An Analysis of Interpersonal Meaning in a Computer Mediated Conversation Using the Systemic-Functional Grammar Approach

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This study explores the expression of interpersonal meaning in a computer- mediated chat discourse between Japanese and Filipino students in the Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) project. Using Systemic-Functional Grammar, a transcript of chat dialogue was analyzed through identification of clause mood structures and speech functions. The patterns of the mood structures were investigated, and the use of mood elements, like subject, finite, complement, adjuncts, modals, were also explored. Results suggest that Japanese and Filipino students make use of interpersonal grammar uniquely based on the influence of their respective culture and language.

Introduction

In keeping with the increasing world of highly advanced information technology, WASEDA University in Japan created a new style of education by applying multimedia and the Internet technology in the classroom environment, thus the launch of a digitalization project called *Cross-Cultural Distance Learning* (CCDL) in collaboration with 14 universities around Asia, having De La Salle University (DLSU) as the representative of the Philippines. In this project, videoconferencing, chat and e-mail systems are fully utilized so as to build good ties of friendship between students of WASEDA University and those of the other universities; also, to develop an effective approach for the acquisition of English as a common language of the participants.

Having the acquisition of communicative proficiency of English as one of the most important aspects of WASEDA University's project, student participants are encouraged to interact in the different technological modes using the English language. The CCDL chat (Internet chat) project is one opportunity for the different students to meet and simultaneously communicate in English with other people who differ in culture, beliefs, values and religion.

Considering the opportunities the said chat project can provide, second language learners may experience a unique way of developing their communication skills. Participants in the CCDL chat project key in their ideas on the keyboard that appear on the computer screen for communication exchange; they also communicate through a CU-SeeMe system that has a camera

where they can see each other's faces during the chat. With this kind of system, the mode of communication is written as if spoken. Hence, the student participants learn how to manage interaction by using several communication skills, since that chat discourse is a mixture of spoken and written mode (how you casually converse in spoken interaction would be encoded, through words and symbols, in the computer).

A student's participation in an Internet chat exchange, such as this project, can be a unique learning experience (Oya et al, 2001). Each participant in Internet Chat environment can improve their writing skills since they must put their idea into sentences quickly, and type it quickly (other types of writing cannot provide such training). Also, the participants can establish an active relationship with each other as promptly as in face-to-face communication, especially since this chat project uses a camera.

With the uniqueness of a chat exchange, young adults avidly participate in such activities, which are casual conversations that are not usually available to them in academic settings. Hence, De La Salle University's students who are given the chance to participate in WASEDA University's chat project are very much attracted to the idea. They could not even believe that an English academic course can give them this chance of making casual conversations through Internet chat.

The chance is not available to them only because the project's coordinator is their instructor in the said writing course. The teacher also believes that the opportunity of communicating with other people of different cultures is a good learning experience to better enhance their language performance in various situations. And for her, the students are best taught of communication skills by putting them to participate in authentic interactions. In this particular context of the project, the students get to realize how to really interact with foreigners because they get to experience it themselves. Also, students get to explore the way other speakers use English. For instance, Filipino students discover how the Japanese communicate English in their own way of using its grammar.

Interpersonal Meaning

Given these intentions, therefore, it is useful for teachers to be aware of the function of interpersonal meaning in clauses, especially in helping students analyze authentic interactions to discover how people use interpersonal grammar in taking part of them. For this reason, the teacher can model a systemic functional approach in exploring casual conversations such as dialogues in chat exchange, especially since it looks at conversations as a purposeful behavior and a process of making meanings.

In systemic functional approach, language is viewed as a resource for making not just one meaning at a time, but also several strands of meaning simultaneously. This means that a casual conversation is modeled as the concurrent exchange of three types of meaning -- experiential, interpersonal, and textual. However, this study focuses on the analysis of interpersonal meanings in casual conversation (cc) since cc is believed to be driven by interpersonal meanings; this is because the primary task of casual conversation is the negotiation of social identity and social relations. Also, since cc has the turn-by-turn structuring, it is realized through interpersonal meanings of mood and conversational structure (Eggins & Slade, 1997)

For this particular study of exploring the use of interpersonal grammar in an Internet chat discourse, a transcript of a chat dialogue between CCDL participants like a WASEDA student and a DLSU student, will be investigated. A record of a dialogue is chosen according to the view of systemic functional approach of what is a text, i.e., a whole, harmonious collection of meanings that has unity of purpose and appropriate to its context. The chosen transcript is a dialogue between Naomi, a WASEDA University student and Erni, a DLSU student. These students have previously introduced themselves through email.

For a better grasp of the following analysis, the chat transcript is labeled by the utterance as expressed by a participant (W for WASEDA student; D for DLSU student) and numbered using Arabic numerals 1,2,3 as it occurs. If there are more than one clause per utterance, then clauses are marked by running letters of the alphabet always beginning with the letter *a*.

