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The Medium Is the Metamessage

Conversational Style in New Media Interaction

DEBORAH TANNEN
Georgetown University

Introduction

IN 1981 I ORGANIZED the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics "Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk." In my introduction to that volume (Tannen 1982a, ix) I explain that I regard "text" and "talk" not as two separate entities—text as written language and talk as spoken—but rather as "overlapping aspects of a single entity": discourse. I suggested, moreover, that the word "discourse" is invaluable as a corrective to the tendency to think of spoken and written language as separate and fundamentally different. Research by many of the participants in that meeting supported this view. Bright (1982) showed that spoken discourse exhibits verse markers like those associated with written poetry, and Chafe (1982) demonstrated that spoken Seneca rituals contain many features of written language. In my own research (for example, Tannen 1982b), while ostensibly focusing on spoken and written discourse as well as on orality and literacy, I emphasize that the division is illusory. I suggest that we think instead of oral and literate strategies that are found in speaking or writing.

Another major thread of my research has been analyzing everyday conversation. Early on I developed the notion of "conversational style," whereby speakers think they are simply saying what they mean and accomplishing interactional goals, but in doing so they necessarily choose among many options for each of the full range of linguistic phenomena such as pitch, amplitude, length of pauses, rate of speech, intonational contours, relative directness versus indirectness, discourse structure, and humor. These relatively automatic choices differ according to numerous cultural influences. I have tended to emphasize five primary influences: ethnicity, geographical background, age, class, and gender, while noting that there are innumerable other influences on style, such as sexual orientation and profession. I have shown, furthermore, that features of conversational style function to communicate not only messages—the meaning of words—but also *metamessages*—indications of how speakers intend what they say and what they are trying to do by saying those words in that way in that context.

These two research threads—on one hand, examining spoken and written language, and on the other, analyzing everyday conversation—converge in the discourse of new media.[1] Email, texting, Gchat, IM, SMS, Facebook, and other types of digital media discourse are widely understood to be written conversation. (For support of this point see Herring 2010.) In this chapter I build on and reinforce this view by demonstrating that the discourse of digital media interaction is characterized by written linguistic phenomena analogous to those I have identified as constituting conversational style in spoken interaction. I show, furthermore, that metamessages are conveyed in electronic interaction not only through the forms of discourse used but also through the choice of medium itself. I hope thus to contribute to an understanding of how new media interaction works, and how it affects interpersonal relationships.

A subtext of my argument is a response to the widespread the-sky-is-falling alarm with which many older Americans have responded to young people's use of social media. I join Thurlow (2006) and Crystal (2008), among others, in pointing out that much of what is being done by young people using new media is not, as their elders often perceive and fear, fundamentally different from what has always been done with language in social interaction. But doing the same old thing in new ways can also present new challenges. One such challenge posed by new media is that the potential metamessages one must take into account increase as the number and type of media platforms among which one must choose proliferate. Moreover, interpreting new media metamessages is especially challenging because media ideologies, as Gershon (2010) demonstrates, are emergent and continually evolving, and they tend to vary greatly not only from one user group to another but also among users in ostensibly the same social groups.

Overview

In what follows I begin by defining the term "metamessage" and explaining how I use it. I then explain and illustrate the linguistic phenomena that constitute conversational style in spoken interaction, with emphasis on the contrast between what I have dubbed "high-involvement" and "high-considerateness" styles. Next I explain how I first came to see parallels between regional differences in spoken conversational style and generational differences in digital discourse style, leading to the metaphoric characterization of cross-generational new media interaction as a kind of cross-cultural communication. With this as background, I introduce and illustrate social media analogs to conversational style, showing that differences tend to pattern not only by generation but also by gender. I then describe an "enthusiasm constraint" characteristic of cross-cultural and cross-regional spoken style. Examples of analogous phenomena in text messages exchanged by women college students include exclamatory punctuation, repetition, capitalization, and greater message length as unmarked displays of enthusiasm. The notion that these discursive practices are unmarked is crucial: their use by young women in the examples presented does not signal literal enthusiasm, but rather is necessary to avoid the impression of apathy or negativity. I go on to present other digital analogs to metamessages in conversation. Indirectness is seen in the brevity of text messages and in a link to a YouTube video. Next I con-

sider digital analogs to the pacing and pausing of turn exchange in spoken conversation. Following that I present examples of metamessages communicated by the choice of medium, including the use of multiple media to send the same message. I next consider medium-related challenges posed by the proliferation of media options. My last example is of a miscommunication that resulted from the mechanics built into the digital platform used when sending text messages. In conclusion I suggest that the alarm with which older adults have greeted young people's new media practices resembles not only the negativity that commonly accompanies cross-cultural differences in conversational style but also the alarm that accompanied the introduction of a communication technology that we now accept without question: the printing press.

All the examples I present and discuss are of naturally occurring electronic discourse exchanged among friends and family. They were provided by students in my classes who gave permission for their use and who, along with the interlocutors in their examples, are identified (or not) according to their preferences.

