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## **Avoiding Net Quarrels**

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### **Introduction**

Inequality in society continues or is even aggravated on the net. The fact that the cost of the equipment required to set up and access computer networks creates "haves" and "have nots" advantages certain groups of Internet users over others. (Herring, 2001, p. 12). Some social groups do not get a hearing in society because their habitual forms of discourse are not privileged, not recognised as legitimate or even "sensible" by those who control the media and exercise power. Things are not different on the Internet. Both in the real world and on the Net a major task of unprivileged groups is to break through a credibility barrier so that their voice and their arguments can be heard.

Since Computer Mediated Communication inherits power asymmetries from the larger historical, economic and social context power conflicts cannot be avoided. But a completely open network will soon become useless when opposing groups opposing in society meet each other on the net. While empowerment is the main concern when people meet, relentless disputes covered by the anonymity of the Internet will paralyze any discourse very soon.

There are different solutions to solve this problem, but this isn't the main concern of this review because even if this problem is solved a lot of traps remain. Net quarrels have a higher frequency than quarrels in face to face communication. In this text I will try to track down the origin of these quarrels. I think this might be useful. First I will compare Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) with Face To Face (FTF) communication thus framing the problem. Second I will line out a pragmatic view on language on the net. This said I will describe in detail five important differences between CMC and FTF that may cause problems. Concluding I will propose some thumb rules that might help making CMC relevant, also stating that CMC is useless without FTF, something we always should bare in mind.

## **CMC ≠ FTF**

In order to communicate, the communicator has at his disposal a plurality of signalling systems: language as a semantic system, verbal and non-verbal systems, paralinguistic cues: vocal qualities, non-linguistic cues: postures, body touch, interpersonal distance, direction, mimic, gestures, gaze orientations etc. Semantic indeterminacy entails continuous a variation of meanings between stability and instability. Contextual regularity is seen, as a stabilizing factor but this means also that all systems mentioned must converge, act in synchrony.

The "pronounced word" is a powerful communicative device, that can regulate and manage the expression of communicative intention. Anger has many degrees: from irritation, bitterness, rage to explosion? These are all expressed differently by stress, intonation, vocal pitch variation, intensity, speed and rhythm.

"...the paralinguistic system is characterized by its own semantic independence, since it has the power of conveying emotional experiences, cognitive states (certainty, doubt, hesitation, etc.), irony, humor and the like autonomously. It may refer to the same utterance in order to express joy, love and hate, tenderness and anger, fear and sadness, shame and pride, conviction and doubt, tiredness and desire etc.," (Luigi Anolli, 2002a)

The Facial Acting Code System (FACS) originally developed by Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen in 1976 contains 64 Action Units (AU). The pictures of it can be found at <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs/project/face/www/facs.htm>. Studies indicate that the facial expressions of happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and interest are universal across cultures (Paul Ekman, 1999).

The gesture system is not universal, but it can operate stand alone or in cooperation with verbal expression. On the other hand McNeill claims that the extremely close synchrony between gesture and speech indicates that the two operate as an inseparable unit, reflecting different semiotic aspects of the cognitive structure that underlies them both. Evidence for this tight synchrony includes the fact that disrupting speech (as during delayed auditory feedback) disrupts gesture, that stammerers modify their gestures to maintain synchrony with speech, and equally, that deliberate mismatch between gesture and speech can influence a participant's recall of a narration.

Gesture, the instantaneous, global, non-conventional component, is not an external accompaniment of speech, the sequential, analytic, combinatoric component, but inhabits it. (McNeil, 2002)

The independence of the different signalling systems allows that they express different messages at the same time. These messages can accommodate each other.

In comparison with co-occurring linguistic elements the paralinguistic system is characterized by its own semantic independence, since it has the power of conveying emotional experiences, cognitive states (certainty, doubt, hesitation, etc.), irony, humor and the like autonomously. It may refer to the same utterance in order to express joy, love and hate, tenderness and anger, fear and sadness, shame and pride, conviction and doubt, tiredness and desire etc. (Luigi Anolli, 2002a)

When saying in 'Did it hurt?' accompanied by a worried look, it expresses empathy, while accompanied by a tough look it expresses sadism and sarcasm. Seductive, ironic and deceptive communication mostly shows some mixture of linguistic, paralinguistic and non-linguistic cues. Communication can become pathological when the messages conveyed by different signalling systems exclude one another.

All signalling systems express the speakers' intention in a given situational context. The recovery and attribution of that intention by the hearer involves a precise and conscious activity and the participation of the receiver in the meaning elaboration, since meaning is defined only when the addressee recognizes the speaker's communicative intention. This involves cognitive and emotional aspects, which may be in line, or not. This presupposes a strong reciprocity. (Luigi Anolli, 2002a) Lacking this reciprocity is the basic origin of failure of the communication system. Face to face communication is the richest in context cues and any form of mediated communication lessens the cues available.

## ***A pragmatic view on language on the Net***

The language used on the Net in email isn't a strict language, where the meaning of words is univocal delimited, it's closer to the natural language we use in conversation and speech than to formal writing (Naomi Baron, 2001, Sally Abalrous, 2002) With e-mail correspondence, one has the illusion of ephemerality, messages appearing and disappearing from your screen (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991, p. 39). People posting on the Internet tend to behave more informal. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, and express themselves more openly, not caring about univocal expression. This kind of behaviour is close to face-to-face communication only IT ISN'T. It's not a conversation but a series of intermittent, one-directional comments, though it uses more or less the same language. As to Newmeyer: "Virtually any sentence imaginable is loaded with potential ambiguity." (Newmeyer, 2006)

Pragmatic linguistics (Grice, Sperber) have underlined the semantic indeterminacy of language. The meaning of a word or an utterance or a gesture does not depend so much on a universal, abstract and fixed semantic system, isolated from the context, but it is strictly connected with the referring context. No meaning is totally foreseeable or definable a priori, because it depends on the context as background.

