Conversational Rituals in Computer-Mediated Communication

A Qualitative Study of Discussion Forums

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to offer a new perspective on both interpersonal communication and computer-mediated communication (CMC), by means of conducting a pragma-linguistic analysis and comparison of a semi-threaded discussion forum and a fully threaded discussion forum; analysing features such as linguistic markers, dialogic listening, politeness, cooperation, elaborate or laconic greetings, farewell expressions and other conversational rituals. A qualitative study was conducted, employing two methods of gathering data: (a) participant observation and (b) document and material analysis. The major question for discussion in this study is whether there are any differences with respect to linguistic and non-linguistic features between the semi-threaded and fully threaded forums? The study concludes that there are differences in linguistic and non-linguistic features between semi-threaded and fully threaded forums, but these differences are minimal and can more likely be attributed to the forum subject matter and social context than to the forum structure itself.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication (CMC), conversational rituals, linguistic markers, non-linguistic markers, semi-threaded forum, fully threaded forum, pragma-linguistic analysis.
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1. Introduction

Contemporary society has undergone major transformations in terms of interpersonal communication. The Internet along with its discussion forums has become an increasingly popular medium for communicating the intention and behaviour of participants as well as a platform for seeking and sharing information. Within a computer-mediated setting, communication takes place by means of linguistic choices and non-linguistic expressions including emoticons or quick topic shift intention\(^1\). The Internet has a great impact on language, both facilitating and constraining our communicative abilities (Crystal, 2004). Reflecting on the notion of the communicative act within a virtual community, the computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting becomes a linguistic medium relying on different backgrounds, dialogic listening, politeness, cooperation and conversational rituals.

This study addresses the notion of conversational rituals in computer-mediated communication (CMC) presenting a new perspective on discourse analysis, behaviour, and the intention of participants in a computer-mediated setting. In the first section, an overview of the main theories are presented along with definitions of the key terms employed. In the second section, data and research methods will be thoroughly discussed and research question will be adequately addressed. In the final section, the results and further discussion will be presented, including a detailed analysis of data as well as inferences and conclusions drawn from this analysis.

Through a detailed examination of conversational rituals within a computer-mediated setting, the study conducts a pragmalinguistic analysis of two selected online discussion forums underlining both linguistic and non-linguistic markers. A comparison is made between a semi-threaded discussion forum and a fully threaded\(^2\) one, analysing features such as linguistic markers, dialogic listening, politeness, cooperation, elaborate or laconic greetings, farewell expressions and other conversational rituals.

This study poses the research question: Are there any differences with respect to linguistic and non-linguistic features between semi-threaded and fully threaded forums? Given the focus of the research question, I will first carry out a preliminary discussion of these features as they relate to CMC. Conversational rituals in computer-mediated communication are a major feature to be analysed by focusing on topic such as initiation, progression and termination. It is

\(^1\) Change or reintroduction of conversation topic between interlocutors

\(^2\) See section 4.1.8. for clarification
important to address the subject of conversational rituals, given that contemporary society has recently undergone drastic changes in terms of both conversational rules and behavioural codes (Fulk and Collins-Jarvis, 2001). The everyday conversation, in which we engaged based on verbal and social interaction, has been evolved to incorporate the technological advances of modern society. Accordingly, a new type of communication is necessary to respond to the needs of our current society. These communicative needs are explored through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), also defined as online communication. CMC falls somewhere between oral and written forms of communication because it “is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both” (Crystal, 2010).

Individuals interact in this type of communication with an awareness of the number of participants present and the degree of informality inherent in CMC. The CMC type of communication takes place in an informal social context characterised by interaction of participants as well as a certain degree of spontaneity (Markman, 2006). Consequently, this analysis is part of both communication and pragma-linguistic approaches, taking into account elements such as the interpersonal aspect of communication, online interaction, context, participants, audience, and roles as well as rituals (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

As for data and methodology, a qualitative study is employed and data is collected after further analysis related to the number of participants taking part in the discussions on the two forums. In order to gather research data, the primary method used is the observation of activity on the two forums. The gathering of secondary data is to be performed in order to explore the background and contextual knowledge leading to the interpretation of the primary data. The source of the secondary data is research literature associated with the subject under discussion (Fabb and Durant, 1993).

In summary, this study expresses a new perspective on interpersonal communication, conversational rituals as well as the intention of participants within a CMC setting. The research question under discussion is addressed in this study by means of observation and discourse analysis of two discussion forums.
2. Theoretical Background

In recent years, research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) taking place in the field of linguistics has examined language in the online context from a variety of perspectives. Specifically, CMC studies which are related to pragmalinguistics include context, linguistic markers, politeness, conversational rituals, style in the digital written language as well as social identities in relation to language and digital media. Research on CMC implies constant interaction within the CMC setting associated with the evolved communication channels of the internet. The CMC type of communication is thus restricted to interpersonal communicative exchanges carried out through emails, Internet forums or other types of applications.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) has presented a great shift in the way people interact and search for information (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000: 176). The Internet provides users with access to thousands of sources and a wealth of information presented in various formats, and enables interaction with people all over the world.

