

***PECULIARITIES OF ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES USE OF THE LANGUAGE.
ANALYSIS OF FORUM INTERACTIONS OF TWO E-MODULES AT THE UNIVERSITY
ROMA TRE.***

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Sommario :L'obiettivo principale del presente contributo è analizzare il ruolo della linguaggio nell'ambito delle comunità di apprendimento in rete. Come Afferma Wenger (1998, p. 52), c'è comunità di apprendimento quando un gruppo di persone condivide gli stessi interessi ed intraprende e condivide azioni comuni. La funzione della lingua è fondamentale all'interno del processo di "negoziamento del significato" che avviene nella comunità. Se il linguaggio, e l'uso situato del linguaggio, in particolare, è importante per qualsiasi gruppo, diviene essenziale in una comunità di apprendimento online, sia allo scopo di creare un repertorio comune sia per produrre conoscenza vera e propria.

Summary : The main purpose of this contribution is to analyse the role of language within online learning communities. As Wenger (1998, p. 52) states, there is a community of learners where a group of people share the same interests, and according to those common interests, engage in shared actions. The function of language is fundamental within the process of "negotiation of meaning" that happens within the community. If language, and situated use of language, in particular, is important in any community, it becomes essential in an online learning community, both to create a common repertoire and to produce knowledge.

Key words : language, technology, online community, interaction, learning.

Parole chiave: linguaggio, tecnologia, comunità in rete, interazione, apprendimento.

Peculiarities of Online Learning Communities Use of the Language. Analysis of forum interactions of two e-modules at the University Roma Tre.

The problem investigated here is to identify which are the special features of online language of communication, within online communities of learners.

To this aim, forum interactions carried out at two online modules, supporting the face-to-face one of *Experimental Pedagogy and Museum Education* – course of *Primary Education* – University Roma Tre, are analysed, taking into consideration typical aspects of asynchronous communication (Crystal, 2001).

1 - THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE WITHIN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Internet allows the existence of communities made of subjects coming from all over the world, who share the same interest in learning and who can meet and grow together. Either online or not, any learning community can be referred to the one Wenger¹ and Lave, in 1991, for the first time, called “community of practice”.

According to Wenger² (1998), three are the essential conditions to be a community of practice:

- to share *mutual engagement*;
- to be engaged in a *joint enterprise*;
- to have a shared *repertoire* of facts and actions.

It is clear in Wenger’s work that language has an implicit importance in the process of meaning making. In fact, if one investigates Wenger’s idea of the creation of meaning, it can be realised that it is strictly linked to the

experience of everyday life each of us is involved in³.

Meaning is the product of a process, of an engagement we experience by living. When we talk, we act, we think, we try to solve problems, we produce meaning and the process we perform is defined by Wenger as *the negotiation of meaning*⁴.

There are different elements involved in the process and *negotiation* implies interpretation and action, taking into account that these two constituents are not separate entities but they are part of an ongoing process. This process is made up of two ways of acting: *participation* and *reification*.

Participation refers to the establishment of relations with other subjects, while *reification* means “making into thing”.(Tusting, 2005). As it can be argued, language plays a key role in particular when the *reification* of meaning is concerned.

When Wenger (1998, p. 83) speaks of the creation of a joint repertoire within the community, he thinks that it should include: “routines, words, tools, way of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, actions concepts”, most of these items are of linguistic nature.

Tusting (2005) reminds that one of the ways of recognising if a community has reified one element of its repertoire is to see if a name has been given to that particular situation, object, characteristic and this process of naming is one of the most revealing actions in the procedure of *reification*.

Within the community the exchange of experiences, the contribution that each member brings in, in one word the development of knowledge, happens thanks to the use of the language.

¹ Etienne Wenger is one of the main experts on communities of practice. He has been a pioneer of research on this field of interest. He is the author together with Lave of the book, issued in 1991 *Communities of Practice*, where for the first time the topic has been developed.

² Wenger (1998), p. 73.

³ Wenger (1998, p.51).

⁴ Ibidem, p. 53.

Analysing this language could help the understanding of the mechanisms through which the community is constituted, lives and grows up.