At first glance it looks like we are compelled to live in a tower of Babel, but semantic instability is compensated, completed and balanced by semantic stability processes, which make possible and explain the probabilities of order and regularity in meaning exchange. They are at the base of message intelligibility conditions and of mutual understanding between communicators. Through communicative practice communicators gain competence in defining the meaning of words, meaning which is considered as shared inside a specific community of participants.

"They are grounded on context regularity, since if it is true that contexts show a great deal of variability and unpredictability, then it is also true that in most cases contexts are structured and regular forms in our everyday experience of the world. On this platform, individuals build and share their scripts with reference to specific situations." (Luigi Anolli, 2002a)

Intuitive inference relates to the ability to imaginatively "put oneself into others' shoes".

"The truth in Grice's model is that we have the ability to interrupt and prevent the automatic running on of our talking and our doing-and-believing-what-we-are-told equipment, and assume others have this ability too. We interrupt, for example, when we have happened to look under the hood and discovered evidence that the conditions for normally effective talking ... are not met." (Carston, Robyn, 2005, p. 32)

When intuitive inference fails we can find a solution by feedback and a search for shared reference. When feedback is made impossible, inference is inhibited completely. We cannot point to contradictions between message and context either between statements

of the utterance. When something isn't clear or seems to be spurious, e.g. when we observe contradictions in the utterances of a speaker in a conversation, we can normally interrupt and ask clarification. A speaker who isn't hiding his intentions will not have problems with our demand, he will be happy to show that his utterance is not forged e.g.. Maybe he wasn't aware at all of his inconsistency, maybe he was aware but he doesn't want to be considered as a counterfeiter. If he has nothing to hide he will search to solve this problem. Being overt makes the intentions of the speaker manifest.

Keeping this in mind we can be positive about the fact that in a dialogue situation, ambiguity can be neutralised by further dialogue and 'mutual adjustment', feedback, context, inference and shared reference. On the Net it creates ambiguity. The better both correspondents know each other, it is to say they can refer to a shared experience in the real world the more likely they will be able to resolve ambiguity. But when the writer and receiver do not know each other nor their reciprocal context they can only use new sentences, which are again virtually loaded with ambiguity.

Concluding we may say that spontaneous and intuitive inference is strong in face-to-face communication while it is almost absent in digital communication and that mutual trust is strongly depending on intuitive inference. Reflective inference making possible mutual adjustment needs the 'feedback mechanism' and the possibility of 'shared reference'.

For decades, email was notorious for its general rudeness and the apparent ease with which senders resorted to profanity. (Kiesler et alii, 1984, Smilowitz, Compton and Flint, 1988, Smolensky et alii, 1990, Collins, Mauri, 1992, Baron, Naomi, 2002, Curall, Friedman, 2003)

"As a consequence, many CMC users have argued that the written CMC medium is inadequate for expressing nuances of meaning (e.g., sarcasm, bemusement, tentativeness, irritation) that facial expressions and/or vocal features typically convey in face-to-face spoken conversation. Two linguistic features of CMC have emerged from these assumptions about the conversational nature of CMC and the inadequacy of writing to express conversational intent. The first feature is emoticons (also sometimes known as smileys). The second is the phenomenon known as flaming."(Baron, Naomi, 2002, p 20)

In one of her early papers "Computer Mediated Communication as a Force in Language Change" Naomi Baron writes about an "increased tendency for aggression to be displayed when talking from terminal to terminal". In her study she showed that in computer-mediated communication there is a higher frequency of arguments and flaming, i.e. using insults and profanity. Also David Chrystal in his book "Language and the Internet" devotes several pages to the topic of aggressiveness in CMC.

In a series of experiments designed to explore the impact of computer mediated communication (CMC) on group interaction and decision making, Kiesler et al. used groups of three students who were asked to reach consensus on a choice-dilemma problem in three different contexts: once face to face, once using the computer anonymously, (i.e. not knowing which one of their group was talking/typing) and once using the computer where each member knew when the other was 'talking'. Their data showed, "in all three experiments, that CMC had marked effects on . . . interpersonal behavior..." (Kiesler et alii, 1984, p. 1128), in that 'people in CMC groups were more uninhibited than they were in face-to-face groups, as measured by uninhibited verbal behavior, defined as frequency of remarks containing swearing, insults, name calling and hostile comments" (Kiesler et alii, 1984, p. 1129).

Kiesler et al. postulated the following three reasons for their results: "a) difficulties of coordination from lack of informational feedback, b) absence of social influence cues for controlling discussion, and c) depersonalization from lack of nonverbal involvement and absence of norms" (Kiesler et alii, 1984, p. 1130).

