Speakers' Identities in Online Interaction

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Abstract
Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is acknowledged to represent a social space where people interact with others who may not necessarily know them. They can also recreate their own identities in the course of their interaction. This study investigates ways in which the identities of speakers can be revealed by their use of language in multiple-participant conversations. In particular, the study aims to elicit the strategies that speakers employ the most by analysing the way they talk at a micro-analytic level, and the ways in which they organise and sequence their turns at talking. The results show that the processes of turn-taking and topic development are subject to distraction and breakdown in computer-mediated environments. There are many instances of pauses caused by frequent overlaps between participants. The accents of participants are considered the main feature which can constitute one's identity in voice-based chat-rooms. Other factors such as communication and technical skills, systems and server speeds could also have an effect on such communication. Additionally, the participants seem to employ certain strategies to overcome interactional limitations of CMC systems, such as the use of pauses, quiet and loud intonation, and stress of particular syllables of some words. These strategies can contribute to determining the speaker's identity.
Keywords: Identity, online interaction, computer-mediated communication, conversation analysis

Introduction

Various studies of social interaction describe identity as a social, dialogic, and negotiable entity (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). However, research on identity has generally examined distal, larger social contexts rather than contiguous social contexts, whereby a learner's identity is discursively formed through social interaction. Understanding each other's identities can help speakers form better and more positive impressions about their interlocutors, and reduce uncertainty. In face-to-face meetings and even telephone conversations, crucial aspects of identity are usually revealed, such as gender, age, and race. Nonetheless, these features of identity are entirely masked by Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC); all that is shown is what we decide to reveal (Stone, 1996).

Computer-Mediated Communication is considered a recent cultural phenomenon that may appear puzzling to those outside the field. Early research on language use in CMC has concentrated on language features unique to the medium (Prantl, 2016). As CMC has become more popular among people, the registers used in CMC have extended, and research emphasis has moved from "mapping genre specific language features to analysing interactional patterns" (Prantl, 2016, p. 1). There are two main CMC modes, i.e., synchronous and asynchronous, which may be used for different purposes. The main impact on language use in CMC, according to Herring (2004), is the difference between synchronous and asynchronous CMC. Generally speaking, in synchronous communication users participate in real-time interaction, whereas in asynchronous communication they have more opportunity to think and answer (Abrams, 2003). In other words, synchronous communication forms involve users who are logged in simultaneously, allowing for practically direct feedback, which in turn leads to messages scrolling out of sight swiftly. In asynchronous communication forms such as emails or web forums, users are not required to be all present at the same time; thus, messages are stored and available for extended periods of time. This division, nevertheless, might not always be useful. "Some forms of what might be considered asynchronous CMC, such as comments on blog posts, might temporarily become synchronous or near-synchronous" (Prantl, 2016, p. 8).

In normal interaction, speakers often encounter some sort of disruption or overlapping during their talk. This situation may be exaggerated in the absence of nonverbal cues (as is the case in voice-based conversations) where speakers cannot see each other. However, anonymity can sometimes have positive value as it creates opportunities for the participants to reformulate alternative versions for themselves and to engage in new forms of interaction (Myers, 1987). On the other hand, a lack of the speakers' identities may have an impact on floor management in conversation. Herring (1999) indicates that in interaction where speakers cannot see each other, knowing when to take a turn during talk is a potentially difficult task, and this results in the turn adjacency becoming disjointed. Thus, knowing the speakers' identities in such situations seems pivotal in avoiding any potential problems.

It is true that technology overcomes time and space barriers that would otherwise hinder people's communication. Technology also enables them to interact with each other almost wherever and whenever they want. However, computer-mediated communications are often

marked as impersonal when compared to face-to-face interactions. An explanation could be that CMC deprives us of most, if not all, forms of non-verbal features that have an essential role in our everyday lives. Research shows that linguistic and paralinguistic features (e.g., facial expressions, gestures) are both essential for most communicative processes (Clark, 1996).

This study aims to investigate how the use of language in multiple-participant conversations can help to reveal the speakers' identity. Specifically, we will look at the strategies employed most by the participants through analysing their talk at a micro-analytic level, and how they organise and sequence their turns during conversation.

Theoretical background on identity

Researchers working in the fields of social sciences have taken an intense interest in what constitutes the term 'identity'. Thus, a variety of definitions has been proposed to describe this term (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988, Deng 1995, Jenkins 1996). However, Fearon (1999) argues that dictionary definitions have failed to depict the word's current meanings in everyday and social science contexts. 'Identity' can be described as a social category, defined by membership rules and alleged distinctive attributes or estimated behaviours; or, it could be socially unique features or views in which speakers take a special pride as constant but socially consequential (Fearon, 1999). Additionally, 'identity' can be referred to as a modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honour that are perfectly connected to social categories.