Metamessages

The concept of metamessages traces to Gregory Bateson's essay "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." Bateson explains that "human verbal communication can operate and always does at many contrasting levels of abstraction" (1972, 177–78). He illustrates "the seemingly simple denotative level" with the sentence, "The cat is on the mat." He illustrates what he calls "the metacommunicative level" with the sentence, "My telling you where to find the cat was friendly."[2] Bateson's notion of metacommunication is key to his seminal concept of framing. He explains that during a visit to the Fleishhacker Zoo in San Francisco, he observed monkeys at play and wondered how a monkey knew that an obviously hostile move, such as a bite, should be interpreted as play. He concluded that monkeys have a way of communicating the metamessage "This is play," thus allowing another monkey to correctly interpret the spirit in which a bite was intended. In other words, the metamessage signaled the activity the monkeys were engaged in. Applying the concept of metamessage to human interaction, Bateson further explains, "In these, the subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers." He notes that "the vast majority" of metacommunicative messages are implicit rather than explicit.

When I refer to messages and metamessages in spoken interaction, I am adapting Bateson's framework to distinguish meaning at two levels of abstraction. I use the term "messages" to refer to what Bateson described as the "seemingly simple denotative level," that is, the meaning of the words as they would be decoded by a dictionary and a grammar. My use of the term "metamessages" derives from his concept of metacommunication, in which "the subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers" and is overwhelmingly implicit. That is, metamessages communicate how a speaker intends a message, or how a hearer interprets a message—what it says about the relationship that one utters these words in this way in this context.

Conversational Style in New Media Discourse

When the topic of conversation among my peers turns to new media use, especially texting, I frequently hear comments expressing alarm, disapproval, and scorn toward

young people's tendency to send and receive text messages while engaging in face-to-face interaction. Most of my peers consider it self-evident that an individual's attention is owed to the people present, and diverting attention to a handheld device is self-evidently rude. I also frequently hear the parents of teenagers or young adults express disapproval, incredulity, and distress because their children often fail to return phone calls promptly—or at all. Although I tend to be relatively neutral on these topics, I understand, in an automatic, gut-level way, why parents and other older adults respond as they do. I was surprised, however, to learn from the students in my class that they and many of their peers react with incredulity to the suggestion that exchanging text messages while in company might be rude—and further, that they regard telephone calls as rude and intrusive, a notion that sparks parallel incredulity among older adults. These contrasting views, and their association with older and younger generations, respectively, are reflected in an article in *The Washington Post* (Shapira 2010) that quotes a mother's complaint about her teenage children: "None of the kids call us back! They will not call you back." The same article quotes a thirty-year-old as saying, "There's something confrontational about someone calling you."

These mutual accusations and the mutual incredulity they evoke remind me of a pattern at the heart of my research on cross-cultural differences in conversational style: the tendency to view one's own sense of what is rude and what is polite as self-evident, while regarding differing views as illogical if not disingenuous. A paradigmatic case of contrasting conversational styles that I have observed, and demonstrate at length elsewhere (Tannen 2005), is the use of and attitudes toward interruption and overlap in conversation. Those whose style I identified and described as "high-involvement" often talk along with others as a display of enthusiastic listenership, whereas those whose style I characterized as "high-considerateness" regard it as self-evident that only one voice should be heard at a time, so anyone who begins speaking before another has stopped is obviously—and rudely—interrupting. These contrasting conversational styles can be understood as reflecting Robin Lakoff's (1973, 1975) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness schemas. The notion that it is rude to vocalize while another holds the floor corresponds to Brown and Levinson's negative politeness and Lakoff's first rule of politeness, "Don't impose." The assumption that an attentive listener should vocalize to show involvement corresponds to Brown and Levinson's positive politeness and Lakoff's third rule of politeness, "Maintain camaraderie." Everyone easily understands why people regard as rude what they perceive to be interruptions. It may be somewhat less obvious to some that not talking along can be equally unacceptable to high-involvement-style speakers. This perspective was articulated by one such speaker to whom I was explaining that high-considerateness style follows Lakoff's "Don't impose" rule of politeness. She responded, "But the not imposing is so offensive!"

Conversational style differences thus result in mutual accusations of rudeness regarding overlapping speech: for one group of speakers it is rude to talk along, whereas to another group it is rude for a listener to just sit there like a bump on a log. These respective accusations are parallel to cross-generational attitudes toward use of communication technology: for many members of one generation it is rude not to return phone calls, whereas for many members of the other, it is rude to make

phone calls in the first place. Similarly, whereas members of one group find it rude to use a handheld device to text while in face-to-face interaction, members of the other may not—and may, in fact, deem it rude to fail to respond immediately to a text message, regardless of where they are and what they are doing when it arrives. Moreover, members of each group regard their own assumptions about what is rude as self-evident while reacting with disbelief—or worse—to the other group's contrasting assumptions.

