

Discussion note

Communicative affordances and participation frameworks in mediated interaction



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Abstract

This contribution presents a discussion piece on the theme of this Special Issue, which itself arose from a panel organised by the editors at the 2011 International Pragmatics Association conference in Manchester, England, at which I was kindly invited to act as the discussant. My aim is not to discuss or review the content of each individual article, but rather to provide some background context against which the arguments and findings of the contributions collectively can be highlighted. I will therefore make some comments on the thematic relationship between the analysis of language use and members' participation in technologically mediated communicative environments.

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Communication and interpersonal relations today are mediated by technologies in an ever growing and diversifying set of ways. Many years ago, Hopper (1992) characterised populations in advanced industrial societies as 'people of the phone' in an attempt to capture the extent to which telephone conversation is relied upon and even actively sought after, as persons appear prone to abandon almost any other activity in order to answer the telephone's summons. Since then, with the advent of the mobile phone, telephone conversation has become even more integrated into the very cultures of sociability and personal connectivity, enabling relationships to be maintained over significant distances and across multiple temporalities in what Katz and Aakhus (2002), a decade after Hopper, described as conditions of 'perpetual contact'. Increasingly, now, internet message exchange systems play a pivotal role in everyday sociability networks, as the accessibility of computer hardware and software, burgeoning of technological sophistication, and expansion of broadband connectivity linking personal computers and handheld devices to the internet have become as central, almost normative a part of people's ordinary lives as the telephone itself.

For research into the relationships between language and social interaction, the resultant proliferation of *mediated* language use – from television and radio broadcasts, phone and e-mail systems, personal electronic devices of numerous types, to internet and video conferencing, automated enquiry systems, web-based information gateways, or the 'intelligent' expert systems frequently deployed in command and control centres for public utility and transport services – raises a number of questions. One concerns the relationship between structures and patterns of interpersonal communication and the enablements and constraints, or *affordances* (Hutchby, 2001) of technologies used in mediating social interaction. Another concerns the *multimodality* of language-in-interaction; the recognition that spoken language is situated within a multimodal system for the accomplishment of social interaction that includes not only gesture, gaze and bodily orientation but also texts, and the communicative affordances of objects and artefacts located and utilised within interactional settings. Indeed I am using the phrase 'language-in-interaction', rather than the conversation analyst's

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preferred 'talk-in-interaction', because as a number of papers in this issue demonstrate, textual forms of communication play as interesting a part as spoken forms in mediated interaction. A third question, to which most of the papers in this issue give direct attention, is that of how members organise and structure their *participation* in these multimodal and affordance-laden environments.

Two key concepts being brought into play here, then, are 'affordances' and 'participation', or to use Goffman's (1981) terminology, 'participation frameworks'. The term participation framework refers to the range of ways that persons within perceptual range of an utterance are able to position themselves in relation to it; for example as addressed or not addressed, ratified or not ratified participant, and so on. For the purposes of the present set of papers, Goffman's original use of the term, which referred largely to spoken utterances, has been extended to incorporate those within 'perceptual range' of written or otherwise mediated linguistic emissions also.

By affordances, we mean to refer to the practical uses that anything within that 'perceptual range' makes available for participants (Gibson, 1982; Hutchby, 2001). Affordances are both *functional* and *relational*: functional in that they enable (and also constrain) the engagement in some activity; they shape the conditions of possibility associated with an action. Relational, in that they may differ for one object in different contexts, or between different species. Water surfaces, for example, have the affordance of 'walk-on-ability' for certain types of insect, but they do not for a human, a lion or a crocodile (unless frozen, of course).

The papers collected in this Special Issue demonstrate, in a whole range of ways, the continuing vitality of these concepts in facilitating our understanding of language-in-interaction even as the forms of technological mediation in society multiply and diversify. In what follows I aim to provide a context of sorts against which the significance of the findings in each contribution can be highlighted.

Language has of course been mediated at least since the invention of writing, and long before the telephone, the technology of the letter enabled interpersonal relations to be maintained in the absence of physical co-presence. So the whole question of how language functions as a means of communication is in many ways bound up with questions of how other forms of technology impact on language use, with the significance of technological mediation for the conduct of language-in-interaction. These papers contribute to a burgeoning literature which addresses that relationship across a range of significant arenas of technological mediation, including broadcasting, telephony and mobile telephony, the internet, text messaging and self-produced video logs. In all of these arenas, technologies of mediation, their communicative affordances and the multiple modalities and participation frameworks they bring into play have affected the styles and structures of language-in-interaction.