The Internet and its discussion forums have become an appropriate medium for an interweaving of pragmalinguistics and communication sciences. The aim of this study is to conduct a pragma-linguistic analysis of two selected online discussion forums; this section provides an overview of the main relevant theories along with definitions of the key terms related to pragmatics, conversation analysis and conversational rituals integrated within a computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting.

2.1. The Field of Pragmatics

Pragmatics as a subtopic of linguistics was initiated in the 1930s by Morris, Carnap and Peirce. They defined the new science as that of the relationship of signs with their users and interpreters. In the 1970s, pragmatics was defined as “the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed” (Stalnaker 1972: 383). Nowadays, the field of pragmatics deals with language as it functions in a context that is socially defined, taking place within space and time limits and assigning possible roles for the interlocutors (Yule 2006: 129). Pragmatic approaches in linguistics have shown how these contextual and social parameters leave their marks on the language system. Pragmatics is the study of how language is used in context taking into account the factors contributing to language usage (Horn and Ward 2006: 538).
In pragmatics the concept of conversation analysis concerns the analysis of natural conversation in order to reveal the linguistic characteristics of conversation and the ways in which conversation functions in everyday life. Conversation analysis studies three aspects of social interactions: turn-taking rules, conversational maxims, and conversation functions such as communicating politeness and assigning roles. Conversation is viewed as a mutual activity in which two or more participants make use of linguistic forms and non-linguistic signals in order to communicate interactively (Brennan 2010: 2). Everyday conversation is part of interpersonal communication, which differs from general impersonal communication. Interpersonal communication involves only a few people taking part in an interaction (Wood 2010: 19). The meaning of the word ‘interpersonal’ derives from the prefix inter-, which means ‘between’, and the word person. All communication occur between people; however, many interactions do not involve a few people communicating in a relatively intimate manner.

Conversations are not merely sequences of utterances expressed in speaking turns, uttered by speakers and decoded by receivers. Conversations are spontaneous and shaped by the intentions and behaviour of their participants. Descriptions of the conversation process are informed by the sociolinguistic approach called conversation analysis (Brennan 2005: 97). This approach has been theorised by scholars such as Emmanuel Schegloff, Gail Jefferson, Harvey Sacks and Charles Goodwin. Conversation analysts have offered a detailed account of everyday conversations, and conversation analysis has provided qualitative perspectives on social conversation structure and process.

### 2.2. Conversation as a Ritual Ceremony

Since this study addresses conversational rituals in CMC, this section provides an overview of some of the theories and definitions related to conversation as a ritual ceremony. According to Goffman (1967:24), conversations as social interactions can be perceived as a ritual ceremony, meaning that each conversation is based on social and verbal interaction. The atmosphere in which interactions take place becomes the setting for observation of rules and codes of behaviour imposed by the established social norms of society (Goffman 1974: 9).

Conversational rituals consist of behavioural routines such as greetings or excuses as well as those taking place as part of complex cultural ceremonies such as official visits. Informal ceremonial interactions allows for improvisations, in contrast to formal rituals, which are
associated with a strict order of linguistic and non-linguistic features that require an interpretation independent of the will of the participants taking part in the social interaction.

Rituals are characteristic of family life, consisting of interactions between friends or between an employer and an employee. Rituals can also be considered as symbolic acts meant to integrate participants into a community and to enable them to create identities within the group.

Conversational rituals are exemplified by greetings, compliments, excuses as well as thanks; they are treated as rituals because these types of speech acts form a representation of the individual’s effort to complete a performance within a specific social setting. The conversational rituals thus become a type of communication: the ceremonial aspect of the social interaction allows the individuals to communicate their own intentions. If the participants in an interaction are involved in a closer relationship, they generally feel safer and more spontaneous in exposing their thoughts, and this fact has a direct impact upon their linguistic choices and non-linguistic expressions. Therefore, conversational rituals associated with more or less closeness between the participants include: laconic versus formal greetings related to notions of respect and politeness, shorter versus more elaborate farewell expressions if the participants are situated at unequal social positions, which needs to be evidenced in their interaction.

Approached from this theoretical perspective, conversational rituals become a “formal conventionalised act through which an individual manifests his deference and consideration towards an object with absolute value or towards its representation” (Goffman 1973: 73). Therefore, conversational rituals are the way through which an individual attains a social goal based on a continuous process of adjustment. Conversational rituals give the participants in an interaction a feeling of closure and help them become members of a group.

2.3. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) represents the new type of communication also known as online communication, and it lies between the oral and written forms of communication. CMC is part of everyday life in almost all parts of the world. Human communication in general is full of several kinds of constraints; oral communication is limited to whether speech is audible, for instance, whereas behaviours such as gestures and facial expressions are perceived through face to face interactions (Crystal, 2010). Likewise, these nonverbal communication behaviours are not everlasting and do not persist in time. Taking into
account these limitations, contemporary society must suggest some other form of mediation if people are to interact despite distance and across time. New technologies have therefore been invented in order to remove these boundaries and allow synchronous communication (telephone, videoconference etc.) as well as asynchronous communication (letters, email, voicemail, etc.).

Within a CMC setting, interpersonal relationships may appear easy to establish, but are sometimes difficult to maintain. Each individual accomplishes an important role in the process of both initiating and maintaining relationships. The good functioning of interpersonal relationships is ensured by conversational rituals within a CMC medium which can help the individuals to establish close relationships with other people so that each individual can be accepted, appreciated and respected by others.