The clauses are then analyzed through their mood structures (declarative, interrogative, imperative) and their respective exchange functions (statement, question, offer, command). After which, the mood elements – subject, tense finite, modal finite, adjuncts, and polarity are investigated. The overall thematic structure, done by a run-through of the different moves or stages is also discussed.

Analysis

Mood Structures and Speech Functions

Declaratives

The clauses in the exchange are largely declarative in structure. Among the 53 clauses in the whole exchange, 44 are declarative in mood structure. Among the 44, 39 are statements, which gives information about the topics discussed in the chat. Both the participants simultaneously give

information since this is a dialogue and the most usual way of giving information is through the use of statements. The context calls for sharing of information since it is a chat exchange.

It is worth noting that there is a declarative clause in the transcript that functions as a question. For instance, the clause 3W. *you seem to be used to using English*, is declarative in structure yet functions as a question since Naomi, the WASEDA student is trying to find out something from Erni, the DLSU student. "In asking a question, a speaker is taking on the role of seeker of information and requiring the listener to take on the role of supplier of the information demanded." (Halliday, 1985, p.68) Erni, then replies in 3Da: *yeah, especially in our school*. The word *yeah* signals affirmation to the modal *you seem to be used*. This use of modalization enables the metaphoric use of the declarative. It is a sophisticated way of a diverse way of obtaining information from another person. The use of Naomi, the WASEDA student, of such modality shows significance in the use of linguistic politeness.

Another declarative mood that functions as a question is 7D. *still there?* Here, the subject and finite are ellipsed since it is already understood, especially since the mode of the discourse is *written as if spoken*. This question is usually asked in computer-mediated communication since technical difficulties are somewhat possible to interrupt (It was answered in 6W: *sorry. i'm here*).

There is actually one declarative sentence that acts as a command, i.e. 12Wb.*I want to know your address too*. This sentence does not directly demand for a service, i.e. to give the address. Its message of *wanting* implies the demand for service. Thus, the sentence is not presented as an order but as a usual way of stating information.

Interrogatives

There are 12 interrogatives among the 53 clauses in the exchange, where 11 function as questions while only 1 functions as a command. The 11 interrogatives are even divided into 3 types of questions – 4 WH-Adjuncts (eg. 4D.*How about in your school*?), 4 Finite-Subject forms (eg. 6D.*are you in what year in college?*). and 3 ellipsed questions (eg. 2Wb. *English?*) This arrangement shows that the chat participants mostly ask questions by using the normal way of forming interrogatives in casual conversations like the Internet chat. This implies the consideration of the relationship of the participants and the context of the communication. They are students from different respective universities participating in a chat project to promote camaraderie among people of different culture and to improve communicative proficiency in the English language.

The students' use of ellipsed interrogatives (ellipsed subject and finite) is worth commenting on. These questions (e.g. clause 2Wb: english?) are used as a follow-up to an interrogative question (e.g. clause 2Wa: what is your country's official language?) or a clarification to a previously asked question (e.g. 8Wa: philippines? [as response to 9D. do you know anybody from my country?]). This system of asking shows that the students know how to provide the proper information needed for better understanding of the discussion. However, the use of ellipsis shows the distinctive feature of an Internet chat where participants need to quickly type in their ideas or queries since dialogue occurs instantaneously.

The only different interrogative is when Erni of DLSU asks in 14D.*by the way, can I ask for your email address?* which performs a command, demanding for service (i.e. to provide him the other party's email address). This is not a predictable way of demanding a service since it is not a command in the form of a declarative. It is actually an indirect way since no participant is authoritative than the other. Also, Erni, well-versed in computer-mediated communication knows how to observe etiquette in asking email addresses. The way the question is asked can even be considered a very polite one to be judged as a command. But then again, its being indirect is being *polite* in demanding a service, i.e. be given the other party's email address.

Mood Elements

Subjects

Since the transcript is a chat conversation, most of the subjects used express the person of the speaker (*I*) and the receiver (*you*). As these participants interact, they take different roles. The speaker of one clause becomes the receiver of the next then the first receiver becomes the next speaker; thus, exchange occurs. There are also a few first person plural pronouns *We,* referring to a group where the speaker belongs to (students, family, friends). Any investigation should be concerned with interplay of 1st, 2nd person and whether the addressee is included in first person plural pronouns (Butt et al, 2000). The interplay of 1st and 2nd person in the transcript is normal in this type of communication (use of the *you* in an interrogative then declarative that follows uses the pronoun *I*). This exchange shows that there is an active relationship between the participants as quickly as they interact in face-to-face communication; this is one significance of a chat. With the use of the pronoun *we*, the receiver or addressee is excluded from it. This is because *we* is used to refer to the participant's group that is the topic of the general subject being discussed (ex: in 2Db, *we* refers to the Filipinos since the subject of that point of discussion is *country's official language*). In other parts, the first person plural pronoun refers to the group of students the participant belongs to since they discuss about *studying the English language*. This is another evidence that the

objective of the CCDL project is being met, i.e. the different student participants get to communicate their views on the acquisition of the English language. Taking into consideration the notion that the identity of *I* and *you* is an expression of unity or distance by inclusive or exclusive 1st person plural pronouns, are expression of the relationship between speakers and address. The participants relationship goes to show that they are physically distant and acknowledging that they are both university students.