I will present one more new media example that struck me, early on, as similar to patterns I had observed and characterized as cross-cultural differences in conversational style. My student Maddie Howard reported to our class that her brother and her boyfriend, in explaining why it is not rude to send or receive text messages while engaged in face-to-face interaction, commented, "But it takes so little time." This exact explanation reminded me of high-involvement-style speakers' reactions to the judgment of high-considerateness-style speakers about a particular interactional practice. I experienced the practice I have in mind, and its geographic distribution, as a native of Brooklyn, New York, living in California. Based on my experience growing up and living as an adult in New York City, I took for granted the appropriateness of the following scenario: A customer in a department store wishes to ask a quick question, such as "Where is the ladies' room?" There is no unoccupied salesperson in sight, so the customer approaches a salesperson who is serving another customer, and hovers in a conventionalized way. The salesperson glances up, the customer quickly posits the question, and the salesperson utters a cryptic reply, such as "second floor." The customer says, "Thank you," and heads to the second floor while the salesperson returns to the sales encounter. The kinesics of such an exchange are eloquent: by hovering at a short distance, the inquirer signals a respect for the primacy of the ongoing sales encounter; the occupied salesperson maintains a physical orientation to the customer being served, similarly signaling that their encounter is ongoing. The exchange takes only a few seconds and is not perceived by anyone to be an interruption. When I attempted to initiate an encounter of this type in California, however, I was stunned to be reprimanded by the salesperson: "I'm serving this customer now. I'll help you when I'm finished with her." My reaction was exactly that expressed by Maddie Howard's brother and boyfriend: How could anyone mistake this for an interruption? It takes so little time. In fact, isn't it self-evidently rude to expect someone to wait a significant period of time—especially someone in need of a ladies' room—to ask a question so fleeting that the answer could have been delivered in far fewer words than the salesperson used to articulate the reprimand? I suspect that this is the logic behind young people's conviction that it is appropriate to send a brief text message while in face-to-face interaction: not only does the exchange of text messages take too little time to constitute an interruption, but it would furthermore be rude to keep the sender waiting for needed information when providing that information takes so little time.

As a native of New York City and a high-involvement-style speaker, I continue to see self-evident logic and advantage to the conversational routine I have just described. As an analyst of conversational interaction, I can see the logic of both perspectives, and can understand why the same behavior can be seen as polite in one

part of the country but rude in another. In the following sections I show that parallel processes of contrasting interactional routines can characterize gender- and generation-related differences in new media discursive practices.

Markers of Enthusiasm and Intensity

Many aspects of social media discourse that tend to differ from one group to another can be understood as associated with high-involvement as contrasted with high-considerateness conversational style. In my previous work (Tannen 1986, 2005), I describe these different conversational styles with reference to geographic region and ethnicity. Among users of new media, the differing uses—and contrasting interpretations of those uses—tend to pattern by age and gender. I begin by exploring in more depth the expression of enthusiasm and its relation to gender.

An element of high-involvement style in spoken conversation is what I call an "enthusiasm constraint." An example I examine elsewhere (Tannen 1986) was provided by a Greek woman. She recalled that when she was a young girl, if she asked her father whether she could go somewhere, and he answered, *"An thes, pas"* ("If you want, you can go"), she knew that she should not go, because his approval had been unenthusiastic. If he had really approved, he would have said something more like *"Nai, na pas"* ("Yes, you should go"). I also describe a cross-cultural difference with regard to the enthusiasm constraint within an American family. A mother who had been raised in New York City was raising her own children in Vermont. When they told her of some event in their lives, she frequently responded with expressive lexical and paralinguistic features such as, "Wow! Oh my god!" In her high-involvement style, her word choice and emphatic voice quality showed enthusiastic interest and attention. Her children, however, who had learned a relatively high-considerateness style, would look around to see what had frightened their mother. When they realized she was responding to them, they'd groan, "Oh, Mom! It's not THAT big a deal!" They were certain that her overreaction was a personality quirk unique to their mother.

These expectations with regard to the expression of enthusiasm vary by cultural or regional background: Greek in my first example, and New York City compared with New England in the second. Parallel patterns have been described by Baron (2004) and Herring (2003) as characterizing gender-related expectations of expressiveness in electronic exchanges, such as in young women's greater use of emoticons. The students in my classes have found similar patterns. Examples of text message and email exchanges that they have gathered demonstrate that gender differences in the use of new media conventions for the expression of emotion constitute a kind of cross-cultural communication and potential miscommunication.

Example 1: Contrasting Expectations of Enthusiasm Markers

A student in my class found evidence of a kind of cross-cultural miscommunication in an instant message (IM) exchange she had with her younger brother, who was attending a college situated midway between their hometown and Washington, DC, where Georgetown University is located. The exchange began when she sent her brother the following IM:

> Hey! So, I have an idea for President's Day Weekend!

Her brother responded,

> Oh God, you and your ideas . . . what is it?

The student did not react explicitly to her brother's use of sarcasm, a rhetorical device identified by Herring (1995, 2003) as more common in men's computer-mediated communication than in women's. She simply went on to explain her idea: to visit him on her way home. (Her meaning was unambiguous, although she miswrote "on the way back"):

> I'm gonna go home from Saturday to Monday, but what do you think of me coming to visit you on the way back? I can take the train and stay over Thursday and Friday night. We can do something fun during the day on Friday, it's supposed to be really nice out!

Her brother replied,

> Okay cool. Thursday is fine, but I have a club baseball tournament I'm leaving for Friday.

Her next message said,

> Oh . . . okay. Well we can get dinner and go out on Thursday then??

Her brother responded,

> Dinner sounds good. I'll pick you up at the station.

Her next response showed how she had been interpreting her brother's messages thus far. She, too, used sarcasm:

> Wow . . . good thing you sound excited . . .

Her brother denied that he had intended to communicate indifference:

> What? Sorry, sorry, I am. I am.

The sister reported that she had truly suspected that her brother was not thrilled with the prospect of her visit, but she later encountered independent evidence that he was. Not only had he repeated "sorry" and "I am" in his reassurances, but, more important, his actions communicated enthusiasm, as he called her repeatedly on the phone and talked about wanting her to meet his friends. Note the significance—the metamessage of enthusiasm—communicated by his choice of technology: the telephone rather than email.