Asch's social influence experiment was used as the basis for a study by Smilowitz, Compton and Flint (1988), investigating the effect of the exclusion of contextual cues provided by face to face interaction on individual judgement in CMC contexts. They determined that: "It is easier for a deviant to persist in the CMC environment." (Smilowitz, Compton and Flint,1988)

Sproul and Kiesler reported that respondents who saw flaming in e-mail messages an average of 33 times month, only saw the same kinds of verbal behaviour in face-to-face conversations an average of 4 times a month. (Sproul and Kiesler, 1986)

"Even extreme acts of aggression, such as narrative enactments of sexual violence against women, find ideological justification in dominant male discourses -- for example, through invoking principles of "freedom of expression" (Herring, 2001, p. 12)

Smolensky, Carmody, and Halcomb (1990) examined the extent to which tasks, and the degree to which users are acquainted with one another, will mediate the occupancy of uninhibited verbal behaviour. They determined that the amount of uninhibited verbal behaviour was highest among triads who did know one another prior to the experiment, and those persons who were highly extroverted were likely to exhibit the highest levels of uninhibited verbal behaviour. (Smolensky et alii, 1990)

Clark and Brennan pointed to the lack of grounding in email communication (H. Clark, S Brennan, 1991, p. 128) when confronted with ambiguity and conflict. Friedman and Curall refer to it when analysing email disputes that seem to escalate more often than disputes in face-to-face communication. (Friedman, R. A. & Currall, S. C. 2003.) My framework sketched above: 'the most important type of cognitive effect achieved by processing an input in a context is a contextual implication', is confirmed by their observations. I will treat this in more detail now.

## ***Looking for causes of Net Quarels***

### **(1) Poor language: A limited vocabular, results in lack of humour and cannot convey feelings**

Communication between men takes place mediated by language. Human life in its present form would be impossible and inconceivable without the use of language. Compared with other mammals we have an extended set of codes associated with sounds that give meaning to words used in sentences... A gorilla may have the ability to understand about 200 codes (the number varies depending on the experiment). Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (1961) contains more than 450,000 entries the same number we find in the 'Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal' (1500-1976, <http://wnt.inl.nl/>) Of course we do not use all these words, but we use a lot as a native speaker, without being aware we use them, they are there since we learned language from our mother, by social interaction and at school. By three years of age children are learning at least two new words a day and possess a working vocabulary of 1,000 words. The average English-speaking 17-year-old knows more than 60.000 words. Some adults have a vocabulary of over the 100.000 words. (Bloom, Paul, 2002) The 'lingua franca' of the Internet is English, but only a small number of Internet users really have an extended knowledge of the English language. When you wander through cyberspace you notice impoverishment and superficiality. People who aren't native speakers of English use an English vocabulary limited to about 1000 words (the vocabulary of a 3 year old).

Unless people use their native language or local slang, this does not only result in a childish like communication by adults it has also some consequences one does not think

off at first. During my long stay on the Net I noticed I gradually was losing my sense of humour<sup>1</sup>. I've been wondering why. Galina Kalmikova enlightens the question. She states:

"The perception of a joke is determined by many factors, not in the last place by the language competence and knowledge of characteristic features pertaining to a specific cultural environment. The perception of a joke is quite often caused by the fact that the recipient not only understands the language and external shapes of the characters in the joke, but that (s)he is also familiar with scripts and cliché-phrases. Due to these factors, jokes are not clear to children who have not yet seized scripts and clichés, characteristic for jokes. The same goes for the carriers of other cultures even if they know the language of the joke well." (Galina Kalmikova, 2003).

So when communicating with people having only a vocabulary of 1000 words, there isn't much to laugh about. To trigger laughter with their colleagues, employees send jokes around. They get these jokes on specialised sites, like jokes.com. They seem to lack the creativity to make jokes themselves. These jokes are mostly some kind of picture, small film, thus not verbal at all. Before employees met each other at the coffee table. They made jokes on work situations, on bosses. Jokes are often a binding factor in small groups. They foster solidarity. An entire joke culture would be disappearing if we limit our communication to email.

Humour is often based on paradoxes. Problems we have to solve contain paradoxes and contradictions<sup>2</sup>. Contradictions and paradoxes can be easier solved when we meet Face to Face. Paradoxes often trigger laughter, but problems are solved, contradictions have to be worked out, have to be eliminated. Using email, paradoxes lead to misunderstanding and the typical ping-pong of email exchange that solve nothing at all, contradictions often lead to conflict.

A limited vocabulary is also annoying and obstructive when expressing emotions. Language isn't limited to conceptualisation, expressing factual information, inquiries or requests. A person's speech, supplemented by facial expression and gesture when speaker and hearer are mutually in sight, indicates and is intended to indicate a great deal more next to humour: emotions and feelings, tastes, tempers, all kind of mental states. These vary rather analogously than discretely, they aren't monotonous and apt to digitalize.

The (subtle) differences in emotions, feelings, sentiments, tempers and mental states can be expressed by a great number of words. The fact that these differences are expressed by parts of a language usually mastered later by foreign learners gives rise to misinterpretation and often makes foreign speakers appear rude or insensitive when they are, in fact, simply deploying fewer resources in the language. So we can also expect that if a limited vocabulary is used on the Net, it will induce rudeness, cause misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks God, I had a rather intensive social life outside my job.