Other subjects in the transcript are in the 3rd person, those are the things spoken about, like the topics *country's official language, use of the English language, family name, Filipino, Philippines medium of instruction,* etc. These subjects are discussed in the six moves or stages of the whole transcript. The use of these subjects show that the participants exchange views and learn more about different cultures and languages; and this is one of the intentions of the CCDL chat project.

A characteristic of the Internet Chat is economy of expression, i.e. the participants make their sentences short and to the point (usually use of one-word sentences) so that they can immediately respond to the partner's utterance. This characteristic is evident in the transcript in study. There are 5 ellipsed subjects in some of the mood structures in the transcript. One occurrence is in 7D, the interrogative *still there?* Here, Erni need not indicate that he is pertaining to the addressee Naomi by the use of the subject *you*. Utterances in Internet chat resemble face- to- face conversation since interaction is active, the participants need not always identify the subject of a statement. This question of Erni is most probably a way of confirming if Naomi, the other party's connection is still active. In this type of medium, it is possible that a conversation is interrupted by connection problems in the use of computers or camera. The CU-SeeMe system has a CCD camera that each participant can see the face of the person he or she is chatting with. Erni's question might have been a reaction to a camera that went off, and he has to ask Naomi if he is still on the other end.

Other events of ellipsed subjects are shown in expressions like *sorry* which are expressed in 4 utterances. Expressions of apology such as *sorry* when expressed in face-to-face dialogue or spoken communication need not be completed in statement where the subject of *I* is indicated to signify the speaker's participation. This is again a sign that Internet chat and face-to-face dialogue are similar in many ways, although the one-word apology statement is uttered in a number of ways before a sentence with the pronoun *I*. For instance in 6W, the utterance reads *sorry. i'm here*. The speaker does not need to repeat the subject *I* in both clauses.

Tense Finites

The participants in the transcript use mostly present tense since they talk about present circumstances, events, feelings, and thoughts. The temporal operators that indicated the present

tense of the transcript's propositions are *am*, *is, are*, *do*, and *have*. The primary tense conveyed is present since topics discussed are active occurrences or ideas at the moment of speaking. Primary tense means past, present or future at the moment of speaking; it is time relative to 'now' (Butt et al, 2000). This fact relates to the idea that chatting is a mode wherein the supposed-to-be-spoken ideas are typed on the keyboard and appears on the screen as written text immediately received by the receiver and gets immediate response. And so, the participants use the primary past tense only when they did a recall of event (13Db: *we were invited...*) Nevertheless, they use future tense when they express their plan to email each other in the near future (16D: *I'll just send you an email*).

Modal Finites

The participants are able to encode their opinion and judgment of some probabilities or obligations involved in what they are saying by using modals. Modality can be evident in modal finites that indicate probability, obligation and ability. In this particular transcript, the participants are able to use modals pointing out ideas of probability and ability. In 5Db, Erni is expressing that a probable reason why Naomi is not good in English (as Naomi uttered in 4Wa: *wow, i'm no good at english*) is that *maybe* he is used to speak in Japanese. This opinion of Erni may be his way of appeasing Naomi, who is articulating his insecurity in using the English language. Erni's expression of concern signifies the kind of relationship he has with Naomi; they are students actively engage in actual cross-cultural communication through learner- to- learner interaction. As the study of professors and researchers in WASEDA University entitled *Inter-Cultural Interactions in English Through Computer-Mediated Communication Using CU-SeeMe Software* importantly presented, that from the pedagogical perspective one of the advantages of computer-mediated communication is that "Students who are not confident can feel more at ease with non-native speakers than with native speakers." (Oya et al, 2001). Erni's effort to make Naomi feel at ease seems successful primarily because, Erni himself is a non-native speaker. Since Naomi of WASEDA University expresses her not being good in using English, she uses modals indicating opinion of ability and at the same time, negative polarity. In 4Wb, she uses the negative modal *can't*.

The other modal used by Naomi is *seem* in 3W: *you seem to be used to using english*. The utterance of this modal seems not to be the speaker's positioning between a definite *yes* and a definite *no*, it is probable that information is being demanded. As noted previously in the analysis of mood structures and speech functions, this utterance's modalization enables the metaphoric use of this particular declarative.

