

## Pragmatic Aspects in Synchronous Online Communication

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the investigation of the role of pragmatic aspects in the choice of linguistic elements during formal online communication. The investigation consisted of two phases. The first included the analysis of the following three pragmatic aspects in synchronous online communication: peculiarities of communication medium, conversational setting and message senders'/recipients' knowledge and goals. The second phase was the analysis of the relevance of the linguistic means used by the students during the formal online communication. The investigation showed that all three aspects that were analysed played a significant role in the students' attempt to choose and manipulate with the linguistic elements pertinent to formal negotiations. Thus these negotiation sessions provided the students with extensive practice aiming at the development of their communicative competence.

### Introduction

According to J. Mey (1998: 38, 54, 55) the way the linguistic elements are used during communication depend on such pragmatic aspects as message senders'/recipients' relationship, their communicative goals as well as the location and the communication medium used during interaction. The ever-growing access to the new communication medium the Internet has initiated its wide application in communication. Therefore it is essential to investigate the role of these pragmatic aspects in the choice of the linguistic elements during online communication.

The goal of the present paper is to analyse the following:

1. To what extent the pragmatic aspects influenced the students' choice of linguistic and extra-linguistic means during synchronous online communication carried out within the framework of the simulation *ICT in Eutropia*.
2. To what extent the learning objectives were reached during the students' participation in the simulation *ICT in Eutropia*.

### Theoretical Background

Pragmatics, which is considered to be a relatively new branch of linguistics, originated when linguists started investigating the reasons why grammatical correctness contradicted with what was perceived as correct by the message senders/recipients in a certain context of communication. G. Lakoff (1977: 330) illustrated this phenomenon by providing an example about the choice of the relative pronouns. According to the English grammar the relative pronoun *who* is used in the case of nouns marked human, whereas *which* is used for non-human. However, G. Lakoff drew attention to the fact that there were instances in communication when the rule-observation could turn out to be even less "correct" than breaking the rule.

#### Example

My cat *who* believes that I'm a fool, enjoys tormenting me.

This example showed that the relevance of the relative pronoun *who* depended on such factors as the speaker, the cat and their relationship. It might even happen that choice of *which* for that particular cat would have been even more irrelevant than *who*. Thus G. Lakoff (1971: 130) drew the attention to the existence of such extra-linguistic factors that "open the door for ungrammatical behaviour on the part of the language users". D. Hymes (1979: 270-293) enumerated the following extra-linguistic factors that according to him could play a significant role in communication: theme, setting and the message senders/recipients relationship. P. Brown and C. Frazer (1979: 35) added to these three factors the psychological environment of the communication.

During the past 25 years the pragmatic context, its elements and role in meaning making has been in the focus of attention of the linguists dealing with issues of pragmatics. D. Crystal (1992: 57) puts a special emphasis on the language users and their choices of the utterances. He claims that pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of the users, the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication. J. Thomas (1996: 1) also investigates the notion of pragmatic context. He points out the following four processes that according to him are essential in meaning making: the disambiguation of meaning in context, the assignment of complete meaning, distinguishing sentence meaning from speaker meaning, the investigation of why people speak as they do and the investigation of how listeners arrive at particular meaning. J. Mey (1998: 58) summarises the ideas about the importance of the language user and the pragmatic context by claiming that pragmatic thinking is always context bound as people always operate in contexts. Therefore, the context "looms large and has to be taken into account whenever people formulate their thought about language". On the other hand he reminds that the presence of the actual or potential conversation partners during communication is of utmost importance in order to provide a complete account of people's use of language.

The above considered assumptions imply that pragmatic context is the whole environment of communication that possesses the following two features:

1. It is dynamic;
2. It contains the following elements: message sender and recipient, (their shared and personal goals, background knowledge, willingness to co-operate), location of conversation and communication medium (spoken, written, and mixed).
3. All these elements of pragmatic context are essential in interaction as they co-exist during the communication and determine the choice of linguistic means of the message sender and the way these means are interpreted by the message recipient.