It must be underlined that to clarify the role of language within a community it is important to understand also its links with other social processes. Language is one of the principal semiotic elements of social practice which is made of semiotic and non-semiotic components.

According to Fairclough⁵ (1999) this means that all practices combine physical and symbolic resources. As Tusting (2005) underlines, “four are the significant different types of elements which are articulated in social practices and these are: semiosis, material activity, social relations and individual persons (minds, intentions, desires and bodies)”. Different sources (Harvey 1996, Fairclough and Wodak 1997, Fairclough 2003) agree that language is the tool to understand certain social relations.

2 - THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

So far, we have been dealing with negotiation of meaning and with the role of language within the that process. As we have seen there

⁵ Norman Fairclough is [emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Lancaster University](#). He is one of the founders of [critical discourse analysis](#), a branch of [sociolinguistics](#) or [discourse analysis](#) that looks at the influence of power relations on the content and structure of [writings](#). Fairclough's line of study, also called *textually oriented discourse analysis* or TODA, to distinguish it from philosophical enquires not involving the use of linguistic methodology, is specially concerned with the mutual effects of formally linguistic textual properties, sociolinguistic [speech genres](#), and formally sociological practices. The main thrust of his analysis is that, if —according to Foucaultian theory— practices are discursively shaped and enacted, the intrinsic properties of discourse, which are linguistically analysable, are to constitute a key element of their interpretation. He is thus interested in how social practices are discursively shaped, as well as the subsequent discursive effects of social practices (source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Fairclough).

is a relation between language and the other elements of social practice. This relation may help revealing the main characteristics of the use of language within the community. According to Tusting (2005), language, in fact, is able to internalise the other elements. To show how this happens, Tusting refers again to Fairclough who identifies three key functions that language fulfils:

- *representation* (when language is used to represent the world in the same way);
- *identification* (when language is used to express personal and social identities);
- *action* (when language is itself part of what is going on, the action of the event).

According to the function of language, labels are given as:

- *discourses* (potential ways of representing things);
- *styles* (potential ways of expressing identity through language)
- *genres* (potential ways of using the language in the situation)

If we analyse the texts produced within a community according to the categories conceived by Fairclough (2003), we may have a better understanding of the relationship between language and other social processes and between local interaction and broader social structures.

As regards the focus of the present contribution which is the analysis of the language used in online communities, the tool offered by Fairclough (2003) will be taken into consideration, especially to see which are the differences employed when students are engaged in collaborative assignment production or in peer to peer interaction.)

3 - PECULIARITIES OF ONLINE INTERACTIONS

As Crystal (2001, p.25) states “the Internet is an electronic, global, interactive medium and each of these properties has consequences for the kind of language found there.”

The fact that interaction on the Net occurs through an electronic medium naturally constrains the parts involved in the interaction itself to be linguistically limited. Being

connected online allows certain possibilities but forbids others and therefore not always the expectations of the users meet the nature of the medium.

Crystal (2001, p.26) finds out the problem:

The heart of the matter seems to be its relationship to spoken and written language. Several writers have called the Internet language “written speech” and Wired Style advises: “write the way people talk”.

The language of the Net is in fact a mixture spoken and written language and the result is a product which contains the influences of people coming from extremely different places and contexts. Nevertheless, the nature itself of the language makes it interesting to be analysed especially because, presenting characteristics belonging to both the speech and writing spheres, it affects also the evolution of traditional written and spoken language. Some of the written products that we find on the Web share the same characteristics of any paper writing, while other functions of the medium bring it closer to speech interactions.

If we think of emails, we realise, in fact, that they are transient (they can be deleted anytime), they depend on the active participation of the sender and the receiver (they are written to expect or give a response), and they tend to be presented using the features of spoken language. Even on chat, where people are supposed to “speak” in a more direct way, one has to write not to speak.

Crystal (2001, pp.32-33) highlights the mayor differences between face to face and online interaction:

- the lack of simultaneous feedback;
- the rhythm of a web interaction is very much slower than that found in the speech situation;
- the larger the number of participants involved in an interaction the worse the situation becomes.