This example shows that the siblings shared certain assumptions about new media use, such as the enthusiasm entailed by making telephone calls, but they differed in expectations of how enthusiasm should be communicated in digital discourse. The sister, along with other class members, believed that differences regarding the display of enthusiasm patterned by gender. This observation is supported by Herring and Zelenkauskaite (2009), who found that women tend to use more nonstandard typography,

including repeated letters and punctuation, and by Waseleski (2006), who found a similar gender pattern in the use of exclamation points. In order to see what made this young woman suspect that her brother was not enthusiastic about her proposed visit, we can compare his responses to those of the young woman in the next example.

Example 2: Enthusiasm Markers as Shared Conventions

Example 1 illustrated cross-gender miscommunication due to stylistic differences regarding the display of enthusiasm in digital interaction. Example 2, provided by Kimberly Garity, demonstrates how an enthusiasm constraint operates in digital media discourse among young women. It is a text message exchange between Kimberly and her friend Jillian, who had previously lived in the same dormitory. Jillian wrote,

> Hey so I haven't seen you the ENTIRE week and I reeeally miss you!
> What are you doing tonight/tomorrow for meals?
> Sorry I had to miss lunch yesterday!
> But really, this needs to change because I miss McCarthy 8
> only because I can't just stop by your room to chat!

Here is Kimberly's response:

> I miss you too!!!!!!!!
> R you going to Justin and Lance's tonight??
> Slash wanna do din tomorrow??
> I can't wait to catch up on life!!

In analyzing this exchange, Kimberly noted a range of enthusiasm markers, including multiple exclamation points ("I miss you too!!!!!!!!" and "I can't wait to catch up on life!!"). Even question marks were reduplicated ("R you going to Justin and Lance's tonight??" and "Slash wanna do din tomorrow??"). (The word "slash," which refers to the typed symbol [/], designates an option or a topic switch—a fascinating example of how digital discourse represents spoken discourse, even if it means more keystrokes.) Kimberly observed, however, that these markers of enthusiasm were not meant literally. Rather, they are expected—unmarked in the linguistic sense. Had she not used them, it would have been marked; that is, their absence would have carried special meaning, and her friend might well have concluded that Kimberly was unenthusiastic about getting together.

When we discussed this example in class, several women commented that they regularly repeat the final vowel in the salutation "Hi," so it reads, for example, "Hiiii." A single-i "Hi," they explained, comes across as cold, even sullen. One student reported that she had to tell her mother to please add "i's" to her salutation to avoid this impression—even though she knew that her mother did not intend it. Because reduplicating word-final vowels is unmarked, single vowels in that position take on negative metamessages for those who have become accustomed to letter repetition as an enthusiasm constraint. As with all elements of conversational style, our reactions to unexpected style features are emotional and automatic. In that sense, the impression of coolness conveyed by her mother's single-i salutation could be seen as the result of cross-cultural miscommunication. Telling her mother to please add

"i's" is thus parallel to correcting the grammar or pronunciation of a nonnative language speaker: the corrector knows what the speaker means, but the utterance doesn't sound right.[3]

A similar example in Arabic was provided by a student from Oman. She received an email message from a friend with the subject line "Salaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaam sooha," where "sooha" is a diminutive form of the recipient's (pseudonymous) name, and *salam*, the Arabic equivalent of "hi" rendered in English letters, is emphasized by repetition—for a total of 23—of the vowel "a."

Example 3: Volubility versus Taciturnity

If a young man's omission of conventionalized enthusiasm markers could result in the mistaken interpretation of negativity by his sister, in other cases the impression of negativity can be intended. In the following example, which was provided by Lauren Murray, a student ("Mary"—a pseudonym) initiated an IM exchange with a friend with whom she had had an argument in order to see whether the friend was ready to put the fight behind them. Here is how the exchange went:

MARY: Hey.
FRIEND: Hi.
MARY: Hey what's going on? I haven't talked to you in forever.
FRIEND: Nothing much.
MARY: Cool. How's work going?
FRIEND: Good. Busy.
MARY: That sucks. Is it fun at all?
FRIEND: Not really.
MARY: Sweet. Have you met any new guys in the office?
FRIEND: Not really.
MARY: Oh, that sucks. Well, I'm sure you will. Ha.
FRIEND: Ha.
MARY: Omg. The other day I heard Pat dropped out of school and is definitely not going back. I can't believe it. It's so terrible. You know?
FRIEND: Cool.
MARY: Oh, yeah. Did you find an apartment yet?
FRIEND: Nope.
MARY: Alrighty then. I guess I'm gonna go now.
FRIEND: Bye.

As this exchange unfolded, it became clear to Mary that her friend was still angry at her, because all Mary's attempts to get a conversation going were met with cryptic, usually monosyllabic responses. Perhaps most striking is the reply "Cool" following Mary's observation that a mutual acquaintance "dropped out of school" and her evaluation of this news as both surprising ("I can't believe it") and regrettable ("It's so terrible").

To test whether this expectation of enthusiasm was gender related, Lauren Murray showed the exchange to seven women and five men and asked for their interpretations. All five men attributed the friend's short responses to her being busy or indifferent but not angry. Six of the seven women said that the friend was angry. For the women, at least, the enthusiasm constraint was at work: terse replies communicated coolness.

