

## Asymmetrical Relations and Cyberspatial Metaphoricity in Computer-Mediated Discourse

Eero Helenius, in November 22, 2007.

*Computer networks do not guarantee democratic, equal-opportunity interaction, any more than any previous communication technology has had that effect. (Herring, 2001: 612)*

In her text on Computer-mediated discourse (henceforth CMD), Herring (2001: 624) evokes the legacy of Foucault, who argued that “societal institutions are themselves constructed and maintained through discourse.” Herring continues by arguing that “Nowhere is this more true than on the Internet [sic]<sup>1</sup>, where ‘communities’ ... create social structures exclusively out of words” (ibid.). Indeed, there is no better example of a social (albeit virtual) reality constructed through language than the internet and the numerous communities therein.

Unavoidably, internet communities have always drawn upon their real-life counterparts and, in doing so, they have also adopted the power structures inherent them. Just as unavoidably, the perceived “anonymity” of the internet has magnified the problems in those power structures manifold: the abuse of power has been notoriously rife in all human societies throughout the entire history of humankind, but on the internet it has reached a whole new scale. This owes mainly due to the shielding effect of anonymity: if you cannot be identified by name, the acts that you commit cannot be explicitly linked to you, which in turn makes the possible repercussions of those acts largely irrelevant.

The sheer enormity that is the internet is inhabited by thousands and thousands of online communities, each of which have their own (un)written rules and codes of conduct and social hierarchies and so on. Some of them are welcoming to new members, some of them manifestly exclusive and hostile. Typical of the latter group is a plenary antipathy of so-called “newbies” or “newbs,” viz. people new to the community who are ignorant of its netiquette and hence might unwittingly behave (and thus, by definition, to use language) in a way that is perceived as unacceptable by the powers that be. In such a case, the “newbie” is often mercilessly insulted and then excluded from the cyberspace community by one means or another.

What makes the community regard someone as a “newbie” is almost without exception some arbitrary factor: for example, the choice of program used for CMD; the use of a “wrong” expression; not adhering to some whimsical, autocratic rule the person has no way of knowing about, and so on. This is illustrated by the following example, taken from bash.org<sup>2</sup>, a website which is a collection of user-submitted quotes from IRC, or Internet Relay Chat:

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#2142 +(689)
<mEsHmAn> how do i set myself as away?
<mEsHmAn> in mIRC
*** theForger sets mode: +b !*@host62-7-101-176.btinternet.com
*** mEsHmAn was kicked by theForger (mEsHmAn is away)
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The first stretch of text preceded by three asterisks (\*\*\*) constitutes an action wherein the user (who is a channel operator and therefore in a position of power) theForger “bans” the user mEsHmAn from the IRC channel in question, evidently for asking a “stupid” question (i.e. how to change your status to ‘away’ in mIRC), or possibly for using the “wrong”

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<sup>1</sup> Long (2004) argues that there is no longer any reason to capitalise the word internet, because it is just “another medium for delivering and receiving information,” like the radio or the television.

<sup>2</sup> Entry #2142, available from <http://www.bash.org/?2142>.

program for chatting: the chat program mIRC is stigmatised by some users largely due to its popularity and, perversely, its accessibility – the self-proclaimed “elite” use programs that are less accessible, which has the function of eliminating those users whose computer skills are less advanced. The use of a “beginner” program such as mIRC, then, functions as a type of social indicator which gives clues to other users as to what we might call the *virtual social class* or the contextual background of the user in question, which then enables them to make judgments about him or her even before communication has initiated. This is similar to real-world social clues people make about other people and then use them as basis for value judgments, such as what sort of car you drive, what brand of clothes you wear, what kind of music you listen to, for example.

The second stretch of text preceded by three asterisks demonstrates the power of language to create social realities operating on a metaphorical level in computer-mediated discourse: it illustrates the notion of the metaphoricity of the internet – that internet operates largely on a metaphorical level. The user mEsHmAn is “kicked” from the chat room by the power-holding user theForger, while simultaneously being obliquely insulted by him or her. The metaphoricity of this becomes evident from the fact that it is not, after all, that mEsHmAn is physically “kicked,” but rather virtually “removed,” through a process operating solely on a linguistic level, from a chat “room” which does not have any physical, concrete manifestation – it only exists on the level of cyberspatial, *virtual* reality. In reality, all that is happening is that various interconnected servers and workstations are executing certain sequences of commands, programmed in artificial languages, which to the end user appears only in this linguistic manifestation that can only be interpreted in metaphorical terms. In doing so, then, theForger, through language, reiterates, reinforces and perpetuates both his or her position of social power in a community that only exists in virtual reality and that is created with only linguistic elements as its building-blocks, while at the same time illustrating how what Herring calls “power asymmetries” (2001: 624) are transposed from real-life, vis-à-vis discourse to the domain of cyberspatial communication.

## Works cited

Herring, Susan C. 2001. “Computer-mediated discourse.” In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen & Heidi E. Hamilton, pp. 612-634. Oxford: Blackwell.

Long, Tony. 2004. Wired Magazine. [Internet]. Available from <<http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2004/08/64596>>. Accessed 22 November 2007.