CMC has become the object of steady research conducted by specialists from different fields, and, thus, CMC could be considered an interweaving of several domains such as linguistics, pragmatics, psychology, education and communication sciences. CMC is a mixture of both theory and practice. The skill to use a computer and the Internet is a necessary, but attainable skill needed to engage in the communicative act in the context of CMC. CMC can be defined as a recent domain of communication sciences related to both theory and practice implying the use of electronic devices to facilitate interaction between participants. This type of communication theory and practice aims to effectively improve communication spheres as well as communication ethics development. Moreover, CMC studies and research are based on cultural values, pragma-linguistic analysis of text messages and situational context, the number of participants in interaction, the behaviour of participants and their politeness or impoliteness in interacting, and their society’s interpersonal rituals.

CMC has attracted a great deal of academic research and views expressed openly on the subject. For instance, Markman (2006: 539) states that online communication is characterised by informality, as it takes place in an informal social context although modes of CMC can differ due to their lack of synchronicity; therefore, the entire process of a conversation can take place over minutes, hours, weeks or months. CMC may bring many changes in the ways in which participants in interaction communicate with one another, thereby influencing communication patterns (Fulk and Collins-Jarvis 2001: 625). Foster (1996: 24) underlines the fact that the Internet has become the appropriate medium for dialogic listening, politeness, cooperation and conversational rituals. Furthermore, Spitzberg (2006: 230-231) defined CMC as “any human symbolic text-based interaction conducted or facilitated through digitally-based technologies […] a process of message interchange in which the medium of exchange at some
point is computerized”. This process of message interchange can be best described by the attributes of CMC and their impact on sender, receiver, channel influences and dynamic feedback (Walther and Parks 2002: 541; Walther 2007: 2539-41).

CMC entails knowledge and understanding of both interpersonal communication and pragmatics, by examining the way people communicate, and the relationships between the participants in the interaction (Walther and Parks 2002: 556). CMC research, then, becomes an interweaving of interpersonal communication and pragma-linguistics underlining the various aspects of CMC in contrast to more traditional mediums including face-to-face as well as written communication (Walther 1996: 29). Earlier research has concluded that CMC is impersonal, i.e. the main focus lies in content instead of social or personal characteristics (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991). However, relationships developed via CMC might also have become gradually less informal, closer and therefore tightly interpersonal. It is for this reason that participants engaged in interactions over the Internet have more time to construct reciprocal relations without the interference of the outer world (Walther and Parks 2002: 540), which may lead to both development and enrichment of impressions and online relationships (Walther 2007: 2539).

CMC research uses descriptive and observational techniques to generate elaborate analysis of communicational behaviours and reactions to different stimuli (Nardi, Whittaker and Bradner 2000: 81). The present study carries out a thorough comparison between a semi-threaded discussion forum and a fully threaded one, emphasising all of the factors already mentioned and analysing how topics start, develop, change and come to an end as part of a conversational ritual. Therefore linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics are part of the pragmatic analysis conducted. Methods in CMC are associated with observations of activity on forums and data gathering from the research literature on the subject under discussion (Fabb and Durant 1993: 15).

Recent research has shown that, in a CMC setting, instant messages are preferred to other forms of interaction, because CMC is considered less interruptive (Nardi et al. 2000: 83). In conclusion, to move the domain of CMC forward, progress is needed in the areas of communication. It is necessary, within both CMC and other communication domains, to conduct more careful analysis of interactions, and to consider linguistic and non-linguistic expressions as well as to define new theories and models that best characterise both online and interpersonal communication.
3. Data and Method

The purpose of this section is to outline the data gathering and research methods used in this study, and to describe how the method relates to the research question. This study comprises a qualitative study, employing two methods of gathering data: (a) participant observation and (b) document and material analysis. The aim of this study is to offer a new perspective on both interpersonal communication and CMC, by means of conducting a pragma-linguistic analysis and comparison of two discussion forums. Two samples of participants engaged in two separate discussion forums will be used, taking into consideration forum themes.

3.1. Data Gathering Methods

The primary data gathering methods employed in this study is the examination of online communication with the use of observational techniques. The researcher conducted content analyses of conversations employing a variety of mediated communication technologies including the Internet and its discussion forums, considering various factors significant factors including context, linguistic markers, politeness and conversational rituals such as greetings or farewell expressions. CMC research uses descriptive and observational techniques to generate elaborate analysis of communication behaviours and reactions to different stimuli in a CMC context (Nardi, Whittaker and Bradner 2000: 81).

