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Language Economy as Evidence of Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

We argue here that using an economised language in computer-mediated communication is evidence that learners are autonomous. Data is analysed from text chatlogs in English, and we see evidence of such language in reduced forms like clippings. The use of these forms is evidence that a community of practice has formed. Crucially, also, the participants are leaders in the setting of reduced forms as discourse norms. Thus, we conclude that the learners are autonomous agents in their language learning.

Introduction

A characteristic of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is that the language used there is frequently economised, especially when communication most resembles spoken language, as in text chat. Our argument in this article is that such economisation processes are evidence that learners are being autonomous. We specifically discuss one economisation process, namely *reduced forms* like clippings.

Background information on these forms is presented in the first section below, followed by a discussion of learner autonomy. Our evidence that reduced forms are markers of autonomy comes from the fact that they mark a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998), and also that we see that learners are in charge of the process of setting norms for particular reduced forms. These two issues form our main sections of analysis.

Our data comes from text chatlogs from non-native speakers of English produced in Autumn 2007. They are students on an MA in English Linguistics run by a Swedish university. Of the 28 students, one is a native speaker of Bangla, and the rest are native speakers of Vietnamese. Data comes from student-only pre-seminars and seminars with teachers present run through Skype textchat from an introduction to English Linguistics. All participants have been made anonymous in the presentation of the data.

We begin our discussion with some background on reduced forms.

Background on Reduced Forms

There is much literature on the strategies users employ to economise their language when they write a contribution in CMC discourse. For example, Lee (2002: 8-10) goes into detail about the types of reduced forms (which she calls *shortenings*, distinguishing orthographical/morphological reductions from syntactic ones):

- (1) acronym of sentence (*brb* meaning “be right back”)
 letter homophone (*u* meaning “you”)
 number homophone (*4* meaning “for”)
 combination of letter and number homophone (*b4* meaning “before”)
 reduction of individual word (*coz* meaning “because”)
 combination of letter initial and letter homophone (*oic* meaning “oh I see”)

Lee does not mention clippings specifically (although she does mention acronyms and initialisms), but we can easily add them to the set of individual word reductions in the penultimate category.

Yus (2011: 176-179) categorises what he calls “text deformations” in CMC as follows:

- (2) orthographic mistakes
 phonetic orthography (phonetic spellings, colloquial spellings, regiolectal spellings, prosodic spellings, interlingual spellings, homophone spellings)
 abbreviations, acronyms, clippings
 ellipsis

Yus covers similar categories to Lee, apart from ellipsis and orthographic mistakes. His division of phonetic orthography is much more detailed, as he includes categories like regiolectal and interlingual spellings. Different types of clippings are clearly mentioned, though.

However, we adopt the following simplified system:

- (3) clippings (using *pl* for *please*, plus acronyms and abbreviations)
 homophonous spellings (using *4* for *for*)
 reductions of formality (using *yeah* for *yes*)

We are focusing specifically on the reductions in orthography and morphology, although we mention formality as well. We of course recognise that other categories such as orthographic expression of emotion and intonation, etc. are features of CMC in textchat, they are not of interest in this work. The other different classes of examples Lee recognises are part of our system as well, but we stick with the simpler (3).

White (2011, 2012) discusses the contexts in which forms can be reduced in the ways mentioned above. The context is a crucial aspect in interpreting reduced forms. Consider the following example from the data described in the introduction (White 2011: 239) where both the antecedent and reduced form are marked in bold type:

- (4) [8:01:02 PM] Student 9 says: they are two **Ministers**, the man is Hon Damien O'Connor, and the woman is Hon Ruth Dyson
 [8:01:08 PM] Student 9 says: ok, thats good
 [8:01:36 PM] Student 8 says: both of them are **Min**,but one is Male ,one is female

The reduced form *Min* is used by Student 8. This can be interpreted in many ways, but in the actual context of a discussion about the biographies of two ministers in the New Zealand government, it is most relevant to interpret the form as *Ministers*. Also, having the full form specified earlier makes this interpretation appropriate in the context.

