yeah]
3 T: =meaning that comes into your mind?
4 NS: uhm…a good↑ friend
5 T: a good friend?=
6 NS: yeah
7 T: =like::…. your female↑ friend?
8 NS: yeah↑…good female friend

What is interesting about the Serbians’ responses was that all the 5 interviewees chose the girlfriend/boyfriend meaning. That suggests that Serbians primarily understand the noun ‘girlfriend’ as a man’s female partner. One reason for this consensus could be that the noun ‘girlfriend’ is most often used to refer to a man’s female partner, as shown by the corpus data. The Serbians, who are NNS speakers of English, are thus more familiar with the generic use. Another reason could be the lack of a word in Serbian that at the same time means a close female friend of a man
and a female friend of a female person. That is, in Serbian, there are two separate words for the *girlfriend/boyfriend* and *female friend* meaning.

Table 2. Serbian translation of ‘girlfriend’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional/Sexual Relationships</th>
<th>Friendships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English girlfriend</td>
<td>English girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>girlfriend</td>
<td>friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boyfriend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>djevojka</td>
<td>momak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hence, the *female friend* meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’ could be excluded because in Serbian, ‘girlfriend’ (*djevojka*) does not cover the *female friend* meaning. This linguistic difference could cause trouble for Serbians (and other NNSs) and serve as a misunderstanding trigger, as explained by Bazzanella & Damiano (1999).

4.2.2. Frequency

Concerning the frequency of use, responses from the Australian interviewees varied. Some Australian interviewees use ‘girlfriend’ to refer to a female friend often, some rarely or never. The use depends on the personal style of expression. Moreover, no problems were identified with the use of ‘girlfriend’ to refer to a female friend.

On the other hand, 4 Serbian interviewees who use the noun ‘girlfriend’ never do so to refer to a female friend. The following is the response of a Serbian woman (aged 30):

1 T: ... how often† do you use girlfriend to refer to your female friend?
2 NNS: ...I don’t
3 T: you don’t use it?
4 NNS: we::ll no…
5 T: is there any particular reason† for that?
6 NNS: it just sounds strange to me...uhm (.) it’s enough to say friend
7 T: why is it *strange* for you to say girlfriend?
8 NNS: well(.)it’s like I have a girlfriend but I like the boys(.)you know hahh

4.2.3. Context data

In generally, context data collected from the interviews matches the selected corpus data used in this investigation. The Australian interviewees use the noun ‘girlfriend’ to refer to a female person, not present at the moment of speaking. As one of the Australian female interviewees (aged 29) said:
1 T: ...how often do you use the term to refer to your **female friend**
2 NS: as a girlfriend? ...uhm...not that often but↑
3 T: ...in which situations?
4 NS: ...when I’m talking to another female
5 T: would you say (.) for example... my girlfriend and I went shopping
6 NS: yeah yeah... my girlfriend and I went↑ or did↑ something... generally
   ...just referring to a female friend and what I did with her generally or some
   history↑ that I have with her

### 4.2.4. Forms

In order to investigate the implication of the **lesbian partner** meaning, the interviewees were asked the frequency of use between the expressions: ‘*my girlfriend*’ and ‘a **girlfriend of mine**’. The interviewees were further asked which of these two expressions is more common: ‘*I went shopping with my girlfriend*’ as opposed to ‘*I went shopping with my girlfriends*’. All of the interviewees chose ‘a **girlfriend of mine**’ and ‘*with girlfriends*’. In a way, both expressions reduce the ambiguity and the possibility of misunderstanding. By emphasising that you have more than one girlfriend, listeners would not think that you are talking about your lesbian partners. Although people might use these expressions without thinking, it suggests that women do not use the noun ‘girlfriend’ in the singular form very often to refer to their female friends. According to the interview responses, Australian women become more aware of the possible misinterpretation and use the noun ‘girlfriend’ less often.