Example 4: Repetition and Capitalization

In the next example, as in the preceding one, taciturnity is used to send a negative metamessage. In addition, this example demonstrates a use of intensity markers that is parallel to their use in service of the enthusiasm constraint. Example 4, provided by Jacqueline Fogarty, illustrates the use of enthusiasm markers in the issuing of an apology.

Jackie and a number of friends had gathered in order to go somewhere together. As everyone in the group piled into taxis, only Jackie was left awaiting a last member of the group, who had been delayed. Finding herself alone, Jackie sent the following (sarcastic) text message to a friend who was among the group:

Thanks for waiting for Melissa with me thats cool

The friend responded,

JACKIE I AM SO SO SO SORRY! I thought you were behind us in the cab and then I saw you weren't!!!!! I feel soooooooo bad! Catch another cab and ill pay for it for youuuuu

The friend conveyed the sincerity and depth of her apology (either actual or represented—it is neither possible nor necessary to distinguish) by capitalization ("JACKIE I AM SO SO SO SORRY!"), multiple exclamation points ("I saw you weren't!!!!!"), word repetition ("SO SO SO SORRY"), reduplication of word-final vowels (at the end of "so" in "I feel soooooooo bad!" and at the end of "you" in "ill pay for it for youuuuu").

The repetition of the final vowel in "youuuuu" is particularly interesting, since its impact is solely visual. When reading "soooooooo," one can hear the word "so" with the vowel sound elongated, as one imagines someone saying, "I feel soooooooo bad!" But repeating the final "u" in "you" doesn't work the same way. For one thing, the vowel sound doesn't reside in the letter "u" but in the double-digit "ou." More important, "hearing" the sentence in one's mind with that sound elongated ("I'll pay for it for yoooooooooo") doesn't sound like anything anyone would say for emphasis. It seems instead that the reduplication of the word-final letter is a visual means to provide emphasis and communicate sincerity and depth of emotion, much like the previously discussed repetition of the final letter in the salutation "Hiiii."

In reply to her friend's message, Jackie texted,

no its fine we are walking

In this message, the lack of expressive markers, and the resultant impression of taciturnity, indicated how less than fine it really was. Jackie's friend then wrote,

seriously Jackie please, get a cab, I feel so bad!!!

Here the friend's repeated final exclamation points indicate the depth of her feelings and hence the sincerity of her apology. But Jackie was not to be mollified. She replied,

we are walking there its fine.

Throughout this example, the friend uses expressive spelling, capitalization, repetition, and reduplicated punctuation to send a metamessage of intensity along with her message of apology. And Jackie's omission of these features indicates her continuing displeasure and reluctance to let her friend off the hook.

Indirectness and Its Discontents

As far back as Lakoff's (1973) early work on communicative style, linguists have focused a great deal of analysis on indirectness in conversation, with its powerful potential to communicate as well as its risk of misinterpretation. Lakoff made clear that indirectness is fundamental and pervasive in conversational interaction: it is simply impossible for speakers to make explicit in every utterance all the assumptions, implications, and metamessages intended or, in Goffman's sense, "given off"—that is, communicated unintentionally. Indirectness is pervasive in new media interaction as well; indeed, the opportunities and the liabilities of indirectness are enhanced by the constraints of the media themselves.

Example 5: Brevity as Indirectness

The word "cryptic" suggests that brevity can be associated with unstated, even hidden, meaning. Thus brevity, which is commonly regarded as characteristic of text messages, frequently entails ambiguity. Example 5 shows the potential ambiguity inherent in a one-word text message. Fiona Hanly wrote the following description of the complex potential metamessages that she and her friends took into account when considering how to interpret a missive composed of a single word:

On Thursday evening, out to dinner with several friends, one of my friends, Lauren, received a text from a boy she was interested in that read simply: "Hey." To which she wondered: what did he mean with "hey?" Did he really mean just hey? Was he checking to see if she was busy? Was he actually interested in her like she was interested in him? Was he bored? How should she respond—should she assume that there was something implied by his text, address the frame of the conversation, or just respond on the message level he had set up?

Brevity is a common motivation for texting rather than telephoning: one does not have to say, "Hello, how are you? Did I call at a bad time?" before getting to the content of a message. Neither does one have to signal the end or take leave: no "Okay, I'll talk to you later" is required, nor even a fleeting "Take care." This example demonstrates, however, that the brevity of the text message "Hey" means that the text message could be interpreted in many different ways, each possible interpretation entailing indirect meanings that could plausibly have been implied—and equally plausibly denied.

Example 6: An Electronic Link as Indirectness

Greg Bennett provided another example of indirect meaning interpreted, and possibly implied, by a common new media discursive practice: providing a link in the form of a URL to be clicked on. The participants in this exchange, a young woman and young man, were friends, but the woman was beginning to develop a romantic interest in the man. One day, he posted a link on her Facebook wall to a YouTube video that featured a song with rather romantic lyrics. Pleased that the video seemed to imply that his interest in her was also becoming romantic, she sent him an SMS message saying, "Saw the video. Were you trying to say something?" He replied, "ummmm . . . i just thought it was a cool video. why?" This reply brought her back down to earth with a thud. She concluded that she had misread his intent: he was not romantically interested in her after all.