It is not always necessary to have a linguistic antecedent for a form to be interpretable in one particular way. Consider the following:

(5) [8:35:26 PM] Student 1 says: Hello, everyone. Plz join room :**L&G** pre-seminar

This is the first contribution in the discussion, and so there can be no antecedent for interpreting *L&G*. Here there is only the discourse context of a discussion of language and gender that makes it appropriate to interpret *L&G* as *language and gender*.

However, there are other examples of reductions that cannot be explained in the same way. Consider the examples involving reduced functional categories below (White 2011: 242):

(6) a. [9:00:32 PM] Student 14 says: Maybe, they're busy, **pl** wait for some minutes
b. [8:54:30 PM] Student 6 says: **thx** all!

(7) [8:50:51 PM] Student 1 says: '**cos** there are some differences in topic between men's conversation and women's ones. Do u think so?

These examples also appear early on in the chats, and there is no full form to refer back to. White explains them with reference to their high frequency. *Please* and *thanks* in (6) are very frequent items for marking politeness, while *because* in (7) is a very frequent linking expression. It is this high frequency that makes these reduced forms appropriate in these contexts.

Having discussed reduced forms in general terms, we will move on to some background on the specific issue of this article, namely learner autonomy.

Learner Autonomy

Autonomy is defined by Holec (1981) as when a learner takes responsibility for decisions made regarding his/her learning. Benson (2001) uses the term *control* in the same way – autonomy means taking control over learning.

Autonomy is of course an important concept whether the course is a more traditional campus course or a distance one. However, researchers have noted that distance education as a medium may be highly conducive to promoting autonomy for learners. As Warschauer (1997) argues, computer-mediated education can be seen to promote reflection and interaction, key features of autonomy. Benson (2001) claims that learner autonomy requires a social autonomy, since learning is a social process. Thus, groups of learners take collective responsibility for learning. Recently, Mohd Nor *et al.* (2012) and Eneau and Develotte (2012) have argued that strong features of interaction can be found in online forum discussions, and therefore can be seen to contribute to the creation of social autonomy for the groups of learners they studied. Similar features have been identified in chat language, cf. Jepson (2005), Lai and Zhao (2006), and Kim (2011) for example. Nguyen and White (2011) analyse data from Vietnamese learners of English at the tertiary level, and demonstrate that they exhibit features of interaction in their online language use. In the same vein, Peterson (2009) identifies features of interaction present in online data from Japanese learners of English. This interaction suggests a social autonomy within the group, as we have mentioned before.

Having seen this background to the phenomenon of reduced forms and to autonomy, we will now present evidence that reduced forms are another feature that indicates that learners are being autonomous.

Standardisation in Communities of Practice

An important piece of evidence that leads us to conclude that the use of reduced forms by learners demonstrates that they are autonomous is that the forms are markers of *communities of practice*. Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed the concept of community of practice as a way

of explaining learning. People learn by doing something as a social process within a community. Wenger (1998: 73) describes three factors involved in setting up such a community: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, where the latter can refer to discourse norms. White (2011, 2012) argues that the adoption of reduced forms is an example of the setting-up of discourse norms, and constitutes strong evidence that a community of practice has formed. Reduced forms are expected in Internet discourse, and mark that users are experienced at using the Internet.

White (2012, forthcoming) proposes further that reduced forms become discourse conventions through a process called *standardisation*, in the sense of Žegarac (1998). What this means is that reduced forms retain their lexical meaning, but an additional conventional meaning is added. Specifically, users are reinforcing their membership of an Internet community of practice by using reduced forms. When we use a reduced form, we encode meaning, but crucially also reinforce a discourse situation.