Baggioni and Kasbarian (1996) differentiate two types of identity, i.e., the personal and the collective. They also name 'identification' as the process connecting the personal to the collective. This latter type of identity is mostly studied in the field of discourse analysis under the name of social identity, which is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept that came from knowledge of his/her membership in a social group, together with emotional significance attached to it" (Duszak, 2002, p. 2).

Young (2008: 108) argues that identity has two paradoxical meanings emphasising that:
In one sense it is the stable sense of self-hood attached to a physical body which, although it changes over time, is somehow the same; in a second sense, it refers to what we *do* in a particular context, and of course we do different things in different contexts.(P. 9)

Young indicates that the first sense of identity facilitates distinguishing an individual from another, even if they have the same name. However, individuality may be more important in some cultures than others. For example, individuals value their distinctive identity by wearing different clothes, speaking differently, or by competing in order to differentiate themselves from others. However, in some other cultures it could be more valued *not* to discern oneself from others, i.e., by wearing the same clothes, talking in similar ways, or sharing in teamwork.

With regard to identity in social processes, Zimmerman (1998) offers a practical framework for considering the way identities are positioned in processes working over different time-scales, when he differentiates between:

a) Discourse (or interactional) identities, for example 'story teller/story recipient', 'questioner/answerer', 'inviter/invitee', which we are continuously taking on and leaving as talk progresses;
b) Situated (or institutional) identities, such as 'teacher/student', 'doctor/patient', which come into play in particular kinds of institutional settings;
c) Transportable identities which are hidden, move with people through their daily routine, and are potentially relevant at any time (e.g., old man, working class woman).
d)

Zimmerman (1998) further suggests that "…it is important to distinguish between the registering of *visible* indicators of identity and *orient to* identity which pertains to the capacity in which an individual should act in a particular situation." (p. 91) Consequently, a participant may classify a co-interactant as a young person or a female with no orientation to those identities being related to the instant interaction.

Additionally, Park (2007) argues that an identity is "conceptualized as an inherently social product that is jointly created by interactants, rather than as a pre-determined, psychological construct that is lodged within each individual's mind." (p. 341) Conversations work on a turn-by-turn basis, i.e., "the speaker's understanding and analysis of a prior turn is reflected in the way that a current turn is constructed" (Park, 2007, p. 341). Furthermore, Schegloff and Sacks (1973) accentuate that the sequential organization of talk manifests how identity is invoked in people's talk, engaging others to orient to that identity and reveal how it has been understood.

Another key theoretical basis for understanding identity co-construction is participation, which is organised through turn-taking as well as turn internally occurring embodied actions. "Participation places a particular emphasis on a hearer's role as an active co-participant" (Park, 2007, p, 431). Analysis of participation shows that a hearer can participate in constructing his/her identity along with constructing an activity through talk and the body.

Furthermore, identity is viewed as "a situated, emergent construct that arises from the contingencies of local interaction. Identity ascription is thus highly context-specific" (Park, 2007, p. 341). In fact, this view is in line with Sacks' (1972) idea of Membership Categorization Device (MCD), where words can act as 'devices' that force a set of otherwise arbitrary objects into a 'category' with 'members'. Sacks (1972) asserts that people have some knowledge about collections of categories (e.g., male/female, native-speaker/non-native speaker). This knowledge enables us to describe people in a certain way in a given sense, and construct their identities. In addition, Sacks has introduced another term, 'category-bound activities.' This means that, when we put someone in a category, we imply that each category has its set of members. However, each member has his/her own set of behaviours, rights, beliefs and obligations that go together with the role.

The final point to be made in this respect is the fact that identity is immensely negotiable and that it can be explained in terms of the relative positioning of people toward each other. We may choose to explicitly show our identity, but in many cases these identities are revealed without

any intervention on our part. For example, the selection of the garments we put on is largely a voluntary choice to show identity. On the other hand, the accent with which we speak can give away our identities to the people with whom we speak (Alenazi, 2014).

Analysis and Discussion

The data analysed in this study is drawn from a 27-seconds conversation of multi-participants' voice-based CMC. For the analysis of the data, conversation analysis (CA)[i] has been used to investigate the speakers' identities in a multi-participant chat-room at a micro-analytic level. The analysis of CMC interaction in simulated environments can reveal some features of the learners' identity (Alonso-Belmonte & Vinagre, 2017). The aim of using CA is to give a clear understanding of the interactional nuances of what happens in the interactions under study. A detailed overview of conversation analysis is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is noteworthy that the CA framework has been applied to a range of different settings, such as courtrooms, classrooms, and computer-mediated communication (Drew & Heritage, 1992).