What Crystal essentially underlines is the fact that interaction mediated by the presence of the computer forbids the effectiveness of face-to-face interaction, therefore some of its peculiar features must be reproduced someway also on

the Net, if we want to get closer to face-to-face situations.

Even if on the web one “writes as he talks” a lot of the prosody and paralinguage of speech is missing.

Very often, the meaning of what we say is expressed by the way we say it, through the intonation, the stress, the speed, the rhythms, the pauses and the tone of the voice (Dery 1993).

The need to reproduce these aspects of communication on the Net favoured the rise of what Crystal (2001, p.37) calls “emphatic conventions” and he gives some examples for them:

All capitals for shouting: I SAID NO

Letter spacing for loud and clear: W H Y N O T

Word/phrase emphasis by asterisks: The *real* answer

Anyway the above conventions are not always so effective, first of all because not everyone knows the rules of the game. Other tools of the sort are used to reproduce kinesic and proxemic aspects of conversations. There are for instance the so called smyleys: combinations of keyboard characters designed to show emotional facial expressions. There are various sets of them but the best known worldwide are the following:

Pleasure or positive feeling : -) or :) ☺

Sadness or negative feeling : - (or : (☹

Different authors (Dery 1993, Witmer 2000, Crystal 2001) agree in considering that their use is more related to the establishment of a relationship between the subjects involved than that of clarifying meaning.

Another way of reproducing kinesic and proxemic features on the Net is that of putting abbreviated words in brackets to mean a certain reaction:

<g> Grin, used to react to a funny message

As already mentioned, the use of these devices to get closer top speech peculiarities, far from

reaching its original objective, helps the creation of a bound group when a community is established.

What Wenger stated as regards the repertoire of facts and actions that need to be created in presence of a community of practice is performed on the Web also by the use of the above conventions.

From what has been highlighted above, one might argue that online interactions, though aiming at reproducing face-to-face situations, fail to reach successfully the aim.

What is interesting however is the fact that if online interactions are not close to speech interactions, they are not either comparable to conventional writing (Crystal , 2001).

Considering, therefore, that the language of the Net is neither speech nor writing, but it contains elements of the one and of the other, we might say together with different authors (Baron 2000 and Crystal 2001) that it should be taken as a third medium, peculiar of the new era we are living today.

4 - HYPOTHESES, METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENTS OF ANALYSIS

In the previous paragraph, a description of the main peculiarities of online use of the language has been given in order to find out possible cues, studying the characteristics of the forum interactions carried out in the online modules of *Didattica e Progettazione delle Attività Educative - DIPAE* (“Teaching and Education Project”) and of *Sviluppare la Capacità di Comprensione della Lettura - SCCL* (“Development of Reading Skills”)⁶.

First of all it is necessary to spend a few words on the above modules, which support the face-to face course of *Experimental pedagogy and museum education* at the Faculty of Primary Education – University Roma Tre.

Each of the above module, worth 2 CFU (credits), started in November 2007 and ended with the final examination in February 2008. The modules were assimilated to the so called “Laboratories”, compulsory activities in number of 2 for every subject area of study.

⁶ From now on the two modules will be referred to as DIPAE and SCCL.

The possibility to gain the above mentioned 2 CFU (credits) attending online favoured participation and in fact DIPAE registered 401 enrolments and 339 were the students of SCCL.

Activities for each module were organised in 3 teaching units and 9 formative tests (3 multiple choice, 3 filling the blanks and 3 matching). Students had to pass all the formative tests in order to be admitted to the face to face examination. The table below reports final results:

DIPAE	
Enrolled	Successful students at the final exam
401	203

Table 1

SCCL	
Enrolled	Successful students at the final exam
339	196

Table 2

The electronic platform, designed for the teaching activities, provides also a space devoted to forum discussions. Participation in the forum is free and no extra credit is gained, taking part in any interaction.

Considering all the above, the hypotheses of research to be tested were conceived as follows:

Hp1= If a peculiar and finalised kind of language is developed within an online community, it is the consequence of the creation of a community of practice and the use of the same kind of language implies particular aspects of social interactions.

