

# Trolling is a 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 patterns, 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.

### \*Author notes

Lochlan Morrissey is an undergraduate student currently undertaking a Bachelor of Arts in Languages and Applied Linguistics, and a committed amateur poet. His current study interests include natural language processing, post-Marxism, Hegelian philosophy and film theory.

Contact email: [lochlanmorrissey@gmail.com](mailto:lochlanmorrissey@gmail.com)

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