

Chapter 9

Multimodal Communication and Meta-Modal Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an analysis of recordings of workplace interactions conducted with videoconferencing software. Video-conferencing offers users the widest variety of channels, or modes, of interaction, combining video with voice chat, text chat, whiteboard capabilities and collaborative document manipulation. The video-conferencing environment is therefore conducive to multimodal communication, defined in this chapter as the collaborative use of any one of these modes or combination of modes within one communicative event. The standard form of multimodal communication is a combination of video, voice chat and whiteboard application. The use of other modes is shown to reflect distinct communicative functions. Communicating via multiple modes can be technologically demanding and consequently affect usability, potentially necessitating the use of meta-modal language among video-conference participants. Overtly attending to the modes of communication during online interaction is therefore shown to be part and parcel of video-conferencing, serving to initiate repairwork and facilitate the progression of communication.

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is not only a relatively new field of research within linguistics, it is also a subject that enjoys a state of steady renewal, due to the rapid pace at which

information and communication technologies (ICTs) are developing. Advances in ICTs likewise affect the mediation of communication in the digital environment. From the humble beginnings of telecommunications, CMC has radically evolved to enable social interaction in the form of both synchronous and asynchronous communication, such as instant messaging, podcasts, and online

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conferencing, or e-mails, bulletin boards, and wikis. The different forms of CMC in turn breed variations in language use. In addition to adapting to the different modes of communication available, users learn to exploit them in order to create a dynamic form of interaction.

While CMC is traditionally associated with text-based interaction, video-mediated communication (VMC) includes audio and visual modes as well. Video-mediated communication, such as video-conferencing, thus offers users the widest variety of modes of communication, combining video with voice chat, text chat (i.e., instant messaging), whiteboard capabilities, and collaborative document manipulation. The use of any combination of these modes of synchronous communication therefore renders video-conferencing a form of multimodal communication (Herring, 2002; Soukup, 2000). Furthermore, like most interactive communication, video-conferencing normally takes place among two or more participants, and thus allows for simultaneous multiuser, multimodal interaction.

The availability of many modes of communication combined with multiuser capability sets the scene for potentially demanding or even chaotic interaction sequences, begging the question of how users navigate the multimodal video-conferencing environment in order to communicate effectively. The aim of this study is thus to identify and analyze features of interaction unique to the video-conference environment for the purpose of revealing discursive practices which contribute to effective video-mediated communication.

In this chapter we present an analysis of the emergent features of communication specific to the video-conferencing environment. Our analysis focusses on the multimodal communication as a whole and the meta-modal discourse in particular, both of which are identified as characteristic of the featured video-mediated interactions. In each interaction, the standard form of multimodal communication is a combination of video, voice chat and whiteboard application. The use of other

modes or combination of modes will be shown to reflect distinct communicative functions. Furthermore, the integration and use of many modes of communication can be technologically demanding and affect usability, ultimately resulting in the use of meta-modal language among video-conference participants. Overtly attending to the modes of communication during online interaction will be shown to be part and parcel of video-conferencing, serving to initiate repairwork and facilitate the progression of communication. This chapter will thus show that different modes of communication in the video-conferencing environment are used for different purposes, and that the existence of multiple modes of communication is brought to the foreground via metamodal discourse, helping interactants navigate the medium.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Video-Mediated Communication

Enabled by all forms of information and communication technologies, the virtual workplace has been promoted as a viable alternative to shared physical space (Barnatt, 1995; Boutellier et al., 1998; Gorton & Motwani, 1996; Grimshaw & Kwok, 1998; Morgan, 1993), thus rendering obsolete (at least in the minds of many) the notion of co-location as a requirement for teamwork and collaboration (Sapsed et al., 2005; Townsend et al., 1998). Not surprisingly, virtual workplaces are most prevalent in business settings, where they have been established first and foremost in answer to increased globalization and the subsequent dispersion of human resources in the corporate environment (Townsend, 1998).

Different forms of ICTs enable meaningful interaction from a distance, but the use of video-mediated communication technologies has been positioned as key to facilitating meaningful teamwork activity in virtual workplaces (Morgan, 1993; Nguyen & Canny, 2007; Townsend

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