Hp2= If social activities on the web are developed through a peculiar use of the language, learning attainment is influenced.

From a first enquiry of the activity performed on the forum sessions, it might be realised that students gave rise in both the teaching environments to a place where to share the experience they were engaged in. There they could clarify doubt about content of teaching units, get extra information, gain cues to solve online tests.

I considered interesting to analyse the way interactions were conducted in the forum for a series of reasons:

1. to see if participants in the module had given rise to a real community of learners as Wenger conceived it;
2. to verify which could be the relation between the kind of language used in the forum and the social aspects of the interactions performed on the learning environment;
3. to understand if “getting closer”, thanks also to the linguistic patterns used on the Net, could have any influence in learning attainment (improvement of learning).

To develop the above research issues I carried out mostly qualitative analyses.

First of all, driving back to the classification of the key functions of the language identified by Fairclough (2003), I studied the postings of the students of both modules to see which were the functions adopted. This operation allowed to focus on the aim of interactions and to understand better the relation between social context and use of the language.

Then, having pointed out some peculiarities of the tool of communication in use in the forum areas, I registered the frequencies of the above features. This procedure has been carried out taking into account the results of a previous work conducted by John Paolillo⁷ in 1999. The author, starting from the consideration that social network relations are recognised as the principal vehicle of language change, analysing the interactions occurred in a virtual community group, found out that communication on the Net can be more revealing than that offline because “a more detailed and fine-grained information about social contacts can be obtained” (Paolillo, 1999, p.1).

⁷ John Paolillo is a Associate Professor of *Information Science* and of *Linguistics* at the Indiana University in Bloomington (US). His research interests are the following: Sociolinguistics and language acquisition, computational linguistics, second language acquisition, and South Asian languages.

In my work of analysis, I considered the following language patterns:

- use of informal expressions, strengthening the ties among participants;
- use of thematic words related to the final examination (test, question, final exam, marks etc.);
- use of contracted words (nn=non=not);
- use of nicknames (ciully87 instead of name and surname);
- use of modified words and symbols (xké = Perché= Why; ... - ????=emphasis on doubts; etc.).

5 - COLLECTION OF DATA AND MAYOR FINDINGS

The forum area of DIPAE registered, in the period November 28th 2007 – February 17 2008, fifty (50) postings and thirty-six (36) answers. Thirty-eight (38) people participated. The table below summarises the frequencies of the linguistic patterns mentioned in the previous paragraph.

DIPAE	
Informal expressions (e.g. “Hi guys”, “...me neither”, “...me too”, “good luck”, “kisses”etc.)	50
Words referring to the final exam	73
Contracted words (nn=non=not; sn=sono=are etc.)	16
Modified words and symbols (xké=perché=why; ke=che=that; ????= strong doubt; use of capital letters to emphasise)	81
Nicknames	29

Table 3

As regards the module SCCL, its forum area, active from November 11th 2007 to February 21st 2008, registered 30 participants, 30 postings and 27 answers. The summary of data is given in the table below:

SCCL	
Informal expressions (e.g. “Hi guys”, “...me neither”, “...me too”, “good luck”, “kisses”etc.)	22

Words referring to the final exam	52
Contracted words (nn=non=not; sn=sono=are etc.)	4
Modified words and symbols (xkè=perché=why; ke=che=that; ????= strong doubt; use of capital letters to emphasise)	23
Nicknames	15

Table 4

The first evidence, deriving from the reading of the postings on the forum area of both the modules, is related to the creation of a community of learners, as Wenger conceived it, i.e. a place where the group shares *a mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a repertoire of facts and actions*.

Participants, in fact,

- show that they are engaged to fulfil a common aim: the acquisition of the 2 CFU –credits- available;
- are carrying out a joint enterprise: taking and passing a final examination;
- have developed a repertoire using peculiar features of online language.