The observation method is defined as “a fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative inquiry” (Marshall and Rossman, 2011: 140). This method is used to analyse complex interactions in a social setting. The use of observation as a primary data gathering method entails note taking, event recording and behaviour analysis in the chosen social medium, being in this case, the computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting. Observation is recorded by means of field notes which comprise detailed descriptions from the observer’s perspective. The role of the observer is that of an unobtrusive third party and does not interact with the study participants being observed. All in all, the observation method consists of a detailed and structured record of behaviour as well as holistic event descriptions (Adler and Adler 1994: 379).
3.1.1. Participant Observation

Underpinned by both cultural anthropology and qualitative sociology, ‘participant observation’ is a general approach employed as a data-gathering method in this study. Participant observation is considered to be an essential approach, characteristic of all qualitative studies (Marshall and Rossman 2011:137). Participant observation requires first of all a keen observer of the social setting chosen for study. Immersion in the setting allows the observer to perceive and to experience reality from the perspective of the participants taking part in the study (DeWalt and DeWalt 2001: 16). Ideally, the observer spends considerable time in observing the setting, familiarising themselves with the daily activity in the medium under discussion. This immersion in the setting to be observed offers the researcher the occasion to learn more from the participants’ experience. In this study, the researcher visited the selected internet-based discussion forums and the most active discussion threads were selected for observation. The researcher did not interact with the forum participants, only read through the interactions and made notes about the conversational rituals observed and the linguistic markers employed by the forum participants.

3.1.2. Data Analysis

As an analytical framework for CMC, this study makes use of Susan Herring’s ‘Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis’. Herring’s work deals with a typology of both media and social factors for classifying CMC data and presenting an outline of different criteria for data sampling (Herring 2004: 351-354). This qualitative study deals with “sampling by theme” (Herring 2004: 351), which involves collecting data from sources of online discourse, such as discussion forums, that have been categorised by themes. The present sample consists of messages on two differently themed forum threads, then making a comparison between these in terms of linguistic and non-linguistic choices. This method can be useful within this framework because it deals with themes or topics as a significant factor that conditions language choice (Androutsopoulos 2007: 340). However, sampling by theme excludes some co-occurring discourse activities; for instance, the other topics discussed by the same users, which can be a disadvantage. Moreover, sampling by theme is considered less useful if the study deals with language style across the CMC type of communication; however, this study is focused on how topics develop and change as part of a conversational ritual as well as on linguistic choices, as sampling by theme refers to the development of topics.
As for the strategies of online data collection, they differ both in terms of technology and degree of engagement performed by the researcher concerning the relevant forums of online communication. The researcher’s role in the online research and observation must consist of that of a keen observer. The online observation, as a primary method employed in this study, makes reference to the process of virtually being present, with or without actively participating, and watching and analysing the online communication with regard to each linguistic choice. The online observation employed in this study is therefore presented as part of the linguistic CMC research. In this study, the online data gathered consists of written language data found on the two discussion forums. This CMC research therefore focuses on the written language in pragmalinguistics and the nature of written communication in an online context.

This study takes into consideration the following features to be analysed within the CMC setting under discussion: (1) greetings and farewells; (2) compliments and thanks; (3) invitations and apologies; (4) dialogic listening; (5) politeness; (6) cooperation; (7) participants’ roles; (8) context; (9) other conversational rituals. Apart from the insights provided by literature relating to conversational rituals within the CMC setting, two participant samples provide sufficient data. Linguistic and non-linguistic features, relative to the two types of forums are compared. This qualitative study makes an original contribution to the field of both communication and pragmatics, analysing each feature under discussion. By using the observation method, this study aims to provide information so that research question can be properly addressed.

3.2. Data

A thorough analysis of data is conducted in this qualitative study drawing a comparison between a semi-threaded discussion forum and a fully threaded one, analysing features such as linguistic and non-linguistic markers, politeness, cooperation, greetings and other conversational rituals. Threaded display formats in forums are used when the primary use of a forum is to generate user discussion. The two sub-types of threaded formats addressed in this study are semi-threaded and fully threaded forums. Semi-threaded forums allow users to reply to a specific message topic, grouping all replies to a specific message together (Fig 1). This format makes the thread topic the centre of discussion. Participants are able to make references to other participants’ comments using quotation, but the progression of the discussion remains central to the topic. Fully threaded forums on the other hand, allow users to reply to a message topic as well as reply to another user’s reply (Fig. 2). In this format all replies as well as replies to
replies, are grouped under a message topic. In this format, the thread topic is the starting point for discussion, but individual participant responses are as central to the progression of discussion as the topic itself.

Figure 1: Schematic illustration of a semi-threaded forum format

Figure 2: Schematic illustration of a fully threaded forum format
The use of two separate participant samples is a time efficient way of gathering data which is suited to this present research. The forums under discussion: the semi-threaded (Netmums Coffee Lounge) and the fully threaded (Drupal Support) forums were compared in order to establish how topics are initiated, develop and come to an end with regard to conversational rituals. The semi-threaded discussion forum forms part of an online resource for parents in the UK. The website provides advice, support and information about all things related to parenting and childcare. The Coffee Lounge is the main forum which is further divided into sub-forums according to parent-related topics of interest (e.g. pregnancy, feeding and nutrition, and various age-specific categories). Although the forum discussions can be viewed openly, posting to the forums requires membership to the Netmums website. Thus the members of the Netmums Coffee Lounge are all frequent visitors to the Netmums website, and are therefore homogenous in terms of their interest in parenting and childcare. Many of the specific sub-programs are support-based in nature in that topics posted in these sub-forums generally relate to a member seeking advice or support on a personal issue. General discussion and light-hearted banter comprised most of the interactions observed in the Coffee House General Chat sub-forum.