The developments of linguistic theories on pragmatics as well as the ever-growing implications of ICT have brought essential changes to FLT. The linguistic theories provided the theoretical framework for the elaboration of the ideas about the importance of the development of the communicative competence and ICT can provide the communicative environment and for designing activities that could contribute to the development of the learners' communicative competence.

The notion of communicative competence goes beyond the linguistic competence and implies that during communication people need not only the linguistic competence but also such competence that enables them to participate in naturally occurring interaction in a certain setting of communication. I. Kramiša (2000: 66) has summarised the notion of communicative competence and points out that it includes the following competence: linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic. All these aspects are equally important in actual communication.

Pragmatic competence or reasoning according to H. Widdowson (1997: 63) is an essential part of communicative competence as it is ability of matching up the linguistic elements with familiar features of the world that is established in the mind of message sender and recipient. Therefore pragmatic competence is important in successful turn taking during the conversation. This ability can even become crucial in the flow of communication. J. Thomas (ibid.) proves this idea by providing convincing examples.

#### Example 1

*Brussels* has agreed to foot 70% of the cost of compensating British beef farmers.

In this case *Brussels* stands for "the EU commission".

#### Example 2

One waitress to another in a snack bar:  
The *hamsandwich* just left without paying.

In this case *hamsandwich* stands for the person who had ordered ham sandwich in the snack bar.

With these examples J. Thomas demonstrates that pragmatic reasoning is necessary in order the hearer could "fill out" the required words during the communication.

It is possible to develop pragmatic reasoning through participation in authentic or semi-authentic communication. One-way how to provide the FL learners with the possibility to communicate in authentic or semi-authentic environment is the application of NBLT (network based language teaching), which has become possible with the access to the Internet. R. Kern and M. Warschauer (2000: 5, 13) point out that the development of NBLT has brought essential changes to CALL (computer assisted language teaching). The pre-network CALL focused on the learner-computer communication, which was to large extent aiming at the development of linguistic competence. Whereas NBLT allows to move beyond the development of the linguistic competence by providing the learners with the possibility to focus on authentic and semi-authentic discourse and discourse communities in educational setting. The idea that the learners can achieve good language learning results by working with authentic and semi-authentic materials that are situated in the context of authentic situations or simulations was put forward for discussion by B. Ruschoof (1998: 4) at 13/98 Workshop arranged at European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). This idea was further discussed during the subsequent workshops on ICT in language learning that were held at ECML.

### **Participants, Procedure and Authenticity**

Within the framework of co-operation between two universities: The University of Bremen and the University of Latvia, the students of the University of Latvia, the Faculty of Modern Languages participate in the simulation sessions of project IDEELS (Intercultural Dynamics in European Education Through Online Simulation). Simulations according to Van Ments (1994: 4) are complex activities that aim to provide the students with the reproduction of a part of a real or imaginary world. Simulations often involve the students in discussions, making decisions, and negotiations within the simulated environment. G. P. Ladousse (2000: 6) adds that overall aim of simulations is to train students to deal with the unpredictable nature of language as during the simulations "they need to think on their feet".

The simulation world of IDEELS is a fiction country of the Eutropan Federation, which consists of six countries. During the simulation sessions the students act as high-level negotiators representing the interests of their country at the Parliament of the Eutropan Federation. Although the students enter the fiction world during the simulations, it is essential, as C. Chapelle (2001: 90) points out, to evaluate the possible degree of authenticity of CALL (computer assisted language learning) activity that is integrated in language teaching and then subjected to the analysis. The IDEELS simulations possess the following features of authenticity.

**1. Authenticity of the input material.** The input material is vast written material that is found on the IDEELS web site. The input contains the whole range of materials that are essential for the normal function of any European country (for example, map, legal documents, the political system of the country and so on). The IDEELS scenarios



draw on real world statistics and events, and transpose them into the fictional Eutopian world. The scenarios may deal with any of the issues relevant to contemporary European realities.

**2. Authenticity of the learners' interaction.** According to K. Jones (1990: 5) simulations possess a great degree of authenticity because they are the reality of function in the simulated environment. The reality of function means that the participants act, react, speak and even think as real representatives of the countries of the Eutopian Federation.