<sup>2</sup> Paradoxes and contradictions are not the same, therefore I copy the entries in Merriam-Websters:

con.trad.ic.tion n (14c) 1: act or an instance of contradicting 2 a: a proposition, statement, or phrase that asserts or implies both the truth and falsity of something b: a statement or phrase whose parts contradict each other <a round square is a ~ in terms> 3 a: logical incongruity b: a situation in which inherent factors, actions, or propositions are inconsistent or contrary to one another

par.a.dox n [L. paradoxum, fr. Gk paradoxon, fr. neut. of paradoxos contrary to expectation, fr. para- + dokein to think, seem--more at decent] (1540) 1: a tenet contrary to received opinion 2 a: a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true b: a self-contradictory statement that at first seems true c: an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises 3: something or someone with seemingly contradictory qualities or phases

Within the range of the structural and lexical possibilities of a language, speakers are able to convey their emotional attitudes and feelings toward the person or persons they are addressing and toward the subject matter of what they are saying. But deceit is also conveyed by language. People are also able to conceal their feelings as one form of linguistic deception, though this is usually a harder task when they are talking Face to Face. A person's speech is supplemented by facial expression and gesture when speaker and hearer are mutually in sight.

It seems to me that the so-called new language that originates from Internet communication (Internet lingo) is not adding new content and refinement but rather tends to downsize the wealth significances of the used language on the Net. Although Internet gave birth to an extended new vocabulary of technical terms. Using this vocabulary outside the technical realm doesn't necessary add meaning, it rather downsizes the wealth of expression. Examples of this downsizing the wealth of expression can be found in the computer metaphors used to name concepts concerning the human mind. People talk about 'downloading something to their hard disk' when referring to 'keep something in mind', 'remember', 'memorise', 'bear in mind', 'consider' etc. Oh, and we have even those wonderful alternatives for hard disk: database, chip... but all of course as dead as anything. A computer stores masses of data accurately and unchanged in its memory, but this misses the whole wondrous side of our memories, which proceed by a rich and shifting network of associations we are hardly even beginning to understand. It's practically never said in so many words, but a metaphor is always based on an implied comparison. The Industrial Revolution did a lot more than just transform our physical world; it revolutionized our whole way of talking about ourselves. It's hard to imagine how we managed to explain our feelings before we knew the mind is a steam engine: blowing off steam or having a head of steam, being under pressure or all fired up, serving as a safety valve ... Continuing to look farther back quickly convinces us that there is hardly any product of human inventiveness that has not been used to talk about ourselves. a broken record, an emotional roller coaster, being an open book, having a screw loose, being a dim bulb, being out of focus, going down the drain, engraved/etched on the mind, having a short fuse, burning the candle at both ends ...

Put in the form of propositions, the mind is a computer, a steam engine and so on sound a bit preposterous, since we know that all these expressions are 'only metaphors'. But consider: aren't we regularly seduced into using a metaphor as if it described all that needs to be observed about the human mind? Take the common expression he's blowing off steam, which is a colourful way of talking about expressing emotions. But humans are a lot more complicated than steam engines: releasing steam does automatically relieve the pressure in an engine, but does shouting your resentment about something necessarily make you feel relieved? It might, but it might also build up the anger (=steam) even more by reminding you how mad you really are.

"According to the inferential model, a communicator provides evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided. An utterance is, of course, a linguistically coded piece of evidence, so that verbal comprehension involves an element of decoding." (Wilson, Deirdre, Sperber, Dan, 2004)

Some metaphors can be misleading when they are not completed with other evidence. This is less a problem in face-to-face communication than it is in written communication.

"However, the linguistic meaning recovered by decoding is just one of the inputs to a non-demonstrative inference process which yields an interpretation of the speaker's meaning." (Wilson, Deirdre, Sperber, Dan, 2004)

Defenders of the claim that computers have added to the richness of language forget that the computer world has borrowed and included a mass of words from ordinary language, e.g.: gopher, desk top, clip board, drag and drop, copy and paste, shut down, to surf, to hit, navigator, piracy, traffic, etc.

A remarkable impoverishment of language on the Net can be detected in the editing style of webs displaying chunks of texts comparable with advertising and billboards.

"A troubling model of what writing in the future might look like appears in Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think!* (2000), a book on how to write good Web sites. Krug writes: "Web users tend to act like sharks: They have to keep moving, or they'll die. We just don't have time to read any more than necessary"(p. 22). Or: "most Web users don't have time for small talk; they want to get right to the beef....The main thing you need to know about instructions is that no one is going to read them – at least not until after repeated attempts at 'muddling through' have failed"(p. 46.) While this is an accurate description of how most users "read" on the Web (and therefore good advice for Web page design), the larger question will become, what effects are the design of "readable" Web pages likely to have on written language not intended just for rapid browsing." (Baron, Naomi, 2002)

The National Endowment for the Arts (USA) has done a number of studies over the last couple of years, the results of which are scary. Between 1999 and 2003, the average literacy of the college-educated American declined significantly. Statistically significantly. Only 25 percent of college graduates were deemed proficient from a literacy standpoint, defined as using printed or written information to function in society to achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and potential. The number of seventeen-year-olds who reported never or hardly ever reading for fun rose from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. (Baer et alii, 2006)

Is this only an American tendency or is it spreading? One positive evolution is that youngsters today see instant messaging (IM) only as a background communication, they use the expression 'under the radar', while multitasking:

"But as nearly all of us can attest, the most common use we make of Internet-based technology in controlling the ways we linguistically interact with one another is through multitasking. Who among us has never, at some point, read or composed an email while simultaneously talking on the phone? These days, multitasking while using a computer is being raised to a high art by teenagers and young adults." (Baron, Naomi, 2005, p. 14)

