

Chapter XXVI

Self–Construction in Computer Mediated Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents and illustrates the theoretical and methodological frameworks of a discourse-oriented approach to the study of self-construction in computer-mediated discourse (CMD). It is argued that this approach is suitable for the study of CMD, when the major traces of self are imprinted in discourse--language used in a specific context. Espousing functionalist approaches to discourse analysis which view language resources as the building blocks of human communication, the approach foregrounds the process of discursive positioning--a central theoretical construct and a methodological principle. It also shows how micro- and macro-levels of analysis can be integrated in the exploration of self-construction in CMD.

COMPUTER MEDIATED DISCOURSE—MICRO AND MACRO ANALYSES

Every second, myriad messages are dispatched across Planet Earth by netizens (Crystal, 2001) in synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication. This digital undertaking is accomplished in the absence of “facial expressions, gestures, and conventions of body posture, and distance (the kinesics and proxemics) which

are so critical in expressing personal opinions and attitudes and in moderating social relationships” (Crystal, 2001, p. 36).

How are selves constructed in these digital texts? This chapter will provide an answer to this question by presenting and illustrating the theoretical and methodological frameworks of a qualitative approach that focuses on the study of computer-mediated discourse (CMD). Before we embark on this undertaking, we will briefly provide broad definitions of the terms ‘qualita-

tive research', 'discourse analysis,' 'text,' and 'self-construction' which are inter-connected in this chapter. Qualitative research aims at understanding the meaning of human processes including self-construction by emphasizing interpretation, and contextualization of the study in situ and in vivo (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000; Schwandt, 2001).

What is discourse analysis? Brown and Yule's (1983, p.1) definition provides an answer in the following citation: "The analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs." This definition captures the transition from a focus on language as a closed system, to a focus on language as an open system (Schiffrin, 1994). Following Ricoeur (1981), we define text as spoken or digital discourse that is fixed by writing

We also espouse a narrative approach to self-construction (see overview in Bamberg, 2006a) which assumes that humans construct their selves in the stories that they unfold, and researchers can explore this process. Hence, the term self-construction is ambiguous since it refers to the narrated construction of self as well as to the researcher's interpretation of this process. In this chapter we propose discourse-oriented approach to self-construction that acknowledges this ambiguity.

To accomplish this objective, the chapter aligns itself with scholars who have applauded the advantages of the discursive turn in the study of CMD (Crystal, 2001; Herring, 1996, 2001; Markham, 2005; McIlvenny & Raudaskoski, 2005). These scholars share the tenet that meaning and self-construction can be explored by focusing on discourse.

We will examine two central discourse-oriented approaches to illustrate this tenet. These approaches are also pertinent to the process of discursive positioning that will be elaborated on

in the next section and will be directly related to self-construction. Proponents of conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992), the roots of which are anchored in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), focus primarily on naturally occurring interactional discourse in order to explore how social order is unfolded in moment-by-moment conversational interaction. Espousing this view, the researcher micro-analyzes—describes and interprets explicit and implicit features of the interaction.

Critical discourse analysts (CDA) (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O'Garro-Joseph, 2005), on the other hand, conceptualize discourse as a system of thought (Schwandt, 2001) and emphasize the impact of a priori non-discursive contextual conditions on the production of dominant constraining discursive practices. Accordingly, proponents of CDA often adopt a deductive stance which is guided by the idea that discourse analysis should move from "description and interpretation to explanation of how discourse systematically constructs versions of the social world" (Rogers et al., 2005, p.371). To this end, critical discourse analysts define a priori theoretical concepts such as 'hegemony,' 'asymmetry,' 'ideology,' 'control,' 'inequality,' and 'discrimination' (van Dijk, 2001) before they set out to explore how these concepts are expressed in the texts that they focus on.

We have seen that CA advocates a micro-analytic study of discourse in context that is by and large free from guiding theoretical principles, whereas CDA encourages the researcher to equip him/herself with explanatory macro principles. The two approaches seem incompatible at first glance. Current discourse-oriented studies advocate the construction of an interface between micro- and macro-perspectives on discourse analysis (see overview in Kupferberg & Green, 2005). These studies acknowledge the importance of micro text-analysis that is sensitive to changes in the participants' discursive positioning in relation to each other, but at the same time emphasize

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