**3. Authenticity of the teaching goals and outcomes.** Before the simulation the students worked out their personal goals for the simulation session. After the simulation session the students discussed among themselves as well as with the educator their experience and the teaching/learning goals that they had reached during the simulation session.

The simulation session that is subjected to the analysis was carried out in November of 2001. The subject of the simulation was *Information Communication Technology (ICT) in Eutopia: Data Access and Protection (DAP)*. During the simulation session 28 students participated in five teleconferences: an opening teleconference, three teleconferences on DAP and a post-simulation teleconference. The subject of each teleconference is reflected in the Appendix 1.

The software programme OPUSi enabled to save all transcripts of the teleconferences. These transcripts were subjected to the analysis in order to identify the relevance of the linguistic means used by the students of the University of Latvia, the Faculty of Modern Languages.

The following aspects of the pragmatic context of the teleconferences were considered: the message senders/recipients conversational setting and communication medium.

The way these three aspects of the pragmatic context might work in synchronous online communication and influence the choice of the linguistic means was viewed alongside with the comparative analysis of the specific features of spoken and written communication put forward by D. Crystal, I. Blundell, J. Higgins, N. Middleman and C. Tribble.

## Results and Discussion

This section contains the conclusions concerning the pragmatic aspects in written and spoken communication as well as the findings concerning the way each aspect of pragmatic context influenced the choice of the linguistic means during the teleconferences. The author of the present paper has chosen an empirical approach: i.e. only the actual choices of the utterances will be considered.

### Message Senders/Recipients

J. May (1998: 198) stresses that from pragmatic point of view, "the presence of the communication partners is a necessary condition on any use of language in communication". The communication partners during

interaction can operate with the following contextual information in order to assign complete meaning to the utterances: partnership, non-verbal aspects of communication, shared knowledge and goals.

### Partnership Awareness and Non-verbal Aspects of Communication

Participants of spoken interaction are present during communication and the speakers have particular addressees in mind, whereas the writer is distant from the reader in space and time. This distance as C. Tribble (1996: 10) notes turns the writing into one-way communication, which excludes turn taking.

Participants of the IDEELS teleconferences were present in time, but distant in space. However, the application of software programme OPUSi allowed cutting the space distance. All participants of the negotiations were virtually present and had particular addresses in mind and addressed them much in the same way as in spoken communication. The Appendix 2 contains greetings and leave-takings that were the most extensively used during the teleconferences. The words *see*, *all* and *everybody* show the partnership awareness of the participants as the choice of these words imply that the message senders have particular addresses in their minds, although they do not "see" each other.

Another proof of the partnership awareness was the students' extensive use of the various paralinguistic (gestures, facial expressions, volume of the voice) means during the teleconferences nevertheless they could not see the message recipients. It is possible to observe the application of these features on the videotape containing two teleconferences.

During spoken communication the participants are in face-to-face interaction; therefore, prosodic (rhythm, phrasing, pauses) and paralinguistic features can add meaning to the utterances. In written communication, on the contrary, there is no visual contact of the partners of communication and the participants cannot rely on non-verbal features used in speaking. C. Tribble (1996: 17) notes that writers have developed ways of compensating for non-verbal features in cases where their presence is significant in meaning communication. The following non-verbal means are extensively used in writing: lines, spatial organisation, punctuation, bold as well as underlined and italicised text.

Participants of the teleconferences on *ICT in Eutopia: DAP*, could not "see" each other; therefore, they could not rely on prosodic and paralinguistic features characteristic in spoken communication. For this reason, they extensively used the traditional non-verbal means characteristic in writing as well as the graphical features that are becoming more and more popular in online communication: written comments containing implications on the emotions of the message sender, emotions, capitalisation of words, repetition of the punctuation marks.

### Examples

...it should be enough to distinguish between the data that NEEDS to be collected by certain institutions and data that is NOT necessary.