"The results (Baron, Clem & Rabinovitz In Prep.) suggest that multitasking while doing IM is extremely common. With respect to computer-based multitasking:

70.3% were engaged in other Web activities (e.g., surfing the Internet)  
47.5% were using a computer-based media player  
38.6% were doing word processing

As for additional off-line activities,

41.1% were holding face-to-face conversations  
36.7% were eating or drinking  
28.5% were watching television  
21.5% were talking on the telephone"  
(Baron, Naomi, 2005, p 14)

## **(2) Depersonalisation**

The pragmatic linguist Levinson complains about the impersonal view on linguistics:



"Students of linguistic systems tend to treat language as a disembodied representational system which is essentially independent of current circumstances, that is, a system for describing states of affairs in which we individually may have no involvement, like the first three minutes of the universe." (Levinson, 2004, p. 2)

The code model for communication has been dehumanising communication study for years. All that 'intello' talk about redundancy and entropy wasn't very fruitful. It might have been useful for engineers wanting to measure signal noise, but in analysing human communication it is misleading. We have sketched face-to-face communication as being very powerful in understanding the meaning of messages. Neither Captain Cook nor the Leahy brothers, contacting tribes in Highland New Guinea for the first time needed words for their transactions with the aboriginals. Inference is the basis for transactional interactions that are independent of culture and language, and the slots can in necessity be filled by mime and iconic gesture. Children learn language without language by inferring the spoken words and gestures of their caretakers.

The code model, originating in first order cybernetics is at the origin of a depersonalising view on human interaction. Humans are considered as computers, as machines and in the end also treated that way. In sociology this is called re-entrance. Social theories are not only created by people who claim to understand what they are saying; they are above all about people and may become understood by the very people of which these theories speak. When this happens, social theories can be said to re-enter the very practices they claim to describe and change their truths right in front of the theorists' eyes. And of course when pleading for a culture where the other is absent they incite manipulative behaviour causing depersonalisation and conflicts.

### (3) Absence of embodiment

Copresence allows each party to observe one another. They can see what the other is doing and looking at, so their Mirror Neurons can try to fetch the intentions of the other party. Often a frowning eyebrow indicates some problem but we do not see it, we cannot react to it. The problem remains. Emotions cannot be fetched. Negative emotions not only remain present they tend to amplify in the silence one spends beyond it's computer.

"Interaction is characterized by expectation of close timing – an action produced in an interactive context (say a hand wave) sets up an expectation for an immediate response. Face-to-face interaction is characterized by multi-modal signal streams – visual, auditory, haptic at the receiving end, and kinesic, vocal and motor /tactile at the producing end. These streams present a 'binding problem' – requiring linking of elements which belong to one another across time and modality (e.g. a gesture may illustrate words that come later, a hand grasp may go with the following greeting)." (Levinson, 2004)

Audibility allows each party to hear timing of speech and intonation. When one utters sarcasm or irony<sup>3</sup>, he does this by stressing certain parts of the sentence. Whereas speech conveys not only what is said but also how it is said, e-mail is limited to the former. As such, e-mail is an inherently more impoverished communication medium than

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<sup>3</sup> **cynic** /snk/ noun

1 a person who believes that people only do things to help themselves, rather than for good or sincere reasons: Don't be such a cynic!

2 a person who does not believe that sth good will happen or that sth is important: Cynics will say that there is not the slightest chance of success.

**cyni•cism** /snszm/ noun [U]: In a world full of cynicism she was the one person I felt I could trust.

**sar•casm**

/skzm; NAmE srk/ noun [U] a way of using words that are the opposite of what you mean in order to be unpleasant to sb or to make fun of them: 'That will be useful,' she snapped with heavy sarcasm (= she really thought it would not be useful at all). a hint / touch / trace of sarcasm in his voice

voice or face-to-face communication. This limitation is likely to be fertile ground for miscommunication and, in particular, a lack of awareness of that miscommunication. Kruger et alii experimented with this limitation and they found that email users constantly overestimated (1) their capacity to convey sarcasm by email either (2) to detect sarcasm in email (Krüger et alii, 2005). When an ironic remark is interpreted literal, one can feel accused and abused. Things might end up badly.

Pauses in a conversation say often more than the content of an utterance:

"Workers in Conversation Analysis have established that after a question, a request, offer or the like, where a response is immediately relevant, the response options are not equal but ranked. Responses which are in the expected direction are immediate and brief, responses which are in the opposite direction are typically delayed, marked with hesitations and particles like well, and accompanied by explanations. Thus the absence of an immediate response after the following indirect request apparently indicates quite clearly to the requester that his request will be declined." (Levinson, 2004)

It is important here to discriminate between conscious recognition of the actions and emotions of the others and the chaining actions of mirror neurons that make us really grasp the intention of actions by simulation and make us really feel the emotions of others thus creating empathy for them.

#### **(4) Sequentiality and reciprocity get mixed up**

In a conversation everybody speaks at his turn. In conversation people time their interferences. They acknowledge by a nod or some consenting remark either they can interrupt to show disagreement. All of that is lost in e-mail communication. Often email conversation gets out of sequence. Contextual clues get mixed up this way. There are fast mailers and slow mailers. In a mailing list the thread you wished to pursue has been lost when you are too slow.