On the other hand, the fully threaded discussion forum is focussed on all things related to Drupal, an open source content management platform. The forum forms part of a larger online community of Drupal developers who seek to contribute to the open source project, or are those seeking advice, support or recognition in their use of the platform. Membership is also required in this forum in order to contribute to discussions. Similar to the Netmums forum, this forum is also divided into sub-forums based on user need categories (e.g. support, services, and general discussion). In contrast to the Netmums forum, topics posted in the Drupal General Discussion sub-forum were still very support-based in nature, with very little evidence of light-hearted banter. Members tended to post topics in this sub-program that did not fit the descriptions of the other sub-forums.

For the purposes of this study, threads with ten or more posts from the general discussion sub-forums were selected from each forum. This would provide sufficient data regarding the linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics of their discourse. In order to understand the participants’ perspectives and compare findings (Mathison 1998: 14; Merriam 1998: 24), observation of the participants’ activity on the two forums was required. The linguistic and non-linguistic features to be analysed were colour-coded, and observations and
comparisons between the discussions on the two forums were made. The research approaches adopted in the present qualitative study include descriptive and selective observation methods.

In this qualitative study related to conversational rituals within a CMC medium, the online setting as a social context seems to lack importance, being limited to digital exchanges taking place over the Internet, as this type of interaction does not involve physical interaction between the participants. Information on the two samples of participants taking part in the online interactions is implicitly referred to as it is part of pragmatics, taking into account that the social relationships built in an online setting are therefore restricted for both observers and participants.

3.3. The Research Question

The major question under discussion in this study is: Are there any differences with respect to linguistic and non-linguistic features between the two types of forums? The research question is related to conversational rituals within CMC as a major feature to be analysed and to the significant differences between the two discussion forums from a linguistic perspective. The conversational rituals informing this study take place within a CMC setting and include greetings and farewells, compliments and thanks, and invitations as well as apologies.

Conversational rituals exemplified in this analysis, taking into account a CMC setting, show respect and appreciation for the other, implying reciprocal trust and similarity of attitudes. The specific features analysed in reference to the research question include: context, linguistic markers, dialogic listening, politeness, cooperation, elaborate or laconic greetings, farewell expressions and other conversational rituals. Each ritual establishes relationships in which each individual can be appreciated and respected by others within their community, albeit a virtual one devoid of the physical presence of interlocutors.
4. Results and Discussion

This section describes the findings that emerged from the data analysis and discuss the conclusions drawn based on these results in relation to the research question. This section begins by delineating the analysis according to the prominent aspects contained within the research question. A discussion of the prominent features that emerged is also outlined.

4.1. Linguistic and Non-linguistic features for analysis

Results of the qualitative analysis are used in the discourse analytic investigation of messages on the two forums. This is done in order to find linguistic and non-linguistic features for the following type of contributions: initiating topics which stimulate a new discussion; continued contribution to the topic of discussion; progression of the topic; and concluding the discussion.

Observations were made with regards to the way participants joined or left a discussion in terms of linguistic and non-linguistic choices. On the two forums, farewell expressions and other greetings are used for politeness to show respect. There is an entire range of strategies and mechanisms meant to establish relationships between participants taking part in the discussions on the two forums. The major set of strategies to be analysed in this section are:

1. dialogic listening;
2. cooperation;
3. participants’ roles;
4. context;
5. politeness: greetings and farewells;
6. politeness: compliments and thanks;
7. politeness: invitations and apologies; other– conflicts shared/expressed.

The discussion threads were analysed by coding linguistic and non-linguistic features according to the strategies listed above. The analysis of data confirms the use of these strategies as discussed in following sections.
4.1.1 Politeness – greetings and farewells

The concept of politeness, which constitutes a conversational ritual, is defined by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1997: 15) as “a set of instructions about the behaviour that the speaker must comply with towards his or her addressee”. In this sense, politeness is by no means a set of rules of good manners in use within a society, or observation of such rules, but a range of conventional procedures meant to preserve the harmonious character of interpersonal relationships within an online setting. In other words, politeness represents, in our case, a range of strategies which facilitate the establishment of relationships among the participants of the online interaction.

It was observed that participants of both discussion forums used laconic greetings such as “hi” and short or elaborate farewell expressions such as “good luck to you all” were also used in order to show respect and politeness. Therefore, the conversational rituals included formal and informal greetings as well as farewell expressions. In the semi-threaded Netmums forums, greetings were also represented by expressions such as “xx” (representing a kiss), and non-linguistic elements in the form of emoticons, which revealed an emotional dimension. These strategies were not employed in the fully threaded Drupal forum. This could be attributed to the difference in context and therefore social norms associated with the audience of each forum. The topic of the Netmums forum centred on sharing personal stories of funny things participants’ children said or did. This type of subject matter evokes personal feelings and memories, and encourages light-hearted banter. The use of emoticons is therefore congruent with the subject matter. In comparison, the Drupal forum thread topic was started as an appeal for advice regarding an ineffectual software plugin a member purchased. While this could potentially evoke emotions of anger or frustration, the users being addressed could all relate to the problem and instead adopted a more supportive and advisory tone, attempting to assist each other to solve the problem. In instances where emotions were expressed, linguistic, rather than non-linguistic features were used.