The following section aims to present the data; this will be done using a two-tier approach. That is, it will start by a general description of the extract, and then it will be followed by a deeper analysis of the interaction at hand. The following extract demonstrates different characteristics of multiple participants' talk:

Extract 1:

1	S1:	hhh (.) uh::: [yes
2	S2:	[I'm Romanian
3		(0.6)
4	S3:	< who is uh:: (0.3) Romanian ↑ ? ((in a Borat[ii] voice))
5		(0.9)
6	S1:	Robin. was ↓ ((inaudible))
7		(2.0)

The conversation starts by S1 laughing and saying *yes,* which indicates that he has finished his turn and is now aiming to give the floor to another speaker. Then S2 overlaps the end of S1's turn when he introduces himself in a Borat voice, such that the word '*yes'* and the sentence "*I'm Romanian*" are said at the same time. This overlap leads to a short pause (0.6), after which S3 joins the conversation, trying to imitate S1 (i.e., speaking in a Borat voice). S3 might have deliberately spoken in the same accent as S1 as a way of constructing his own identity, since knowing the identity of the co-speakers is crucial to understanding the interaction (Donath, 1999). Voice-based CMC is an opportunity for participants to construct their identities by themselves, since in the real world it is framed by others. Therefore, self-presentation can be a new form of identity constitution. In line (4) the word *uh::* is elongated and stretched, and there is a (0.3) pause before S3 utters the word "*Romanian*." Again, there is another pause in line (5) before S2 tries to respond to the previous question proposed by S3; however, the end of his response is inaudible. This simultaneous talk is followed by a (2.0) pause that would be considered relatively long in natural

talk. As we can see in this short extract, there are frequent pauses in the conversation and comprehensibility does not seem to be achieved. This could be because the participants did not get acquainted with each other at the beginning of their talk. Also, these overlapping utterances and pauses are some of the features associated with multi-participant CMC chat-rooms where nonverbal elements are absent.

Extract 2:

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8       S3:     [°hh ah° ]
9       S1:     Do you [know something about-]
10      S3:             [I        was       bor]n
11              (1.1)
12      S1:     na:[:::
13      S3:         [I was bo:rn in. eh. Romania ((in a Borat voice))
14              (1.4)
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In this extract, S3 rejoins the floor as in line (8) in a relatively quieter voice than the previous turn; this could indicate that he has some trouble understanding S1's initiation. However, S1 does not try to clarify his speech; rather, he shifts the focus of the speech and posts an incomplete initiation. No response is received as it overlaps with S3's response. This overlap between S1 and S3 causes a momentary pause (1.1). The sudden stop in articulation is interactionally relevant, for two reasons:

a) it is strategically located after an utterance that has been produced at almost the same time, and

b) it momentarily opens the floor as it represents a turn transition relevant place for S2 to regain the floor (Jenks, 2009).

Subsequently, S1 displays a negative stretched response, '*na:[::',* in line (12) which is overlapped by S3's utterance in the same Borat voice. Both S1 and S3 respond to this overlapping conversation by letting the floor open for more than a second (i.e., 1.4). This pause resets the floor and gives the speaker the chance to renegotiate speakership. Jenks (2009) considers such placement after many overlapping utterances as an example of a strategy that the speakers use to prevent the uncertainty that results from more than one participant speaking at the same time. Moreover, it is noticeable that the turn-taking in CMC does not stick to the ideal that speakers' turns alternate in an orderly way. The speakers are unable to predict whether their interlocutor is going to respond; they may have been impatient, thus initiating another question before a response to the first has been received. This results in unfinished and interleaved exchange sequences (Condon & Cech, 1996).

Extract 3:

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15      S4:     are you t-[are y-   ]
16      S1:              [have you] ever
17              (.)
18      S4:     eh-
19              (0.3)
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20	S1:	've you been=
21	S4:	=＞ are you trying to mimic Bo<u>rat</u> ↑ ? (0.6) you see someone
22		(always) trying to mimic Bo<u>rat</u> ↑
23		(0.7)
24	S2:	Borat <u>yes</u> was (.) film<u>ed</u> in uh:: Romania
25		(0.8)
26	S3:	ye↑ah↓:::↑ hhh.he·hh ((Borat voice))

This extract begins with S4 asking a question and then stopping suddenly, as there is an overlap with S1 in the second part of his utterance. As can be seen, there are frequent overlaps between S1 and S4 from the beginning of the conversation; both of them are heard producing two simultaneous utterances. In lines 16 and 20, S1 does not complete his utterances, which may indicate a lack of linguistic repertoire or communication skills. For this reason, a new set of linguistic skills and communication strategies is needed when frequent overlapping utterances occur (Lamy, 2004). The frequent multiple initiations may reflect the difficulty participants have in determining whose turn is next. S4 tries to take part in the conversation, perhaps wanting to demonstrate membership knowledge as in the following example:

| 21 | S4: | =＞ are you trying to mimic Bo<u>rat</u> ↑ ? (0.6) you see someone |
| 22 | | (always) trying to mimic Bo<u>rat</u> ↑ |

Noticeably, S4 stops in the middle of his talk for (0.6) and then re-establishes the floor and continues to talk. In this case, he is being disruptive by coming in quickly and there is no evidence in line 20 that S1 wants to give up the floor. This example highlights the value of using pauses to avoid overlapping talk as they help to facilitate a transition between the speakers; also, pauses are the socially acceptable thing to do when multiple overlapping talks happen (Jenks, 2009).