Email is a diachronic form of communication. Contextual clues often depend on the time frame of communication. When using email time frames of sender and receiver can vary greatly. We send an email in the morning when we are fit and well cancelling an invitation of a friend because we notice there are some inconsistencies in our agenda. It's just an every day routine to us, but we do not wonder when our friend will be reading it. Let's say he is returning from his job where he was confronted with plenty of problems, he is tired and feels unhappy and lonely. So he checks his email, hoping to find some better news. Our cancellation will only add to his unhappiness, if not be interpreted as a blow in his face. One advice, do not cancel appointments by email, it is a little cowardly isn't it? Simultaneous communications allows immediate feedback when something is misunderstood or falls badly. Email doesn't allow this.

"Human interaction is characterized by a conversational mode of exchange, in which the erstwhile speaker becomes a listener, and the erstwhile listener becomes a speaker, the valued commodity apparently being speaking while others hold their tongues. This alternation of roles seems to be universally built into the deictic system of languages ("I" refers to the current speaker, "you" to the current addressee, and my "I" becomes your "you"). Many human societies have asymmetrical assignments of roles and elaborate divisions of labour, but in all of them informal interaction seems to be built on the alternation of conversational roles. Given that human language processing is obligate and automatic (hearing you speak English, I automatically comprehend even if I'd rather not), the alternation of listening roles implies an obligatory inhabiting of other's mental worlds. So it seems that cooperative sharing of the communicational resource guarantees our mutual sharing of the Schelling mirror-world." (Levinson, 2004)

## **(5) Absence of social context cues and shared reference**

This might sound controversial, though it isn't. Email occurs in a very different context than direct communications. It lacks social cues. Emails are typically received and written while sitting in isolation, staring at a computer screen. Email interactions are thus distant from the social rituals common to face-to-face or telephone conversation. You are just talking to a machine when writing email. One could wonder if the new language of the Internet is spoken by a great number of rather insular types who like to keep interpersonal contact to a bare minimum. A person doesn't dismantle mentally when on the Net. He will behave on the Net like he is behaving or wanting to behave in the real world, but he remains hidden behind his terminal and unexposed, recklessness bares no risk

People get a lot of SPAM, unsolicited mail. How come? The response-rate of email (0.25%-0.5%) is lower than the response-rate of postal mail (2%-3%). Henceforth the aggressiveness of direct mailers though there are methods to prevent the need of this practice: when you collect your email addresses on your website from people stating they want to receive mail. It is as simple as that... but some people think that they can get away with SPAM, and of course they need to send huge volumes.

Mauri Collins has tried to find the origin of flaming. As to her it's the consequence of the absence of 'social context cues'.

"The term 'social context cues' refers to the various geographic, organizational, and situation variables that influence the content of conversation among persons. Persons are usually sensitive to these social context cues and they can inhibit or facilitate what is said, how, and by who to whom. When defined as a person's physical position in time and place, geographic location can have a profound effect on communication. Discourse that is suitable for a bedroom is rarely suitable for the podium at a national convention, from a pulpit unsuitable for a bar on a Friday night. A business phone call made to someone's home number may originate quite properly at ten o'clock in the morning, yet be most unwelcome arriving in another time zone at 5 am." (Collins, Mauri, 1992)

Though she points in the right direction, the explanation of the social field is rather limited. That shouldn't surprise us because sociology hasn't implemented yet a relevant definition of communication.

## ***How to make Net Conversations Relevant***

The situation is not hopeless. First we must mention that some features of email also can be advantageous in preventing ambiguity and conflicts. Once you know email is quite different from face-to-face communication you can avoid ambiguity and conflicts bearing this in mind. Therefore one must become conscious about how face-to-face communication works and try to replace the contextual evidence by written evidence. This isn't mere a transposition of spoken language into written language, we must rethink and recompose the whole conversational discourse in a written discourse.

The guidelines I give here mainly apply for email with a single recipient. Designing email messages for multiple recipients is a more complex operation that requires attention to the different sorts of background, interests, and affiliations of the recipients addressed. In general these guidelines apply also for distributed work groups, mailing lists or advocacy campaigns, though these practices are quite different from one another and demand some specific approach. See for this different approaches e.g. for workgroups [↓](#),

for mailing lists at <http://www.cs.man.ac.uk/~rizos/web10.pdf> and for internet campaigning at <http://www.e-benchmarksstudy.com>

### **(1) Review what you received**

Before answering an email we can review all the text sent by our addressee on this particular subject. This allows us to quote exactly what he said. Email is an archive of opinions and statements, using it can save a lot of trouble. What are the sensibilities of the other? What arguments did he use? This is part of the 'frame of reference' (see also: frame your answer)

If there are inconsistencies in the arguments of your collocutor you can ask additional questions.

Avoid arbitrary quoting or cut-and-paste editing. Often people select the weakest parts of a text for quotations and refutations. A strategy that has been proposed for maintaining the structural coherence of conversational arguments in face-to-face interaction is the practice known as recounting. Recounting is the restating or summarizing of an opponent's position (including both supporting and refutational stances) in the construction of one's own refutational or counter-refutational message. Answer to the whole text not to the parts that let you feel superior.

### **(2) Revise your answer**

You can overlook and redraft your mail until it is as precise possible. A slip of the tongue is less likely unless you push the 'send' button without thinking or the cat is jumping on your keyboard.

If you're angry when you are writing an email, it will almost invariably show up in the way your mail reads to the recipient. You could even be angry about something completely unrelated to the content of the communication or the addressee, and it will still seem to the person reading it that you are angry with him. Don't write while you are angry. It's often best to wait a full 24 hours.