White (forthcoming: 11-15) presents evidence that standardisation has taken place in textchat data. What is important for us here is that we argue that learners, not native speakers, control the process. Consider their roles in examples from a discussion of the concept of *implicature*. The students use the reduced form, *impli*:

- (8) [9:17:55 PM] Student 1 says: Al right, let's take this sen as eg: "When did u stop beating your wife?". We can see **implicature** in this sen. What abt presupposition, why not it?
[9:18:26 PM] Student 5 says: and also **impli** and presup can tell people more than that

The teacher does not confirm this form in the later seminar, but uses an alternative, although very similar, form:

- (9) [13:07:52] Teacher 1 says: first: i have put on frontier forum a message about presup vs. **implic**. please read that when you get a chance

But she then changes to a different form:

- (10) [13:31:13] Teacher 1 says: no - no, i don't want to agree to **imp** being in the pre

The students keep on with their original form, but also have a rival form, the form the teacher uses in (10):

- (11) a. [13:39:18] Student 7 says: I think pres focus on words and phrase but **impli** focus on context. Am i right Teacher 1?
b. [13:41:39] Student 25 says: and **impli** maybe: I need to buy new ones
- (12) [11:08:29] Student 19 says: Every sentence has PRE? PRE is always true but **IMP** is the speaker's comment

Neither is standardised, although *impli* is slightly more common (three instances of *impli* versus two of *imp*). As we see, native speakers can influence the process of standardisation somewhat, although it is a limited one, in that students will consider the forms the teachers use, but they do not necessarily standardise it. However, it can be the simple fact that *imp* is shorter that causes it to be chosen by some students in preference to the longer *impli*.

We will now look at the related set of examples relate to reduced forms for *presupposition*. We again find that different forms are available, and examples of these can be seen in the following:

- (13) [9:17:55 PM] Student 1 says: Al right, let's take this sen as eg: "When did u stop beating your wife?". We can see implicature in this sen. What abt **presupposition**, why not it?
[9:18:26 PM] Student 5 says: and also impli and **presup** can tell people more than that
- (14) [10:36:32] Student 12 says: **Presupposition**: background assumptions embedded within a sentence or a phrase and considered to be true.
[10:36:34] Student 18 says: **Pre**. ia embedded within a sentence or a phrase, **IMP**. operates over more than a phrase and sentence. **IML**. is more indirect than **PRE**>

The teacher starts off by confirming the reduced form in (13):

- (15) [13:07:52] Teacher 1 says: first: i have put on fronter forum a message about **presup** vs. implic. please read that when you get a chance

However, later in the same seminar, she changes, and adopts the version in (14), before moving back in (17):

- (16) [13:31:13] Teacher 1 says: no - no, i don't want to agree to imp being in the **pre**
- (17) [13:42:07] Teacher 1 says: alright - can we move on from **presupp** and imp?

The students are divided on these forms, and both are equally available:

- (18) [11:08:26] Student 4 says: in some extent we can identify the differences between **pre** and impl. Thanks Teacher 1
- (19) [10:46:56] Student 5 says: it means that **presupp** is the most obvisous in the statement?

Thus, we see a fluid situation, where both students and teacher are unsure about which form to use. Naturally, as a result, no standardisation has taken place. In the case of *pre*, as Herring (p.c.) points out, the reason why it is not standardised can be that the form is too ambiguous and therefore too context-dependent. Thus we might expect *presup(p)* to be standardised eventually.

To conclude the analysis, what we have seen is that the students are leaders in the standardisation process. They do not generally follow the teachers' choice of reduced forms. We propose, therefore, that they are exhibiting learner autonomy. To use Benson's (2001) term, they are taking control of the process of setting discourse norms in their community of practice. The teachers, who are authority figures because they are native speakers and therefore are more aware of discourse conventions in English and in Internet communication, do not have such a leadership role. In the pre-seminars in particular, the students take the opportunity to develop their Internet discourse, including reduced forms, without the clear control of the native speakers, i.e., without them being directly present in the discussions. The community of practice is therefore exhibiting social autonomy by setting its own discourse norms, and therefore we conclude that learner autonomy is being demonstrated by the development of conventions for using reduced forms.

Conclusion

We have presented evidence that the use of reduced forms shows that non-native speakers of English are being autonomous in their learning. These forms are markers that a community of practice is being or has been formed, and this in-group marker comes about through a process of standardisation where the learners are in the lead, not their native speaker teachers. Therefore, we conclude that the use of an economised language is a strong marker that learners are being autonomous.

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