The use of the term ‘**friends**’ is definitely more common than ‘**girlfriends**’ according to the Australian interviewees, as this 15-year-old girl said:

1 T: ok... how often↑ do you use the term to refer to your female friend?
2 NS (15): like: *never*...uhm because everyone knows my **best friend** who is a
girl so I can say anna... and I usually hang out with her () and () uhm.. my
friends are usually girls... so I just say I’m hanging out with my friends and
just generalise them as girls really

### 4.2.5. Intercultural miscommunication

When asked would they ever say something like ‘*this is my girlfriend*’ when introducing a female friend to someone, all responses were negative. The following is the response of a Serbian female interviewee (aged 27):
Moreover, 3 Australian and 4 Serbian interviewees agreed that the noun ‘girlfriend’ is ambiguous and can cause misunderstandings. Most of the Australians said that they would not necessarily think that a woman refers to her lesbian partner by using the noun ‘girlfriend’. However, their judgment depends on the familiarity with the woman. If they know her beliefs, values and way of life, they would not have any doubts.

However, the Serbian interviewees’ responses support the possibility of this misunderstanding more strongly. Since the noun ‘girlfriend’ is increasingly used to refer to a lesbian partner, the Serbian interviewees become more confident with the girlfriend/boyfriend meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’ and can misunderstand the female friend meaning when spoken by a woman. They would not necessarily think that two women are lesbians if they refer to each other as girlfriends. However, they would have doubts more often than Australians would. Once again, the reasons for these doubts could be the linguistic difference previously mentioned and the fact that NNS speakers are more familiar with the ‘partner’ meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’. From the cultural perspective, Australians are generally more open about lesbian relationships than Serbians. Consequently, Serbians are aware that Australian women easily admit having lesbian partners, which could give rise to doubts.

When asked if they would ask for clarification if they are not sure whether two women are friends or partners, all Serbian interviewees answered negatively. The following is the response of a Serbian female interviewee (aged 30):

1 NS: hahh no no↑ … probably not
2 T: why not?
3 NS: weːll it would be awkward just to suddenly ask are you a lesbian↑ hahha
   noː (0.2) I’d rather wait a little bit and conclude from other things that they
   may say or do.

Although the Serbian interviewees would prevent miscommunication by seeking clarifications, they can also put the hearer’s face at risk. The hearer (NS) might become embarrassed because of the speaker’s (NNS) doubts. The NS is not aware where the doubts come from and could think that NNS doubts are caused only by NNS beliefs that the NS has lesbian preferences. Hence, often NNS of
English (Serbians) would not say anything, which could lead to the communication breakdown at the later stage in the conversation.

Concerning the male interviewees, the Australian male interviewees said that when they hear other women call each other ‘girlfriends’, they do not find anything puzzling about that. In a way, that suggests that women are more conscious about how, when and with whom they use the noun ‘girlfriend’ to refer to their female friends. On the other hand, the Serbian male interviewees gave similar responses to those of the Serbian female interviewees to all interview questions, confirming that Serbs generally understand the noun ‘girlfriend’ as a man’s partner and all the consequences which that might cause.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Australians and Serbs have different understandings of the noun ‘girlfriend’. People are faced with many difficulties when speaking and interpreting a foreign language as words rarely have true counterparts between languages. In order to acquire an understanding of a foreign word appropriately and accurately, NNSs have to become familiar with all complexities and uses of that word. Moreover, NNSs often have to restructure their mental processes in relation to the word itself. As shown, one of the problematic words that can cause intercultural miscommunication between NSs of English (Australians) and NNSs of English (Serbs) is the noun ‘girlfriend’. However, concerning the small size of the research data, further research on this topic would be of benefit.

*Author notes
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References


**APPENDIX: Interview Questions**

1. When you hear the word ‘girlfriend’, what is the first meaning that comes into your mind?

2. Are you familiar with all three meaning of the noun ‘girlfriend’?

3. Do you clearly see the differences between them?

4. How often do you use ‘girlfriend’ to refer to your female friend?

5. In what situations do you most often use it?

6. Do you hear other women refer to their female friends as ‘girlfriends’? If yes, how often?

7. Which generations use ‘girlfriend’ the most?

8. What would you rather say: ‘my girlfriend’ or ‘a girlfriend of mine’?

9. What would you rather say: ‘I went shopping with my girlfriend’, ‘I went shopping with my girlfriends’ or ‘I went shopping with my friends’?

10. Would you ever think two women are partners if they say they are ‘girlfriends’? Why would/would not you think that?

11. Do you agree that misunderstandings are possible due to the implications of a lesbian partner meaning?

12. Have you experienced any misunderstandings with the use of ‘girlfriend’?
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