This example illustrates both the communicative potential and the inherent ambiguity of posting a link to another medium or message, such as a YouTube video—a form of indirect meaning that is particular to electronic interaction. The example also parallels gender patterns in conversational style with respect to directness versus indirectness. In a discussion of conversational style differences regarding indirectness (Tannen 1986, 79), I give the example of a man who had repeatedly asked a woman coworker to join him for lunch, and was uncertain how literally to interpret her repeated refusals, which were always accompanied by plausible explanations for why she was unable rather than unwilling to accept. He tried to clear things up by asking a direct question: "Do you really mean you can't, or are you trying to tell me you don't want to have lunch with me so I shouldn't ask again?" Even though the latter assumption was accurate, the woman could not bring herself to say, "I don't want to have lunch with you—ever," so she said something like, "Oh, well, sure, you know, it's a really busy time for me." His attempt to force her to be direct failed, because indirectness was the only way she could refuse an invitation.

Looked at from the perspective of conversational style differences with regard to indirectness, it is possible that the young man who posted the link to a YouTube video really was developing a romantic interest in the young woman. However, by posting a link, he was expressing it indirectly. By asking, "Were you trying to say something?" the young woman was asking him to shift from indirect to direct communication. His seemingly clueless "ummmm . . . i just thought it was a cool video" might reflect, as she concluded, that she had been wrong to interpret the link as an indirect expression of romantic interest. However, she might also have been wrong in drawing this conclusion. It is possible that his response indicated his discomfort with direct expression of romantic interest rather than a lack of such interest.

Electronic links, then, can be seen as a form of indirectness that is particular to and pervasive in electronic interaction.

Pacing and Pausing in Turn-Taking

A final linguistic feature of new media discourse that parallels conversational style in spoken interaction is relative pacing in the exchange of turns. In spoken conversation, everyone has a sense of how long a pause is normal within a turn before listeners get the impression that a current speaker is finished so another is free—or obligated—to

take the floor. Elsewhere I demonstrate at length (Tannen 2005) that there are cross-cultural and cross-subcultural differences in pacing and pausing, and that these differences lead to mutual negative evaluations and frequent misinterpretations. When interlocutors have differing expectations regarding the length of interturn pauses, the one who expects a shorter pause will get the impression that the other has finished when that other is simply waiting for the length of pause that signals an open floor. The latter feels that the former is interrupting and hogging the floor, while the former feels forced to do all the interactional work with someone who either has nothing to say or is unwilling to say anything. In both cases, the speed of response has led to interpretations—sometimes valid, sometimes not—about interlocutors' intentions and abilities.

In the exchange of electronic messages, it is clear when a sender's turn has ended, but interactants must still decide how quickly to respond to messages they receive, and speed of response carries metamessages with regard to intentions. My students tell me that they frequently confer on the appropriate way to respond to electronic messages, and have advised friends, "Don't respond right away; you don't want to seem desperate." This advice is predicated on the assumption that a speedy reply indicates enthusiasm, and that when it comes to the delicate negotiations of romantic interest, too much enthusiasm equates with desperation. In the same spirit, a lengthy response time could indicate a lack of enthusiasm. Furthermore, as with spoken conversational style, interpretations can turn out to be mistaken. A student reported that when her boyfriend did not respond quickly to a text message she sent, she concluded that he was angry at her. It turned out that the reason was merely technological: his cell phone battery had run out. The interference of such purely technical phenomena—all electronic equipment can malfunction, break, or run out of battery power—introduces the risk of unintended meaning that may be seen as a kind of indirectness particular to electronic interaction.

The examples thus far have illustrated digital discourse analogs to elements of conversational style in spoken discourse. I first showed that volubility versus taciturnity, capitalization, repetition, and emphatic punctuation can be requisite, unmarked markers of enthusiasm in digital discourse, particularly among young women. I then suggested that brevity of text messages, the provision of electronic links, and the pacing of turn exchange all constitute kinds of indirectness that are particular to digital interaction. Like indirectness in conversation, these aspects of computer-mediated interaction entail the sending and interpreting of unstated meaning, or metamessages. In the next and final section, I turn to a phenomenon that is particular to new media interaction: the metamessages communicated by the choice of medium.

The Medium Is the Metamessage

In the multiplatform environment of electronic discourse, the choice of medium itself sends metamessages. My use of the term "metamessage" in this context is parallel to Gershon's (2010) notion of "second-order information."

The mere use of a medium communicates meaning. For example, when Greg Bennett told of a blog post he had written that was related to the topic of our course, I asked him if he had received any responses, and he said, "It got thirty hits." The literal answer to my question would have been, "No, the blog hasn't received any responses." But that would have indicated a lack of interest on the part of readers, or

even a lack of readers, which would have been misleading. The level of reader interest was better communicated by reporting the number of "hits": on thirty separate occasions, a reader had engaged with the blog. (We don't know whether this was thirty separate readers; a "hit" could represent a new reader or a return reader.) Enthusiasm or interest among readers was a metamessage indicated by their use of the medium.

Example 7: Communicating Intensity by Using Multiple Media

In example 4 Jacqueline Fogarty's friend emphasized the sincerity of her apology by repeating words and word-final vowels in text messages. In example 7 a college student sends a metamessage of sincerity in an apology by a different sort of repetition: using two different media to send the same message. Maddie Howard had been busy studying when a friend interrupted to ask her a question. Soon after, the friend apologized for the interruption by sending both a text message and email. Here, first, is the email message. (The phrase "app rising" refers to "Appalachia Rising," a conference held at Georgetown to oppose mountaintop removal mining.)

