

Aleksandra Górska
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

AN ICQ MESSAGE BOARD SESSION AS DISCOURSE: A CASE STUDY

Abstract

Even though the scope of literature on online communication expands fast, very little attention seems to be paid to instant messengers—programmes providing for one to one communication in real time. It is quite surprising, since such programmes create conditions closest to face to face communication. The similarities and differences between computer-mediated and face to face interaction should be the most apparent in instant messenger mediated communication. The present paper focuses on this type of internet communication. The data sample is a transcript of an online conversation that took place within one day. It is analysed within the framework of Conversation Analysis with regard to turn-taking and the occurrence of discourse markers. Also, attention is paid to the use of minimal responses. Although, as might be expected, face to face and computer-mediated interaction share many features with respect to the above criteria, there arise a few interesting differences.

Keywords

Computer-mediated communication, electronic discourse, instant messaging, turn-taking, adjacency, discourse markers.

1. Introduction: online discourse

In the present paper online communication, in the form of instant messaging, is regarded to be conversation. The striking difference between the two is that of mode; conversation is spoken while the instant messaging is typed. Nonetheless, studies of spoken and written language (cf. e.g. Brown and Yule 1983; Johnstone 2002; Ochs 1979; Stubbs 1983; Tannen 1982, 1984) found that it is formality and purpose (Beaman 1984: 46), rather than mode or channel, that determine register (the term *register* is used here in the sense that Biber 1994 uses it). Some researches (e.g. Ochs 1979) focus on the contrast between planned and unplanned

rather than spoken and written discourse. “Modes of discourse that take place in real time, such as face to face speaking or singing, involve relatively little planning. More planning is possible ... in situations in which discourse can be drafted, edited or rehearsed before it enters into interaction” (Johnstone 2002: 182). Such a point of view can be especially useful in determining the nature of computer mediated real time communication. In this sense, even though it is technically typed, i. e. written, online discourse takes place in real time and thus belongs to the unplanned registers.

Brown and Yule (1983: 15-16) list differences characterising spoken (or spoken-like) and written (or written-like) discourse. Among the features of the former are:

- incomplete sentences, or sequences of phrases (cf. e.g. lines 13, 18, 29-30, 36 of the forthcoming sample)
- little subordination, prevalence of active declarative forms (cf. lines 27-31)
- relationships between clauses expressed by means of simple conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *then* (cf. lines 6, 18, 19, 29, 31, etc.)
- repetition of the same syntactic forms (cf. lines 15 and 16)
- the use of general vocabulary, such as *nice*, *thing*, *stuff*, etc.
- the use of “fillers,” such as *well* or *oh* (cf. e.g. lines 17, 22, 64)

as well as frequent use of repair mechanisms (Tannen 1982), which can be seen in lines 12-14. Also the more recent studies, devoted to electronic discourse as such, support the spoken-like character of online discourse:

Electronic conference discourse is like conversation in that it presents a number of performance features generally characteristic of in process or in situ communicative events and behaviors, such as repetition, direct address, disfluencies, and markers of personal involvement. ... Electronic messaging in real time, or very brief synchronous interactive electronic communication, is more like informal speech situation. (Davis and Brewer 1997: 3-5)

Another factor pointing to the unplanned and unedited character of online real time communication are the misspelled words such as in lines 15, 19, 29, 42, punctuation errors and the lack of capital letters.

One of the most salient problems of spoken discourse analysis is methodology (cf. e.g. Johnstone 2002: 20-22; Neuage 2002; Stubbs 1983). Having decided to study naturally occurring discourse, the researcher faces the problem of representing the audio- or video-recorded data in print. In the case of online discourse the researcher has insight into all data available to conversationalists, as they too are devoid of cues such as prosody or body language.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework within which a sample of real time computer-mediated one to one interaction is analyzed in the present paper is that of Conversation Analysis. CA sees the conversation as a highly ordered phenomenon, and looks into the methods by the use of which members of a society arrive at a sense of social order. "CA approaches to discourse consider the way participants in talk construct systematic solutions to recurrent organisational problems of conversation ... One of such problems is turn taking" (Schiffrin 1998:239). As far as its methods are concerned

CA focuses upon details of actual events: analysts record conversations without researcher prompting. Analysts also produce transcriptions of events that attempt to reproduce what is said (both linguistic details such as pronunciation and nonlinguistic details such as inbreaths) in ways that avoid presuppositions about what might be important for either participants or analysts themselves. (Schiffrin 1998: 235).

In that respect computer-mediated communication, especially within one of instant messengers providing a record of message exchange, such as ICQ message board, seems to be ideal for analysis, as the analyst has access to all and only the data available to participants of the exchange. What is more, since the transcript is automatically created by the computer, no presuppositions can influence it.

3. The data sample

The sample analysed in the present paper is a fragment of a "history of events" of an ICQ message board exchange. ICQ is an internet tool allowing its users to communicate online by means of one of the functions available, namely: chat, message, e-mail, and URL and file transfer, of which message board mode has been chosen to gather the data to be analysed in the present paper. A "message board session" resembles regular internet chats in that it takes place in real time, but unlike chats, it provides only for one-to-one communication. One of its advantages over IRC or other real time communication tools is that it generates a "history of events"—a record of sent and received messages, where the date and time of sending the message are indicated beside the nickname of the sender.