The following message posted on the DIPAE forum are representative of the above points:

Oggetto	no!!!
Autore	Veronica
Data	28-12-2007, ore 19:08:41
Messaggio	aiuto la prova 3 e 4 non riesco proprio a superarle!!!! (Help, I really can't pass tests 3 and 4!!!!)
Risposte	
Autore	ciully87
Data	28-12-2007, ore 19:57:00
Messaggio	ciao...ti ho amndato le risposte della prova 3 sull'e-mail...la prova 4 nn so farla neanche io...infatti mi manca quella e anke la 2...nn è ke potersti mandarmi le risposte di quest'ultima?grazie (Hi... I sent you the answers of n.3 on your

	<i>email...I can't find the solution of test 4 either... in fact I miss that and n.2 too... couldn't you send me the answers of this last one? Thank you.)</i>
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Table 5

Same evidence emerges from the postings on SCCL forum interactions and another example is given below.

Oggetto	le unità
Autore	Alessiac
Data	2-12-2007, ore 14:52:32
Messaggio	ciao a tutte ragazze...io ho provato a svolgere solo due prove e le ho superate...però penso che sia più indicato terminarle tutte e poi cominciare a studiare le unità perchè la prova finale in presenza riguarda quelle e non le prove di verifica che invece sono solo esercitazioni...o no??? (Hi girls...I tried to solve two tests and I passed them... but I think that it would be better to end everything and start studying the teaching units because the content of the final exam is concerned with them and the others are only formative... correct?)
Risposte	
Autore	valevale
Data	2-12-2007, ore 18:42:47
Messaggio	Io ho finito oggi le prove di verifica... e sono d'accordo con te... inizio ora a studiare le unità per la prova in presenza di Febbraio! (I took all the online tests and I agree with you ... Now I start studying the teaching units for the final exam in February.)
Autore	alessiac
Data	3-12-2007, ore 23:50:44

Messaggio	Ok grazie mille!!!Allora continuerò su questa strada anche io... <i>(Ok, thank you!!! I'll keep on the same way too)</i>
Autore	Tonale
Data	10-12-2007, ore 15:16:23
Messaggio	Scusate ma a me sembra che sia necessario prima capire le unità didattiche e poi fare i test di verifica. Per es. i test che trattano il punto di vista prevedono la conoscenza delle informazioni presenti nella unità didattica relativa. ciao! <i>(Sorry, but to me it is necessary to understand teaching units first and then take the tests. Eg. Tests dealing with point of view imply contents present in the related teaching units.)</i>
Autore	Alessiac
Data	10-12-2007, ore 19:47:09
Messaggio	boh vabbè io comunque le ho passate tutte quindi prima o dopo è uguale!!! CIAO CIAO <i>(Boh, ok, anyway I passed them all so before or after it's the same!!! BYE BYE)</i>

Table 6

As one can see from the examples of the postings, participants are eager to finish their tests to be admitted to the final face-to-face exam. They share the same purpose and are engaged in the same enterprise, searching for help and helping each other, trying to solve the most difficult tests. The creation of a repertoire is well described by the use of those linguistic patterns previously identified (contracted words, use of symbols and modified words, of nicknames and of field words related to the final exam).

If one takes into account Fairclough classification, it seems clear that the main function language serves here is that of *action*, where language becomes part of what is going on, performing the action of reaching the

particular aim of passing the final exam of the module.

Social interaction, therefore, allows the creation of a real linguistic *genre* as Fairclough defines it.

Concerning contents of the teaching units, they have been treated differently. In the module of DIPAE, a thematic forum has been created spontaneously by the students and it registered the participation of 56 students, 46 postings and 110 answers. In the module of SCCL no thematic forum arose and just two of the postings on the forum area dealt with content issues.

In the DIPAE thematic forum, students proposed subjects related to the contents of the teaching units and asked for comments and opinions of the others. Reading through the various postings the main finding is connected to the change of the function of the language as described by Fairclough (2003).

Language patterns disappeared (slang expressions, contracted and modified words etc.) and, if on the free section of the forum the identified function of the language was “action”, being here the purpose of interactions that of developing thematic issues raising the interests of colleagues, the function becomes “representation”, i.e. language used to represent the world (Fairclough 2003) and the label assigned is that of discourse.