> great :) oh and sorry for barging into your study sesh last night! there were some stranded app 2 rising folks and i was gonna see if i could drive them. :/

Maddie also received the following text message the same day:

> Apologies for intruding on your homework time last night!

Each missive alone communicated the apology; sending two separate messages, each by a different medium, added emphasis. It is worthy of note that the gravity of the offense that instigated this apology is less than that in the previous example. Perhaps that is why this email message includes only a single exclamation point ("last night!"), although it does include two emoticons (the opening ":)" and the closing ":/"). This seems fitting, as the inconvenience visited upon Maddie, having her homework session briefly interrupted, is less than that experienced by Jackie, who was left stranded by her friends. The emphasis by multiple media as compared with emphasis by capitalization and repetition seems, respectively, perfectly suited to the seriousness of the respective offenses.

Metamessages in Medium Choice

Another example of a metamessage communicated by the choice of medium was recounted by Caitlin Sudman. Caitlin noticed that the Facebook status of a friend, Sue, had changed from "in a relationship" to "single." This status change alerted her Facebook friends that Sue and her boyfriend had broken up. Predictably, many of those book friends posted messages of support and sympathy on Sue's Facebook wall. Caitlin noticed, however, that none of those messages were sent by Sue's close friends. Caitlin was certain that this did not mean that her close friends cared less about Sue than did her Facebook friends. She surmised that Sue would have contacted her close friends by another medium—a private one, such as email or telephone—before making the information about her breakup available on the public medium of Facebook. Learn-

ing an important development in a close friend's life on Facebook would be distancing, even rejecting—a sign that one was not, in fact, a close friend.

Awareness that choice of medium sends metamessages is not a new phenomenon. Older adults can recall when we had to choose among several media to convey information: face-to-face conversation, telephone, or letter. A letter, furthermore, could be handwritten or typed. Today those same options are available, but so are many electronic options as well. The dilemma posed by sorting through the potential metamessages associated with each medium was described by a student in my class:

> I recently had to contact someone for the potentially awkward purpose of asking him to be my partner for an upcoming ballroom dancing competition. The message I had to convey to him was to let me know ASAP because registration had to be in, ideally at the end of the same day. He had earlier told me he would let me know well ahead of time, but he didn't. I had several steps to take and decisions to make along the way in contacting him and they were all tied to issues of which medium to use. The first step was to decide which medium to use to contact him. The message needed to be prompt, but I also wanted to avoid the face threatening act of contacting him by phone or in person because that would make it harder for him to say no. I wanted to give him an out if he wanted to decline. I rejected email as too formal. Such a tone would have seemed odd and possibly demanding, even desperate. My remaining choices were texting or Facebook. While texting would have been ideal in terms of time and tone, I didn't have his phone number. So, I turned to Facebook. The first thing was to check whether he was on Facebook Chat. Unfortunately, he wasn't. I had to then decide whether I wanted to post my question or subtle reminder about the deadline on his wall or in a private message. A wall post would have better conveyed the idea that I was not being pushy and was simply reminding him that he agreed to give me an answer before the deadline. A private message would make it less awkward for both parties involved if he preferred to dance with someone else. However, while nowhere near the level of email, a private Facebook message is formal in the context of the three, well four if you count the Status message pings, ways of contacting someone by Facebook. I went to his profile page and saw a recent exchange he had with someone else about how he and his actual partner, who later told him she couldn't go to the competition, were dancing together. But I thought my message would look strange right above that one. So, I picked the private message. But I had one final choice: what to fill in as the subject. Now, this just may be me being weird, but I wasn't sure where to proceed from there because the subject is what introduces the reader to the message. It's the first thing he sees. It sets the tone. I solved the dilemma by getting right to the point and asking about the competition in the title and adding the point about the deadline in the body of the message. Since I was at my computer for a long time after, I did check for a reply, but more than that, I checked to see if he was on Facebook to see whether he had gotten the message.

This eloquent articulation of the factors the writer had to take into account in choosing a medium for her brief query dramatizes how each new medium entails both new opportunities and new liabilities with regard to potential metamessages entailed in the choice of medium.

Example 8: Pitfalls Built into the Technology

Sometimes miscommunication can result not from the choice of a medium but from the mechanics built into it. My final example demonstrates such a liability. Example 8, provided by James Boyman, is a text exchange between James's thirteen-year-old sister Laura and his cousin Nick, who was also thirteen. Nick told James that it is common practice among his peers to put a tagline on text messages as a personal signature, much like the signature that routinely appears at the bottom of many people's email messages. There is a difference, however: whereas the signature appended automatically to the end of an email message is visible to both sender and receiver, a text message tagline automatically appended to every text message sent does not show up on the screen of the sender's handheld device. (In the following example, Nick's tagline, "saints suck," refers to a football team, the New Orleans Saints.)

The exchange began when Laura initiated a text message to Nick:

> hi wats up?