In order to show his knowledge, S4 is trying to relate S1's voice to the famous character of Borat. It is obvious that lines 20 and 21, connected by two equal signs, are by different speakers; this means that S4 follows S1 with no discernable silence between them, and is 'latched' to it.

One interesting point that could be noted is what Tracy (2002: 18) calls *master identities,* which she defines as "...those aspects of personhood that are relatively stable and unchanging." These master identities are indexed by the idea of *habitus*, which refers to socially acquired inclinations, tendencies, or predispositions that are revealed in many ways, including ways of talking. An example of *habitus* could be the person's accent, which contributes greatly to establishing the master identity of people as it enables us to categorise their national origin or ethnic identity. From S4's accent, one can categorise him as an Indian speaker.

Going back to the extract, we notice a short pause in line 23, which may indicate that the other speakers had no idea about Borat; lack of membership knowledge can impede the flow and dynamics of the interaction. Iwasaki (1997) points out that when a speaker communicates unknown information, he or she is more likely to control the floor; thus, less participation is expected. Then in line 24, S2 provides some information about Borat; however, no response or comments are offered, and it is followed by another pause. After all, S3 mocks the previous

statement (line 26) somewhat by the rise and fall of agreement tokens and laughing, imitating S1's accent. This behaviour brings Boudourides' (1995) view to mind, that the anonymity of the participants increases the absence of typical social ties. Anonymity has a double effect: while it lessens the level of social pressure on the participants, the level of the unpleasant communication is likely to increase with the liberation of the people (Boudourides, 1995).

Conclusion

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to any human communication that happens through the use of two or more electronic devices. CMC activities can be either asynchronous, such as writing emails and posting responses to a discussion board online, or virtual synchronous conversations, such as those held in chat rooms (AbuSeileek & Qatawneh, 2013). This study has shown that, in multi-participant communication, there are few cues to identity. This results in frequent overlaps between the participants, which lead to many instances of pauses. This could be an explanation of the apparent inconsistency and incomprehensibility of the interaction, as CMC has been claimed to be interactionally incoherent. Particularly, the processes of turn-taking and topic development are subject to distraction and breakdown in computer-mediated environments. The accent of the participants can be considered as the main feature that can constitute one's identity in voiced-based chat-rooms. In extract 1 we have seen how S2's accent, in the incipience of the conversation, turned the subsequent talk to be about accent and culture. This attracted others' attention to engage in the talk and initiate different utterances about cultural identities. In most chat-rooms there are multiple participants who are unable to see each other; thus their roles do not necessarily follow a logical sequential order. Other factors such as communication and technical skills, systems, and server speeds could have an impact on such communication. Moreover, the participants seemed to employ certain strategies to overcome any interactional limitations of CMC systems, such as the use of pauses, quiet and loud intonation, and stress of some syllables of the words. These strategies can contribute to determining the speaker's identity.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984)

[[ ]]	Simultaneous utterances – (beginning [[ ) and (end]])
[ ]	Overlapping utterances – (beginning [ ) and (end])
=	Contiguous utterances
(0.4)	Represents the tenths of a second between utterances
(.)	Represents a micro-pause (1 tenth of a second or less)
:	Sound extension of a word (more colons demonstrate longer stretches)
.	Fall in tone (not necessarily the end of a sentence)
,	Continuing intonation (not necessarily between clauses)
-	An abrupt stop in articulation
?	Rising inflection (not necessarily a question)
__	Underlined words indicate emphasis
↑↓	Rising or falling intonation (after an utterance)
[° °]	Surrounds talk that is quieter
hhh	Audible aspirations
.hhh	Inhalations
.hh.	Laughter within a word
>>	Surrounds talk that is faster
<<	Surrounds talk that is slower
(( ))	Analyst's notes

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[i] The analysis is based on transcription conventions in Atkinson and Heritage (1984, see Appendix).

[ii] Borat is an American film which was written and produced by the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, who also played the role of Borat. He represented a fictitious character of a Kazakh journalist travelling through the United States and recording real-life interactions with Americans. Baron Cohen won the 2007 *Golden Globe Award* for Best Actor: Musical or Comedy, as Borat, and the film was nominated for *Best Motion Picture* in the same category.