Here it is an instance extracted from the thematic forum under discussion:

Oggetto	Ma quale Valutazione? (<i>What evaluation?</i>)
Autore	paolab
Data	7-2-2008, ore 22:11:38
Messaggio	Oggi la programmazione e la valutazione sono contestuali, complementari e interconnessi secondo una visione sistemica dei processi di insegnamento/apprendimento, resi possibili dalle diverse fasi valutative. La valutazione puo' essere considerata esaustiva? Completa e/o oggettiva? Credo che anche i docenti devono verificare se il loro modo di programmare, progettare e insegnare (aggiungerei suscitare l'interesse!) e' oggettivamente efficiente ed efficace a seguito della verifica dei livelli

	raggiunti dagli alunni. (Today design and evaluation occur at the same time, are complementary and strictly connected according to a systemic vision of the teaching and learning processes, made possible by the different evaluation phases. Can we consider evaluation a comprehensive process? Is it complete and objective? In my opinion also teachers should test if their way of planning, designing and teaching (I would add motivating!) is objectively efficient and effective, after the analysis of the results of their pupils.
Risposte	
Autore	gabry1971
Data	7-2-2008, ore 22:41:12
Messaggio	Beh.. se la valutazione fosse esaustiva, completa e/o oggettiva, il sistema scolastico sarebbe perfetto. Se l'efficacia della valutazione fosse vissuta dai docenti come il complemento delle proprie competenze didattiche/educative e della capacità di suscitare interesse, il sistema valutativo funzionerebbe al meglio. (Well... if evaluation would be comprehensive, complete and/or objective, the school system would be perfect. If teachers could understand the effectiveness of evaluation as part of their teaching and motivating competences, the evaluation system would improve.)
Risposte	
Autore	Zoetta
Data	8-2-2008, ore 22:08:43
Messaggio	Oggi non si fa altro che parlare di programmazione e valutazione ai fini di una buona didattica; mi chiedo quanti docenti facciano una programmazione individualizzata tenendone poi conto nella fase valutativa. Credo che all'interno di una classe eterogenea per provenienza culturale, sociale ed economica, un buon insegnante debba riuscire a comprendere e prendere in considerazione una serie di fattori che prescindano dalla didattica. <i>(Today we do not do anything else than speaking of</i>

	<i>designing and evaluation to produce better teaching. I wonder how many teachers design individualised teaching taking it into account in the assessment phase. I think that within and heterogeneous class as regards cultural and economic background, a good teacher should include a series of factors that leaves aside teaching).</i>
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Table 7

3 - FINAL REMARKS

The work that has been presented here refers to different aspects of human communication and tries to investigate also how communication influences learning in particular environments.

I started mentioning Wenger's theory about communities of practice in order to explain what sort of learning community I referred to and which could be the role of language within the above sort of communities.

When Wenger (1998, p. 83) speaks of the creation of a joint repertoire within the community, he thinks that it should include: "routines, words, tools, way of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, actions concepts", most of these items are of linguistic nature. Moreover, language has strong links with other social processes. Language is one of the principal semiotic elements of social practice which is made of semiotic and non-semiotic components.

According to Fairclough (1999) this means that all practices combine physical and symbolic resources.

This aspect is useful to clarify some of the peculiarities that language acquires in online learning environments, especially when we turn to the analysis carried out by Crystal, where meta-linguistic value of the symbols used on the Internet is essential to understand why Internet language is "written speech" (2001, p.26) as he says.

The analysis that has been carried out on the two online modules mentioned above represents a preliminary study and there is space for development of further investigation, but, according to the findings, it emerges that a peculiar and finalised language has been

performed within the students community and that social interactions exist because of a mutual engagement, whose strength justifies the community itself.

The use of the Internet language, moreover, seems to help students in learning, because, through it, they search and obtain responses to their doubts and difficulties.

In summary, considering the activity carried out on the modules observed:

- the main function the language serves in both the free sections of forums analysed is action (Fairclough 2003), meaning that it is the tool to perform a peculiar social activity;
- participants are engaged to fulfil a common aim and have developed a peculiar repertoire creating a real community;
- social interactions made possible also by using peculiar features of online language helped clarifications on content issues and therefore influenced learning attainment.

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