Nick's reply appeared on Laura's cell phone screen:

> nothing much. Wats up with u?
> saints suck

Responding to the second line of Nick's text message, Laura wrote,

> oh, ur upset about the football game

To this, Nick replied,

> yeah I am
> saints suck

Noticing the repetition of the final line, Laura replied to this by sending the message,

> u already said that

Seemingly puzzled by this remark, Nick wrote,

> wat do u mean?
> saints suck

Laura, puzzled in turn, replied,

> u said it again

Nick then wrote,

> wat are u talking about?
> saints suck

At this point, Laura figured it out:

> oh its ur signature

Nick, however, was still clueless:

> wats my signature?
> saints suck

At that point, Laura had to end the exchange. (Note that "g2g" is an abbreviation for "got to go"):

> nev mind. g2g moms here

Nick then took his leave as well—none the wiser about the role played by his tagline in creating confusion:

> bye
> saints suck

The potential ambiguity of Nick's signature, "saints suck," is built into the medium. For the receiver of the text messages, it is not immediately apparent—as it would be with an email signature—what is preprogrammed and what is part of the specific message. For the sender it is easy to forget about the signature, which is not visible on his screen. If Laura does not know how the words "saints suck" were intended, Nick is not aware that those words are there at all. The misunderstanding thus results from a liability built into the medium.

Conclusion

The preceding example is a microcosm of a theme I mention at the outset: although new media interaction poses new challenges, much of what happens in digital conversation is similar to what has always happened in spoken conversation. Implicit in my illustrating a range of new media analogs to conversational style in spoken interaction is the *plus ça change* claim that new media interaction is not an entirely new world, but a world in which many familiar interactional activities are being accomplished in new ways. In this spirit, it may be helpful to remember that what Crispin Thurlow (2006) dubs "moral panic" has accompanied the introduction of all new media. Historian Elizabeth Eisenstein reminds us of Plato's fear that the invention of writing would destroy memory. She further documents the mixed reaction sparked by the invention of the printing press, as reflected in her title, *Divine Art, Infernal Machine*. Reminiscent of ambivalent reactions to digital media, the printing press was hailed as a potential solution to a vast array of problems but also railed against as the source of an equally broad range of devastation, including the risk of political chaos resulting from widespread pamphleteering and information overload. Eisenstein provides this example of such ambivalence:

> Leibniz, when addressing Louis XIV in 1680, paid tribute to the way printing duplicated books and thus made it possible "to preserve the greater part of our knowledge." But he also expressed alarm about the "horrible mass of books"

that kept on growing. Unless contained and restrained, he advised, the increase in output would result in intolerable disorder, and it would become "a disgrace rather than an honor to be an author." (2011, 87)

Contemporary readers are unlikely to have feared that the printing press risks rendering it a disgrace to write a book, yet Leibniz's tone resembles the scorn often heard today toward those who profligately disseminate their words in blogs and twitter feeds.

This spirit of scorn and moral panic with which members of older generations have greeted younger generations' uses of new media has led me to think of new media interaction as a kind of cross-cultural communication. The present study represents my elaboration of this metaphoric premise. In interpersonal interaction taking place over new media, as in interpersonal conversation, meaning is communicated on two levels of abstraction: message and metamessage. Whereas messages can be understood by reference to the meaning of words and grammatical usage, metamessages are communicated by aspects of conversational style found in electronic discourse that resemble those in spoken interaction. The examples in this chapter include the use of emphatic punctuation; capitalization; and repetition of words, letters, or punctuation marks. These are parallel to the use of amplitude, intonation, and elongation of sounds to create emphasis and emotional valence in speaking. I also suggest that the brevity of text messages and the posting of electronic links as well as metamessages communicated by the choice of medium are all forms of indirectness, with corresponding potential for communication of unstated meaning as well as for ambiguity and misinterpretation. Furthermore, metamessages communicated by the speed of response are parallel to interpretations (and potential misinterpretations) of pacing and pausing in spoken conversational turn exchange.

New media discourse, however, also entails unique vehicles for positive or negative and intended or unintended metamessages. Sending a message via two different media is a way of communicating emphasis or intensity, and the choice of medium itself sends metamessages—and such potential metamessages must be taken into account in making that choice. There are also liabilities built into the technology of electronic media, such as the potential for technological breakdowns and the automaticity of a signature tagline that is visible to the recipient but not the sender. In sum, I have identified some of the ways that new media discourse parallels phenomena in spoken interaction, as well as some ways that it differs, in order to shed light on the discourse of digital social media and how the use of such media affects interpersonal interaction.

NOTES
1. Finding a term to refer to the topic of this chapter is problematic. As Susan Herring points out in her chapter, "new media," which is used here and in the title of the volume, "is lacking in historical per-

spective"; the term "digital media" is too broad, as it includes video games; and computer-mediated communication (CMC) is no longer descriptive, since handheld devices, for example, are not computers. In this chapter I use "new media," "social media," "digital discourse," "electronic communication," and other related terms interchangeably, in order to refer collectively to the use in interpersonal interaction of email, Gchat, IM, SMS, text messages, and Facebook.

2. Bateson also identifies a second type of meaning that operates on the same level of abstraction as metacommunication: "metalinguistic," in which "the subject of discourse is the language." He illustrates that level with the example sentence, "The verbal sound 'cat' stands for any member of such and such class of objects."

3. Anna Marie Trester reminds me that the metaphoric parallel between native and nonnative speaker is not entirely arbitrary but rather reminiscent of the common observation that young people are "native speakers" of new media discourse, whereas for older people it is a second language.

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