I appreciate your desire for a fast-paced discussion, but let me remind you that slow thinking sometimes leads to better results (said with a smile).

The Committee for Decent Internet? \*smile\*

You seem to agree in everything, there is no need for a HERO here. :)

Who is that quoted from????

These means are used to present the paralinguistic features that give additional meaning to what is said in the particular context of communication to the particular message recipients.

The third proof of the partnership awareness is the change of the register used during the simulation teleconferences and the post-simulation teleconference. The Appendix 2 contains the students' choices of greetings and leave-takings during simulation teleconferences, but the Appendix 3 contains the students' choices of greetings during the post-simulation teleconference. The choice of formal/informal expression show that the students' attitude had changed towards the message recipients. During the negotiations on DAP the message recipients were high level representatives of the countries of the Eutropean Federation dealing with the country policy making. Therefore more formal expressions were used. During the debriefing session the message recipients were the students of the tertiary institutions who were sharing the impressions of the simulation session. For this reason less formal expressions were chosen.

### Shared Background Knowledge and Goals

Shared knowledge refers to the information that messages senders/recipients suppose they share and can rely on during the communication. Shared goals are the goals that message senders/recipients are planning to achieve during the communication.

Participants of the negotiations acted as high level representatives of the countries belonging to the European Federation; therefore, they were supposed to possess the whole range of the information about the European Federation: geographical position, political system, industry, agriculture, education and so on. They also possessed the information about the tentative agenda of each particular negotiation session. This shared knowledge helped the negotiators perceive the ideas considered during the negotiations as well as actively participate in the discussions. The communicative goal of the negotiators was to agree about the changes to be introduced in the Constitution of the Eutropean Federation concerning the country policy on data access and protection. All participants carefully considered the regional and the whole federation interests, because only those changes would be introduced in the constitution that would receive unanimous agreement from all participating countries and organisations. The Appendix 4 contains an extract from the teleconference *DAP, Commercial Enterprises and Financial Institutions*, which demonstrates the way the participants used their background knowledge as well as took advantage of the fact that other participants shared the same knowledge. For example, the author of the message

103 did not have to provide the detailed information included in the point 3 as all participants were supposed to be familiar with the issues provided by this point. Thus some of the utterances that might seem slightly ambiguous if taken out of the particular context acquire full meaning if viewed in the original context of the negotiation sessions.

### Conversational Setting

D. Crystal (1992: 291) claims that writing is static, permanent, but speech is dynamic interaction in which both participants are present.

According to I. Blundell, J. Higgins and N. Middleman (1992: 3) the levels of formality and hence the choice of the linguistic means depend, to large extent, on the location of the communication. It means that very close friends will choose less formal linguistic means during their conversation at the cafeteria. However, if they both attend a budget meeting with serious issues on the agenda, they are supposed to use theme related vocabulary and more formal linguistic means in spite of their close relationship.

The online negotiations were dynamic interaction that included the intensive exchange of written messages by the participants who were virtually present at the negotiations. The location of the negotiations (Parliament of the Eutropean Federation) and seriousness of the issues discussed during IDEELS simulation session (data access and protection), determined the application of the formal vocabulary and the words indicating the place and the sequence of the whole event. For example, the students used formal greetings and leave-takings during the teleconferences devoted to the negotiations (see Appendix 2). These greetings and leave-takings also contain clear-cut indications to the place and time of the negotiations. Thus the pronoun *here* provides the co-ordinate of place the word *next* provides the co-ordinate of time. The word *next* in the phrase *the next conference* shows that the following teleconference is indeed following the present teleconference from the point of view where the participants were situated as refers to the sequence of time of the whole event.

### Communication Medium

D. Crystal (1992: 291) points out that there are two main types of communication medium: written and spoken communication. Both mediums are used to exchange information and share feelings and opinions. On the other hand D. Crystal stresses that each of these two mediums possess specific features that are determined by the message senders/recipients relationship, prosodic and paralinguistic features, possibilities of error correction, planning and the speed of the message exchange during communication. The features connected with the message senders/recipients relationship as well as prosodic and paralinguistic features were considered in the section devoted to the message senders/recipients. The present section deals with the following features: error correction, planning and the speed of the message exchange in written spoken and online communication.