From its earliest days, between the 1930s and the 1950s, radio and television broadcasting has effected changes in the use of language both in public and in private. As Scannell (2013) has argued, the early technologies of the studio microphone (on radio) and, later, the studio camera (for television) yielded new forms of speaking 'in public' or 'to an audience' that were very different from the declamatory forms of public address used by platform speakers, politicians, lecturers, priests and others who addressed large co-present audiences in the days before broadcasting enabled so-called 'mass' communication to be experienced by individuals or small groups in the privacy of their own homes, rather than in some defined public gathering space. The microphone and the television camera had particular communicative affordances that allowed the voice of the announcer, or the singer, the newsreader, comedian or actor, to be heard as if addressed intimately to the listener as a co-present individual. Thus, the loudly extrovert singing of the music hall gave way to the crooning of the radio performer, a form of singing that is only possible, in public, through the use of voice amplification. The camera and its associated linguistic technology, the teleprompter, enabled scripted speech to be read out on television by an announcer who appeared to be looking directly at the viewer, thus simulating the interpersonal engagement of eye contact in face-to-face conversation.

Radio and television talk more generally has a specific character which serves to differentiate it from the vast majority of institutional forms of discourse and which therefore provides a specialised set of questions to which researchers in language and social interaction have been drawn to address themselves (Hutchby, 2006). One feature of particular relevance stems from the fact that its principal intended recipients are not co-present but distributed, physically, geographically, and often temporally. There may be a co-present audience in the studio (for example for many chat, quiz or game shows), and that collection of recipients may act as a 'mass' audience in the traditional sense. But even then there is a further layer of recipients who are not only physically absent but individually distributed: the viewers and listeners. Given these conditions of production and reception, the issue is one of how broadcast talk is mediated and distributed to its various recipient constituencies, and how the dynamics of address, the participation framework, operates specifically within the communicative affordances of broadcast talk. Jautz's contribution in this issue adds further to our understanding of how these dynamics of address, of speakership, hearership, ratified and non-ratified participation function in the context of broadcast talk.

Broadcasting itself evolved from the technology of the telephone. Indeed one of the earliest potential uses of the telephone envisaged by its developers and marketers was as an early form of broadcasting, in which users would pick up their handsets to listen to music, in a way that the radio subsequently became popular for (Grint and Woolgar, 1997).

The fact is, however, that users were more drawn by the telephone's affordance of enabling people to speak with the intimacy of face-to-face conversation without being physically co-present. Those affordances in turn have, again, effected changes in the styles and structures of ordinary conversation.

Conversation analysts and others have investigated the nature of talk and reciprocity on the telephone in some detail, revealing the technology's impacts in terms of participation and sequential organisation. For example, around the telephone's affordance for intimacy at a distance there have evolved distinctive forms of conversational opening and closing sequences. In relation to this, the properties of the telephone's ring itself can afford novel possibilities for patterns of interaction. Dimensions of accountability can surround apparently minor issues such as how quickly we pick up the phone, how we respond to call-waiting tones, or whether we use answering machines as call-screening devices (Hopper, 1992). The range of social contexts in which telephone calling and answering take place also afford the development of a whole range of new, interactionally relevant forms of social identity. For example, analysis of calls can reveal a micropolitics of power around what Hopper termed *caller hegemony*; or around the different responsibilities of callers, answerers, and 'answerers-not-called' (gatekeepers) (Sacks, 1992).

The advent of mobile telephony brought to the fore technological elements such as caller pre-identification, along with social factors such as the personalisation of phone handsets and the de-anchoring of the phone and its user from singular physical locations (Weilenmann, 2003). This has encouraged further changes in the structures of communication, especially in terms of opening exchanges and the organisation of topic initiation. Because the mobile phone tends to be the personal possession of a given individual, and because these devices tend to incorporate caller display by default, it is more likely that both caller and called parties can treat one another as to all intents pre-identified at the start of a call and so dispense with many of the identification and recognition sequences that evolved around the landline phone (Schegloff, 1986), a technology that tends to exist in shared use among multiparty households. Different analysts have taken different positions on the question of how thoroughgoing or radical these changes appear to be (see Arminen, 2005; Arminen and Leinonen, 2006; Hutchby, 2005; Hutchby and Barnett, 2005). The contribution by Ayass adds a new dimension to these considerations of the interactional uses of mobile technologies (and crucially, not just electronic devices but more traditional technologies of language mediation such as books and newspapers), analysing the ways they can be used not only as enablers of involvement in interaction but also as involvement shields; technologies whose affordances allow distinctive ways of managing what Goffman (1963) called the *territories of the self* in public space.