4.1.2. Politeness – compliments and thanks

The expression of gratitude was only evident in the fully threaded Drupal forum. Thanks were expressed explicitly (thank you …, thanks …) and implicitly. This is again congruent with the intent and purpose of contribution from the participants of this forum. The participants generally contributed to the topic to offer advice or support to those seeking it in relation to the thread
topic. Thus when this type of contribution was made, the socialised response to show gratitude was elicited. Although contributions from the Netmums forum participants were more personal, the information shared was not intended for the direct benefit of the other participants, other than to provide a source of humour. Compliments however were paid in both forums, expressing solidarity between the participants. Paying compliments was also a means of bestowing positive evaluation, for example “good idea” to acknowledge the value of another participant’s suggestion in the Drupal forum; or “lol these are so funny” to acknowledge the other participants’ contributions in the Netmums forum. In order to better understand what compliments represent, Holmes (1995: 117) states that, “A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed for some ‘good’ which is positively valued …”. Here, ‘some good’ or the ‘thing’ complimented refers to intrinsic qualities such as characteristics and skills.

4.1.3. Politeness – invitations and apologies

According to Holmes (1995: 155), “an apology is a speech act ... intended to remedy an offence for which the speaker takes responsibility…” in order to restore equilibrium. Apologies were not commonplace in either forum; however in one recorded use of the word “sorry” in the fully threaded Drupal forum, it was observed that it preceded a statement which was in direct conflict with another participant’s post, as an example, “Sorry, but that's irresponsible advice. Informing someone you're about to violate their license agreement and/or copyright does not inoculate you from legal action”. This suggested politeness toward each other even when opinions differed. The fact that there were no apologies in the Netmums forum is consistent with the light-hearted nature of contributions in this topic thread. Invitations were observed in the fully threaded Drupal forum, whereby participants encouraged each other to contribute to the topic by making suggestions like, “perhaps it’s best if one of you guys asked what is Leighton up to…”. Invitation was more implicit in the Netmums forum in that the topic itself invited members of the general forum to share their experiences.
4.1.4. Dialogic listening

According to Stewart and Milt (1995) dialogic listening emphasises conversation as a shared activity where the focus is on the emerging communal view that develops from the conversation. When engaging in dialogical listening, “…you join with the other person in the process of co-creating meaning between you” (Stewart and Milt, 1995: 192). A form of politeness, the dialogic listening discerned revealed that each participant showed respect and consideration for the others, considering them unique persons and contributing to the communication process which consisted of participants, the message and the online context. The participants asked clarifying questions such as “Are people getting their questions answered…?” tried to detect implicit meaning, used interjections, expressed feelings and attitudes (often through the use of emoticons), and asked open questions to better understand attitudes and opinions. This was the most prolific strategy employed in the semi-threaded Netmums forum, with participants on this forum sharing their personal experiences rather than sharing knowledge or opinion as in the Drupal forum. It was observed that while the contributions from participants in both forums drew on individuals’ personal experiences, the nature of sharing was different. In the Drupal forum the experiences shared were more technical and non-humanistic in nature, whereas the information shared in the Netmums forum related to more humanistic, non-tangible experiences and feelings. This is in line with Stewart and Milt’s (1995) assertion that dialogic listening stresses an open-ended, playful attitude toward conversation.

4.1.5. Cooperation

In order to establish relationships, participants in these online interactions made their wish to cooperate clear. According to Grice (1980: 30), interactions are based on the Co-operative Principle. This principle is founded on the assumption that participants in a conversation implicitly agree to cooperate by making their contributions to the conversation, and that the contributions should be informative for the conversation to proceed (Pan, 2012). This was more explicit in the fully threaded Drupal forum where participants brought their contribution to conversations, and their contribution was the one expected by the interlocutors, for example, “we’ll happily get involved”. At the same time, their contribution corresponded to the aim of the communicative act, namely of the talk exchange. Cooperation also manifested itself in the Drupal participants’ argumentation, as each participant wanted to influence and persuade the
other, using phrases like “FYI” (for your information) or making statements like “that’s irresponsible advice”. The entire process of cooperation, developed through questions and answers, was related to both dialogic listening and politeness strategies. In the Netmums forum the Cooperation principle was more implicit in the participants’ act of contributing to the thread in the absence of any tangible incentive to gain or provide advice or support. Participants joined the discussion in response to the topic request, thereby indicating willingness to cooperate.

4.1.6. Roles (participants)

Social distance between the participants in the online interaction led to the establishment of two types of relationships (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997: 9); the first being a symmetrical relationship. This type of relationship was established between the participants in the Netmums Coffee Lounge who treated each other as equals. The other type of relationship observed is an asymmetrical relationship. This kind of relationship is established between participants who are characterised by different social roles. In the online interaction on the Drupal forum, participants who were more experienced and knowledgeable in Drupal as a content management system (CMS) are situated at a higher social position, whereas others find themselves in a lower position. These features of the forum was also observed in the data. However this did not seem to impact the other features such as politeness or dialogic listening.