The errors and other inadequacies in writing may be eliminated in later drafts without the reader ever knowing they were there because these inadequacies are invisible in the final draft. Whereas in speaking errors cannot be withdrawn. However, it is possible to rethink the utterance while it is in progress and add a qualification. During the IDEELS negotiations the error correction worked much in the same way as in spoken communication.

#### Example

We don't want the data is public. Sorry if the explanation hasn't been correct (so fast).

Thus this message contains the qualification to the previous message.

The written text is the result of advanced planning that includes repeated reading and close analysis. During spoken communication complex advanced planning is hardly possible due to the speed of exchanges and the necessity to think while talking.

Although the content of the teleconferences on DAP was outlined in the tentative agenda, the exact advance planning was impossible due to the dynamic flow of the ideas in course of negotiations. Another specific feature of synchronous online negotiations was that the discussions could work in the following two ways: slowly in orderly fashion or quickly with the accompanying overlapping discussion threads. During a negotiation the medium fashion was mostly used, which means that there were also overlapping discussion threads. Thus the small extract of the teleconference on DAP, Commercial Enterprises and Financial Institutions contains three threads. The overlapping during the communication as well as the speed of the message exchanges (see Appendix 1) at times caused some difficulties when attempting to follow the flow of the ideas and participate in the discussions. For example, during the first teleconference dealing with very serious issues on DAP and the individual some of the participants found it very challenging to follow the ideas.

#### Examples

Sorry to disturb, but could you, if you're directly answering a question, indicate which message you're referring to?

Can anyone really follow the conference?

We can't follow the conference either?

Are we still talking about commerce?

However, with the every coming teleconference the students could more successfully follow the flow of the ideas although the average speed of the message exchange had increased.

#### Students' Reflection

Moray Van Ments (1994: 130) considers that the debriefing stage in a simulation is very essential as it provides the learners with the possibility to reflect on their own performance. During this stage a lot of learning is taking place. The learners' reflection about their own learning is extensively put into practice within the framework of the IDEELS simulations. Before the actual start of the

simulation *ICT in Eutropia* (October-November, 2001) the learners got acquainted with the idea of the simulation and set out their personal goals for the session. Debriefing, which included the post-simulation teleconference, two questionnaires, classroom discussion, reflective essay, and the final summary of the insights reflected in PowerPoint presentations, allowed to summarise the results of the reflection. 98% of the students consider that they have substantially enriched their vocabulary. 97% of the students pointed out that they had experienced an extensive practice in the English language use in authentic communicative environment. 98% of the students stressed that they had had a possibility to focus on the qualities necessary in successful teamwork (tolerance, responsibility, and discipline). 99% of the learners admitted they had devoted a lot of time to activities that promoted the cognitive skills development or as students put it "logical thinking" (analysis, comparison, identification of the main points). 99% of the students were convinced that they had advanced their writing skills (ability to express in writing contextually pertinent idea during the dynamic flow of the written message exchange) as well as their keyboard skills. 99% of the students expressed their satisfaction that they had had a possibility to explore the ICT subject in the European context as well as extensively use ICT in practice. Two of the PowerPoint presentations that were prepared by the students of the University of Latvia, the Faculty of Modern Languages are available on the IDEELS web site in the section Feedback.

#### Conclusions

The analysis of pragmatic aspects determining the choice of the utterances in synchronous online communication within the framework of the IDEELS simulation session allows to draw the following conclusions as regards the peculiarities of online communication as well as its educational potential.

1. Online synchronous communication belongs to the mixed type of communication medium (terminology according to D. Crystal (1992: 292) for the following reasons. Firstly, the message exchange is carried out in writing. Secondly, the transcripts of the messages resemble the transcripts of spontaneous conversation. Thirdly, the transcripts contain graphical indications to the prosodic and paralinguistic features that are used in written texts as well as indications that are specific in online communication. Fourthly, errors once communicated cannot be withdrawn; however, it is possible to add the qualification during the turn taking and, finally, the coherence of the utterances is quite loose due to the overlapping discussion threads.