If and when you write something that you are not entirely sure about, if you have doubts about how something is going to come across, it's often a good idea to put the email aside for now and come back to review it later.

### **(3) Use argumentive discourse, avoid hegemonic discourse**

Argumentative discourse maybe unusual in social face-to-face conversation, in email it adds to the clarity of your message and avoids misinterpretation. Consider a discourse situation where the speaker tries to convince the hearer of a particular point of view. The task for the hearer is to understand what it is the speaker wants him to believe - to analyze the structure of the argument being presented, before judging credibility and eventually responding. It is the task for the speaker to make this as easy as possible, to make it sensible.

As we mentioned as to the relevance theory of Sperber:

"The central claim of relevance theory is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise enough, and predictable enough, to guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning. The aim is to explain in cognitively realistic terms what these expectations of relevance amount to, and how they might contribute to an empirically plausible account of comprehension." (Sperber, 2004)

"The success of inferential communication does not require that the communicator and the audience have the same semantic representation of the utterance. It suffices that the utterance, however they may represent it, be seen as evidence for the same conclusion."  
(Sperber, 2006)

Relevance of an input to an individual is defined as follows:

- "a. Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time.
- b. Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time." (Sperber, 2004)

From a rhetorical point of view it's better to let evidence precede a claim than to claim something and then stating the evidence.

Avoid hegemonic discourse. A hegemonic discourse is one, which has become so embedded in a culture that it appears silly to ask "Why?" about its assumptions. It is capable not only of determining answers, but also the questions, which can be asked. This is close to Double Bind.

#### **(4) Be consistent**

Contrary to a conversation, where you can only utter one argument at a time, in email you can bundle your arguments. Take care you do this in a consistent way.

"A proposition E is evidence for a proposition C if there is some rule of inference such that E is premise to C's conclusion – in other words, there is some logical connection between E and C".

The more consistent you are, the more you prevent to be misunderstood. Inconsistencies undermine your truthfulness. Demagogy may work in face-to-face communication, using email fake arguments become transparent.

During a face-to-face conversation you can change your views when you take the arguments of your interlocutor for granted. You can negotiate and bargain. You can use fuss and adaptive logics. If you do this in email you must question your own point of view. You cannot mix your doubts with an affirmative appeal. When you are confronted with inconsistencies in your own story it's better to admit them or to keep silent.

#### **(5) Frame your answer**

It is always useful to be aware of and sketch the context and the framework of your plea, remarks and requests. They may be obvious to you but are they obvious for anyone? Frame analysis is essentially about how people organise their experience in terms of recognisable social activities and peer groups. The 'frame of reference', is a set of connections among behaviours, attitudes, engagements, objects, events etc. constituted as a recognisable structure of relevancies. When framing your answer you make clear what is relevant to you and what might be relevant for your recipient. Framing permeates the level of ordinary social action. We live in a world of social relationships, in which roles are acted out, some groups are privileged while others are discriminated, power and stratification are real.

#### **(6) Use an elaborated code**

Use an elaborated code instead of a restricted code (Bernstein, 1971). One of Bernstein's research studies involved showing a group of children a strip cartoon and recording their account of what it depicted. Some said things like:

"They're playing football  
and he kicks it and it goes through there  
it breaks the window and they're looking at it  
and he comes out  
and shouts at them  
because they've broken it  
so they run away  
and then she looks out  
and she tells them off"

while others said:

"Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball  
and it goes through the window  
the ball breaks the window  
and the boys are looking at it  
and a man comes out and shouts at them  
because they've broken the window  
so they run away  
and then that lady looks out of her window  
and she tells the boys off."

(from Bernstein, 1971 p 203 [re-arranged])

As Bernstein points out, the first account makes good sense if you have the strip cartoon in front of you, but means much less without it. This is an example of restricted code. The second can "stand on its own", and is an example of elaborated code. The essence of the distinction is in what the language is suited for. The restricted code works better than the elaborated code for situations in which there is a great deal of shared and taken-for-granted knowledge in the group of speakers. It is economical and rich, conveying a vast amount of meaning with a few words, each of which has a complex set of connotations and acts like an index, pointing the hearer to a lot more information, which remains unsaid. Another example:

"Howard's at it again." (Restricted)

"I see from the newspaper I am reading that Michael Howard, leader of the Opposition, is once again trying to attack the government from a position of right-wing populism as we discussed a couple of days ago." (Elaborated)

Elaborated code spells everything out: not because it is better, but because it is necessary so that everyone can understand it. It has to elaborate because the circumstances do not allow speakers to condense. These are the circumstances of email.

### **(7) Watch Implications**

As to relevance theory people understand an utterance using inference of what they get as input, trying to grasp the intentions of the sender. Thus the implications are the main point.

It is always important to understand that any word or proposal can have multiple meanings or implications. There are a great many words that can be used to say essentially the same thing; but some, depending on the context, have additional meanings, which can be quite destructive in your efforts to communicate peacefully.

For example, I could refer to someone who does not react strongly to emotional stimuli as "insensitive." Insensitive certainly says this person can take some abuse without breaking down, but it also implies that the person is somehow unkind, uncaring, or callous. When you think someone is insensitive you might wonder if you gave enough cues and evidence to make that person sensible to your cause.