4.1.7. Context

The online setting became a pragmatic context for politeness; this situation making reference to the members of the same community – namely, the parenting community or the Drupal community. On the other hand, the mentioned context was interactional as well, as participants talked freely, contributing actively to the interaction dominated by spontaneity taking place “within the group” (Goffman 1974: 540). It was observed that unique use of acronyms or jargon specific to the context was employed by both forums. For example in the Netmums forum acronyms like “DS” (darling son) or “lg” (little girl) were often used. It was also noted that the Netmums forum adopted a very personal tone in the way that information was exchanged because the audience and topic was of a personal nature, i.e. children. In contrast the Drupal forum, although friendly did not offer exchanges of personal flattery of sharing of personal information. In the Drupal forums jargon related to CMS and coding was freely used as it is
assumed that all participants in the forum would be familiar with these. For example, words such as “module” and phrases such as “fixing the bugs’ were often used.

4.1.8. Conflicts

Participants in the online interaction had different knowledge, conceptions and perceptions; however, there was no apparent incompatibility between the participants in the online interaction. This may be due to the shared context within which participants were joining the discussion. In one recorded instance of conflict in the Drupal forum, one participant expressed disapproval of another participant’s post by saying, “that’s irresponsible advice…it’s no more acceptable for you to…” However, this feature does not only imply conflict between participants, but also recognises the expression of conflict experienced outside of the forum thread. This then initiated instances of shared conflict. The expression and impact on the progression of the discussion were also analysed. Expressions of conflict experiences were observed to be added in order to seek advice or support from the other participants. These expressions were often characterised by exclamation marks, emoticons or placing words in capitals (Caps), for example, “VERY FRUSTRATING” or “This module is simply unusable!!!” Linguistic features representing conflict were not observed in the Netmums forum. This is again consistent with the atmosphere created in the forum by the subject matter of the thread. On rare occasions non-linguistic features by means of emoticons depicting an angry face appeared in the Netmums forum, but these were always used in the context of jest when relating a humorous experience between parent and child where it is suggested that an angry response could have been expected at the time.

4.1.9. Differences between semi-threaded and fully threaded forums

Generally, the semi-threaded forum enables discussion topics and questions, whereas the fully threaded forum develops and encourages an expansion of topics by the participants of the online interaction.
Discussion threads from the semi-threaded Netmums Coffee Lounge\(^3\) and the fully threaded Drupal forum\(^4\) were compared in order to establish how topics are initiated, develop and come to an end with regard to conversational rituals. Once a new discussion topic has been initiated, list subscribers may choose to join the discussion. The analysed contributions refer either to previous postings by other participants, or contributions made in response to the initiating topic. According to Herring (1996: 91), reactive postings should be associated with an earlier message, express a certain view, and appeal to the other subscribers. When comparing the two forums, each message referred to one or several previous postings. The ways in which reactive postings were made between the two types of forums were observed and analysed. In the fully threaded Drupal forum, reactive postings were made by indirect reference, direct quoting of earlier postings, or using the fully threaded format functionality of replying directly to a reply as opposed to the general topic thread. Similarly, in the semi-threaded Netmums forum, reactive postings were made either by direct quoting, or by indirect reference. An example of this is seen here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Originally Posted by <strong>Sandra J(134)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My 3 year old daughter decided to sit me and OH down and explain how the baby was coming out!! 'Mammy doctor pulls your belly button off then pulls the baby out of the little hole'!! I had to leave the room to giggle she was so serious about it aswel!! No idea where this idea has come from Haha x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oh bless her 😊 i just had my 2nd and my lg asked if it was gona pop out of my belly button 😂</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Picture 1: Quoting in semi-threaded forum

Replying directly to a posted reply within the discussion thread is not an available function in a semi-threaded forum. It was observed that the common use of quoting in the two forums was used to acknowledge and respond directly to another participant’s contribution to the discussion, whilst still responding to the original thread topic and therefore addressing all thread participants. In contrast, replying directly to a reply in the fully threaded Drupal forum was used to address the individual participant with regards to their posting. This format is more similar to a face-to-face discussion because it enables turn adjacency: the participants’ reaction was not shown at the end of the reaction list, but was indented under the original message.

The language of CMC with regard to the two discussion forums is specific in many ways; one of its characteristics being great variability. Variability is determined by the number

\(^3\) Netmums 2014  
\(^4\) Drupal 2013
of features influencing the context in which the communication takes place (Herring 2004: 67). These features are both linguistic and situational. According to Herring, there are also technological variables which include, for instance, synchronicity and degree of anonymity. As for the linguistic and situational variables or features, this analysis considered topic, politeness strategies, and the principles of cooperation, dialogic listening, context, and participants’ roles in the online interaction. These features did not change from forum to forum, as they were similar on the two forums under discussion; however they differed from participant to participant and even from message to message.

As discussed, these results have provided some insights into the differences and similarities between the fully threaded Drupal forum and the semi-threaded Netmums forum in relation to the way topics are initiated, change and come to an end. To summarise, the two types of forums have many features in common, as they are both public asynchronous communication systems in which the messages are persistent over a period of time; however, they also differ in many aspects as previously mentioned. Regarding similarities, both forums have a small number of participants, and the topics of discussion, although disparate, flowed very swiftly. The participants interact using anonymous identities. The aim of both forums are to create a community of people who would continue to socialise online. The tone of conversation is both friendly and informal, without any evidence of real conflict. The participants on both forums use either animated emoticons or punctuated emoticons, which allow them to express both inflection and emotion, thereby adding more meaning to their messages. Table 1 outlines the differences and similarities in the occurrence of linguistic and non-linguistic features in each forum.