The internet affords new and distinctive forms of mediated interaction again. Here newsgroups, personal web pages (for example Facebook) and internet 'chat' domains, both computer-based and mobile phone-based (such as Twitter), have grown up as spaces in which participants can interact while being geographically and also temporally distributed. Early studies of internet interaction suggested that the anonymised, largely textual and distributed nature of participation enables an escape from traditional paradigms of social interaction, which are based on the centrality of presence (even on the telephone, our interactant is 'present' at the other end of the line; in broadcasting, personalities are visually or sonically present). For example Reid (1991) found, in one of the earliest ethnographies of online participation, that users can feel freer than in co-present interaction to breach the social boundaries which humans ordinarily place around interaction with strangers. Reid suggested that these affordances could lead to positive interactional consequences for certain types of user (see also Turkle, 1995). However there have also been numerous scandals in recent years around the infelicitous posting of material on Facebook or messages on Twitter that have had negative consequences ranging from damage to the careers of politicians, public figures or journalists to the suicide of vulnerable teenagers.

In many of its more stable or socially integrated environments, such as newsgroups and discussion fora, online interaction is mediated not only by the technology of internet servers and computer terminals but also by variants of the kind of locally managed participant statuses that structure interaction in other forms of human communities. While aspects of the environment encourage users to play with the conventional limits of expression, therefore, or to experiment with the boundaries of social etiquette, the participants nevertheless appear frequently to adopt novel and distinctly structured behavioural norms, forms of expression, rules of inclusion and exclusion, and the rest; in other words, to organise their participation in some kind of communal format (Baym, 1996).

Studies focussing specifically on the nature of *interaction* online or via mobile phone texting have foregrounded temporality as a dimension of considerable significance for the organisation of participation. Much internet-mediated interaction is asynchronous, in the sense that participants leave messages or 'content' that can be retrieved at any time by others. But there are forms of synchronous messaging or internet relay chat in which participants are online at the same time and contribute to a 'live' unfolding discussion. Texting falls somewhere between these types, since participants may retrieve texts sent to them at any time, but in many instances texters engage in synchronous exchanges of messages and replies (Hutchby and Tanna, 2008; Laursen, 2005; Weilenmann, 2003). Interaction in such environments is better characterised as quasi-synchronous, however, since the technological mediation introduces a temporal lag between turn production and reception which renders turn-taking problematic; or at least very different from ordinary conversation. For example, participants attempting one-to-one communication via such mediation may experience difficulties relating

'current' and 'prior' or 'current' and 'next' turns because turns from other participants, including their interlocutor, may intervene as theirs is being typed out or even in the course of its distribution via the network server (Garcia and Jacobs, 1999; Hutchby, 2001; Hutchby and Tanna, 2008).

Contributions by **Boyd, Frobenius, Eisenlauer** and **Johansen** reveal different facets of how forms of communication mediated by the internet are growing and diversifying as the technology itself becomes more central to everyday social participation. In each case, a key theme is the way that so-called Web 2.0 formats – in which the internet user is also a participant and producer of web-based communications, via blogging, vlogging (Frobenius), posting videos or commenting on videos on YouTube (Boyd), social networking (Eisenlauer) or engaging with online news publication (Johansen) – necessitate extensions of the concept of participation framework based on new possibilities for the role of 'audience' and the intervening role of technological phenomena themselves in the relationship between speaker (or author) and the ratified or non-ratified participants within the ever-wider perceptual range of a given linguistic emission.

In summary, the intervention of technology in participation frameworks is not, in itself, a new phenomenon. As I began by observing, the telephone plays a describable role in the organisation of conversation conducted by its means, and if we include written formats it was far from being the first discourse technology to do so. The technology, its forms, affordances and effects, continues to evolve and it is important, as with this Special Issue, to continue to engage analytically and in close detail with the nature of that evolution and its significance for human communication. The key thing that this Special Issue demonstrates is not just the importance of taking account of the continuing evolution of technologically mediated interaction, but the robustness and evolving significance of tried and tested concepts such as participation framework, or affordances, that enable us to understand the nature of participation in such communication contexts.

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