Mood Adjuncts

In the transcript, there is one utterance using two mood adjuncts; this is done by Naomi when she compares her use of the Japanese language and the English language. Naomi uses these mood adjuncts *always* and *rarely* to express the *usuality* of her use of these two languages. With the use and choices of mood adjuncts, she is able to compare the *usuality* of her use of the two languages (*always speak Japanese* vs. *rarely use English*).

Comment Adjuncts

Naomi also uses an adjunct to comment on what she is saying in clause 4Wb. She adds *certainly* to the clause *I can't follow a lecture*, trying to emphasize her not being able to understand English; also, she might be trying to be honest and humble about his language proficiency.

Polarity

In the transcript, there are only 3 negative polarities in the form of *don't*, *can't* (modal); these are all from Naomi's utterances as she discusses about her not being very proficient in the English language. There is one instance in 4Wa, when she says *I'm no good at English;* take note that she does not use *not good,* which is the usual way of saying it. Nevertheless, the use of *no*, of course, suggests negative polarity. The use of these negative polarities is a very obvious way for Naomi to specify the *negativity* of her use of the English language.

Thematic Structure

After a full interpersonal grammatical analysis of the whole transcript, now it can allow for a comment on the flow of the meanings accumulated by the speakers/writers. The transcript has been divided in different moves or stages following the patterns of the topic discussion. There are six stages in the whole transcript, i.e. six major topic moves or turns.

The first move consists of only 2 utterances, i.e. being the start of the dialogue, their greetings to each other. The first utterance is from Naomi, starting with a vocative, calling the name of Erni; he proceeds by using a lexical routine in greeting *I'm glad to see you.* Then Erni acknowledges using the Naomi's utterance rheme as his theme, when he says he feels the same way.

Moving on, the second move has 2 turns, i.e. 2 chances of discussing different topics. Here, there is a good pattern of theme and rheme links which uses a variation: theme-theme-rheme-theme-rheme. The topical themes are about the student and their languages. A good feature of this stage is that the students are able to use textual themes like *but* which provide logical link in the utterances. Although, it will be observed that the first turn in the stage is interrupted by a dialogue (7D, 6W). Erni suddenly asks a clarification if Naomi it still around; he anticipates a technical interruption in the chat. Naomi then responds using a lexical routine of apology *sorry;* after which she initiates a new dialogue.

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On the other hand, the third move does not follow a smooth pattern of theme and rheme links since there is overlapping in the sequence of utterances. Overlapping is an interesting characteristic of chat; it happens when a participant may start his or her utterance before the partner does. Sometimes a series of utterances can be interrupted by a question. In 10D, Erni, after an initial utterance, suddenly asks a question but it was answered only after one utterance made by Naomi. Thus, the theme at that point is suddenly changed, quite unexpected. Anyway, the sudden question is introduced with a textual theme *anyway* to indicate transition so they do not come so abruptly.

The fourth move is another stage where flow is easy because of the use of conjunctive themes like *but then* to anticipate a negative polarity. The use of another conjunctive theme is used to move from fourth move to fifth move when they already exchanged email addresses. The pattern theme-rheme-theme is used, although there is an unexpected theme in 15Dc. It might be an idea that Erni just remembered instantly.

Nonetheless, that utterance by Erni is acknowledged by Naomi in the sixth move, when lexical routines of closing a conversation are mostly expressed (*goodbye*, *see you*, *nice chatting with you*). The dialogue ended properly and smoothly.

Implications for Language Teaching

Exploring the interpersonal meanings of English clauses in terms of function will give students a feel and an idea of the way these resources are used across different contexts. In this way learners are more apt to build a practical repertoire of workable language resources for making interpersonal meaning. Also, students build a rich repertoire of text elements when students are introduced to the structural patterns of different genres like computer-mediated communication. Their knowledge of this type register makes it possible for them to adjust their language choices within the generic text patterns so as to meet the demands of immediate situations like this casual conversation.

These language choices should be, first and foremost, be made aware to the students since these choices are influenced by different situations with different functions in which language is used. Hence, participants in the chat project are influenced with the fact that they are doing it for academic purposes (since they are assigned to do it by a classroom teacher) but the mode is casual conversation.

However casual the mode is, their awareness of linguistic choices of interpersonal meaning will prepare them to express their role in the chat discourse. Students get to discover how their relationship with their co-participants is influenced by the topics they get to talk about and the way they talk about it. Most English speakers though are unconscious of the nature of the interpersonal grammar for taking a position, even though they use this everyday of their lives. It can be one of the most difficult areas of English to teach students. Even so, learners can discover how people use interpersonal grammar by taking part in authentic interactions like the CCDL chat project between DLSU and WASEDA University.

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