However, if I called the person "stout" or "stalwart," this might assign the person a characteristic which most people find to be complimentary. Suddenly I've run the gamut from being offensive to complimentary, and I've been essentially saying the same thing. It is obviously important to choose words that best fit what you truly mean, what you want to get across, or at least that will say roughly what you want without upsetting people.

Problem solving behavior, such as giving or requesting information about a party's priorities among the issues, encourages high joint benefit. Contentious behavior, such as making threats or standing firm on one's proposals, encourages failure to reach agreement or, if agreement is reached, low joint benefit.

Three states of mind discourage concession making: viewing concessions as producing loss rather than as foregoing gain; focusing attention on one's goal rather than one's limit (i.e., the alternative that is minimally tolerable); and adopting a fixed-pie perspective, in which one views the other's gain as one's loss, rather than an expandable pie perspective.

Be careful with irony or sarcasm in emails. Irony is wonderful. You can say something without quite saying it. And irony is funny, too. An ironic tone is only wonderful and funny if it is understood, however. When the recipient of your message can see you, or when they know you well, this usually works. But with email irony can spark disaster. Because it is so difficult to convey via email that something was meant ironically, misunderstandings are common and can lead to major fights. Usually, that's neither wonderful nor funny.

The lack of nonverbal clues makes it easy to misinterpret something, but we're not careful enough to avoid these misinterpretations because email feels so instant, easy and accessible, just like talking.

**What can be misunderstood in an email message will in fact be misunderstood, no matter how many winking smileys you add.**

#### **(8) Pretend it's Face-to-Face and be aware whom you're talking to**

When writing your email, make sure anything that you write is actually something you would be willing to say to the addressee if you were speaking to them face-to-face. Writing in all capital letters looks like screaming all the time. For example, do you really think you would say "I don't like your attitude" directly to someone if you were talking to them? Probably not, unless you want to start a fight. However, you might say something more along the lines of "I'm not really very comfortable with the way this is going. Maybe we should talk about this later." Show that you are open to dialog.

In all cases, in all things, it's important to know your audience. Who will be reading this email? What kind of person are they? Are they sensitive? Or perhaps they have bark skin and a stone heart? Even if they were less sensitive, would they be particularly sensitive to this issue which you are raising?

The point is also that no one method works for every person, every time. Carefully monitoring your audience and thinking of how they are likely to react to a given situation will be an enormous aid to you in writing email messages.

**(9) Don't abuse CC and other powerful features of email, use them thoughtfully**

Mail should have a subject heading that reflects the content of the message. Use the Subject field.

When you send a message to more than one address using the Cc: field, both the original recipient and all the recipients of the carbon copies see the To: and Cc: fields including all the addresses in them. This means that every recipient gets to know the email addresses of all the persons that received your message. This is usually not desirable. Nobody likes their email address exposed in public. The same might happen when you forward a message.

The Bcc: field helps you deal with the problems created by Cc: . As it is the case with the Cc: field, a copy of the message goes to every single email address appearing in the Bcc: field. The difference is that neither the Bcc: field itself nor the email addresses in it appear in any of the copies (and not in the message sent to the person in the To: field either). BUT understand that bccs can be dangerous because the act of using them is inherently deceitful, because you are hiding the list of true recipients. The people who receive the mail may then not realize that they were only blind copied and respond to all. When they do this, someone may realize your deception and become very angry. Sometimes you can send an email to the intended bcc recipients prior to sending the actual mail, warning them of the message they are about to get and not to do this. Sometimes, it's easier just to forward them a copy after you have already sent it.

Avoid tweaking CC's. A tweaking CC is a message sent to a colleague by a third party, CCing you, to embarrass or pressure your colleague. Or it could be sent to another colleague, CCing you, for similar reasons. By bringing you into the conversation to expose supposedly ineffective or delinquent behavior, the sender hopes to modify that person's behavior. The tweaking CC is usually counter-productive. It threatens the status of your colleague. This of course might be a reason to keep firm. It wastes the time and emotional energy of all senders and all recipients and is often the first step to escalation.

As part of knowing your audience, understand that big lists of addressees can be particularly dangerous. The more people you have on your list, the more likely any one of them is going to be annoyed by your email. What's worse is that if someone is annoyed, there is a very good chance that when they flame you, they will flame the whole list, which is likely to make you pretty angry, like you have been publicly attacked.

First and foremost, do your best to keep the number of recipients to a minimum. Simply stated, the smaller the audience, the fewer the unexpected personality traits that are going to react negatively to your message. Sending an email to 100 people is like tossing a 20-pound block of sodium into the public pool during adult swim on Labor Day. Remember that a good portion of avoiding a flame war is to keep the person on the receiving end of your email from being on the defensive.

Don't include people like this, unless you absolutely need to. When attacked, don't respond. Most of the time the person who lashes out at you looks far sillier to the people on the list. Let him hold his title and move on. If you must respond, deal only with the issues the person raised, not with their attack.

Don't send large files to mailing lists when Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) or pointers to ftp-able versions will do. If you want to send it as multiple files, be sure to follow the culture of the group. If you don't know what that is, ask.



### **(10) Have an open mind**

A good rule of thumb: Be conservative in what you send and liberal in what you receive.

But absolutely the simplest and best way to avoid e-flaming anyone is to avoid emails altogether. This may sound silly, but it's true. A large number of problems with bad email wars come out of the simple fact that the problem is way too hot to easily deal with "face-to-face," so people hide behind their electronic shield. Overtness anticipates conflicts. **The mind is like a parachute it only works when it's open** (Frank Zappa).

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