2. IDEELS simulation involves students in authentic communication thus providing them with a possibility to develop their communicative competence through constructing the language in authentic environment.

3. IDEELS simulation session activities provide the students with extensive possibilities to reflect about their own performance and learning in the light of the goals set out before the simulation session.

4. IDEELS simulation allows students to get acquainted with the telematics and practice online communication, which is becoming an essential part of the communication worldwide.

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## Pragmatiniai sinchroninio bendravimo internetu aspektai

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas pragmatinių aspektų vaidmuo, pasirenkant lingvistinius elementus formaliai bendraujant internete. Tyrimą sudarė dvi fazės. Pirmoji apėmė sinchroninio bendravimo internete trijų pragmatinių aspektų analizę: bendravimo situacijos ypatumus, pokalbio formą ir pranešimo siuntėjų bei gavėjų žinias ir tikslus. Antroji fazė apėmė lingvistinių priemonių, kurias naudoja studentai formaliai bendraudami internetu, atitikimo analizę. Tyrimas parodė, kad visi trys išanalizuoti aspektai vaidina svarbų vaidmenį studentų lingvistinių elementų, susijusių su oficialiomis derybomis, pasirinkimui ir panaudojimui. Tuo būdu šios derybų sesijos studentams buvo gera praktika, skirta jų komunikacinės kompetencijos ugdymui.

Straipsnis įteiktas 2002 06  
Parengtas spaudai 2003 06

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## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX 1. Teleconferences

Subject	Register	Duration In minutes	The number of messages exchanged	The average speed of message exchange in a minute
Opening teleconference	Formal	60	112	1.7
Data Access and Protection(DAP) and the Individual	Formal	150	329	2.2
DAP, commercial Enterprises and Financial Institutions	Formal	90	300	3.3
DAP and Government Agencies	Formal	90	293	3.2
Post-simulation teleconference	Informal	90	364	4.4



## **APPENDIX 2. Opening Teleconference and the Conferences on DAP: Typical Greetings and Leave-Takings**

### **Greetings**

Glad to see your're here

We're glad to see your all here

Good afternoon! Looking forward to getting new information

Welcome everybody!

Hello! It's nice to be back again

### **Leave-takings**

Nice to have met you

Thanks everyone ... we have to go now ... see you all in the next conference

Thank your for your Cupertino and see you on the next conference

Thanks for the time see your next conference

Goodbye to all of your. We are looking forward to supporting the coming negotiations

We enjoyed today's conference

Thank your for today's negotiations, we're looking forward to the next teleconference

We're sorry we have to leave now

## **APPENDIX 3. Post-simulation Teleconference: Typical Greetings**

Hey!

And here come the Middies ...

Hi there!

Hello everybody!

Hi—great to see that your could male it a day

## **APPENDIX 4. Extract from the Teleconference DAP, Commercial Enterprises and Financial Institutions**

**#103** Point 3: allowed in any case to prevent the misuse of Internet service available. Enterprises may see a difference between financial and moral damage.

**#104** It isn't really necessary to control employees during all their work because you assume them to be not honest.

**#105#103** Sorry: financial.

**# 106** The Internet in the working place should not be limited until its not effecting the work productivity.

**# 107** Employer can limit the websites that employee can use.

**#108 # 104** Yes

**# 109 #96** Despite some bad examples, we should be able to trust our government to a wider extent than a commercial firm.

**#110** Should employers be allowed to read their employee's e-mail without just cause?

**#111 #107** We agree with B on that issue.

**#112 #101:** Companies should be free to decide on the level control. Of, course the workers unions may object.

**#113 #110** No!

**#114** No!!

**#115** And what about email control? We don't accept surveillance of emails.

**#116 #110** No

**#117 #112** What if they decide to control not at all?

**#118 #112+110:** Why should the employee have the right to deal with private matters at the workplace?

**#119 #110:** If the employees or the workers union agree, they sure can read those emails.