Table 1: A comparison of the occurrence of linguistic and non-linguistic features in the two forums.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Fully threaded</th>
<th>Semi-threaded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Politeness (greetings; farewells)</td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Linguistic/non-linguistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Compliments/Thanks</td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Linguistic/non-linguistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Invitations/Apologies</td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dialogic listening</td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Linguistic/non-linguistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cooperation</td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Roles (participants)</td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Context</td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Linguistic/non-linguistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Other – conflicts</td>
<td>Linguistic/non-linguistic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aim of this study was to explore the linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics of two online discussion forums related to the spoken and written norms of language. After analysing data and discussing the results, it was ascertained that because the language used by participants on the two online discussion forums is not uniform, it is difficult to define. Herring’s (2004: 68) contextual features concept has been validated here, showing that “even within the borders of online discussion boards, the character of communication varies considerably”. The context of the thread sets an underlying tone for the discussion, influencing the use of linguistic and non-linguistic markers. In the semi-threaded Netmums forum sample, the topic was light-hearted and in essence an invitation to share personal experiences, therefore the use of non-linguistic markers such as emoticons was more frequent. On the other hand, the fully threaded Drupal forum sample was very technical and the topic initiated from a conflict and the need for advice and support. Thus, while non-linguistic markers were evident, they did not present as prominently as in the Netmums forum. From the analyses, it can be concluded that there were indeed differences in linguistic and non-linguistic features between the fully threaded and semi-threaded forum samples observed, but that these differences could be attributed more to the context of the initial topic than to the functionality of the type of forum itself.
5. Conclusion

This study poses the research question: Are there any differences with respect to linguistic and non-linguistic features between semi-threaded and fully threaded forums? An analysis of the two forums revealed that the key difference between the two is that the structure of a fully threaded forum encourages discourse more akin to face-to-face dialogue than the semi-threaded forum, because it facilitates turn adjacency. However, a comparison of the linguistic and non-linguistic features in the two forums suggested that the occurrence of each was similar in both. The greatest variation between the two forums was found in the tone implied by the way in which linguistic and non-linguistic markers were employed, i.e. informal personal tone vs advisory tone.

According to Brennan (2005), conversations are spontaneous and shaped by the intentions and behaviour of their participants. It was observed that ‘cooperation’, ‘participant roles’, and ‘conflict’ were features that occurred in the fully threaded forum, but not in the semi-threaded forum. However, this was attributed more to the difference in intention of the original topic than the structure of the forum. The purpose of the participants’ contributions to the thread, and the resulting use of linguistic and non-linguistic features are seen to be congruent responses to the original topic of discussion. Herring (2004) purports that variability in CMC language is determined by the number of linguistic and situational features influencing the context in which the communication takes place. According to Savas (2011), attitude towards chat, keyboard control, context of the discussion, and previous experience in chat rooms are some of the factors that contribute to linguistic variation in CMC.

This study concludes that while differences in linguistic and non-linguistic features between the fully threaded and semi-threaded forum samples were observed, these differences could be attributed more to the context of the initial topic than to the functionality of the type of forum itself. This is in line with Goffman’s (1974) assertion that the atmosphere in which interactions take place becomes the setting for observation of rules and codes of behaviour imposed by the established social norms of society. It is suggested therefore, that the findings of this study may stimulate further inquiry into the impact differently themed forums have on the conversational rituals that develop within its discussion threads. For example, would forums with the intent of encouraging controversial debate have the same occurrences of ‘politeness’ feature as forums that foster an atmosphere of support and advice? According to Haring (n.d.),
the use of informal English in web forums is dependent on the topic of the forum, and the social context in which the participants are interacting. Since social context and norms are largely influenced by gender, this raises the question whether the gender of participants also has an impact on the linguistic features employed.

Herring (2000) suggests that the linguistic features that signal gender in computer-mediated interaction are much the same as those that have been previously described for face-to-face interaction. Herring (2000) further claims that women are more likely to thank, appreciate and apologize, whereas men generally appear to be less concerned with politeness. However it was noted when sampling for this study, that participants in forums generally enjoyed a level of anonymity. In some instances, as in the Netmums forums, the gender of the forum member is implied in the subject matter or in the content of responses. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to study the impact of anonymity on linguistic and non-linguistic features in CMC. Suler (2004) found that while online, some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person, a phenomenon referred to as the disinhibition effect. The disinhibition effect is observed in online forums in the tendency for participants to reveal secret emotions, fears and wishes, but to also have the confidence to express criticism, hatred and even threats.

This study also highlighted the use of forum-specific jargon, acronyms and neologisms in relation to forum context and theme. For example in the Netmums forum it was observed that acronyms, unknown to those outside this particular theme of forum, were frequently used. It is evident that CMC is a pervasive aspect of modern communication, and thus it is important that we understand its impact on linguistic practices and how this in turn influences basic human interaction. In conclusion, this study has revealed that there are differences in linguistic and non-linguistic features between semi-threaded and fully threaded forums, but that these differences are minimal and can more likely be attributed to the forum subject matter and social context than to the forum structure itself.
6. References


My name is Sofia Kristoffersen, and I have been studying English at Halmstad Högskola.