The informants are both male native English speakers, one of them Canadian and the other one English. One of the informants provided the "history of events" as a friendly gesture towards a fellow ICQ user, the author of the present paper. The sample has not been edited in any way, even the layout of the messages has been preserved. Except for the numbering of lines of the transcript all the

information has been generated automatically by the programme. All the original abbreviations and spelling errors have been retained.

The sample consists of 66 lines, and is a transcript of an interaction that took place within one day. The first entry was sent at 00:59 and at that point was left unanswered. The interaction was taken up at 21:20, and lasted till 21:36, which means that the actual message exchange lasted for about 16 minutes. In order for the reader to be able to follow the upcoming argument, the whole of the sample is quoted:

1. SP/\WN 07/03/03 00:59 what can u get strikes 4?
2. 9th 07/03/03 21:20 ello mate
3. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:20 hey hey
4. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:21 not at my dad's yet
5. 9th 07/03/03 21:21 lol
6. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:21 and i'm watching predator 1 and 2 when im
there
7. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:21 :-D
8. 9th 07/03/03 21:21 good films
9. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:21 i know
10. 9th 07/03/03 21:21 why do you want strikes mate?
11. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:21 hey,how do i get strikes?
12. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:22 i mean
 - i. how can u get them
13. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:22 what do u
14. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:22 i know they r bad
15. 9th 07/03/03 21:22 missing clan mateches, bad behaviour
16. 9th 07/03/03 21:22 missing training without excuse
17. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:23 oh ok
18. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:23 and the max is 4
19. 9th 07/03/03 21:23 but the hive is not as strickt as the platoons
20. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:23 right
21. 9th 07/03/03 21:23 yep
22. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:23 ohh ok
23. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:23 good:-P
24. 9th 07/03/03 21:23 we have a lot of shift workers in the hive
25. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:24 i see
26. 9th 07/03/03 21:24 so dont worry too much
27. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:24 ok i won't,and i see u got my school message
 - i. hehe
28. 9th 07/03/03 21:24 lol
29. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:25 and it does nto say TODAY when i post on the
 - i. treads
30. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:25 on mine anyways
31. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:25 and it used to
32. 9th 07/03/03 21:25 lol some off mine are missing too

- 33. 9th 07/03/03 21:25 the clan site has been playing up today
- 34. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:26 what do u mean by that?
- 35. 9th 07/03/03 21:26 i had real trouble getting into the site today
- 36. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:27 oh zeck is having problems too
 - i. the new guy
- 37. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:27 he used to be in my clan
- 38. 9th 07/03/03 21:27 i read lol, it is working ok now though
- 39. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:28 ok
- 40. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:29 how many posts do i need to be marine?
- 41. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:29 50?
- 42. 9th 07/03/03 21:30 you dont need posts to be a marien mate
- 43. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:31 i mean rated as marine on the forum
 - i. lol
- 44. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:31 :-P
- 45. 9th 07/03/03 21:31 i see, lol
- 46. 9th 07/03/03 21:31 dunno mate
- 47. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:32 ok
- 48. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:32 i'll find out when i make that many posts
- 49. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:32 lol
- 50. 9th 07/03/03 21:32 start posting and see what happens lol
- 51. 9th 07/03/03 21:32 doh you beat me to it lol
- 52. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:32 lol
- 53. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:32 yep
- 54. 9th 07/03/03 21:32 ;-)
- 55. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:32 any more alien tips 4 me
- 56. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:33 on playing or whatever?
- 57. 9th 07/03/03 21:33 dont get killed lol
- 58. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:33 lol
- 59. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:33 ok
- 60. 9th 07/03/03 21:33 and lady says blood is good for the skin lol
- 61. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:34 lol:-) ok
- 62. 9th 07/03/03 21:34 got to sort food out for my kids, back in a bit
 - i. mate
- 63. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:35 ok
 - i. see ya
- 64. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:35 well i might be at work so see ya sunday
- 65. 9th 07/03/03 21:35 ok mate have fun at your dads
- 66. SP/\WN 07/03/03 21:36 ok
 - i. bye

4. The analysis

4.1. Some remarks on structure

Since Conversation Analysis takes the structural view on conversation, within which the conversation is viewed as a highly ordered phenomenon (Sacks 1992), it seems appropriate to take but a brief look at the structure of computer-mediated communication of the kind that is provided by the sample. In this section a greeting sequence and the first topic are looked into.

The sample opens with a first pair part of an adjacency pair—a question “What can you get strikes 4 [for]?” which, interestingly, is answered in line 15, after having been rephrased in line 11. Even more peculiar might seem the fact that between the question in line 1 and the eventual answer in line 15 twenty-two hours and twenty-three minutes elapsed. In face to face interaction this would be perceived as a severe violation of adjacency. In fact, line 1 is a first pair part followed by a pause (Sacks 1992: 535), a rather long one, caused, most probably, by the offline status of user “9th” at the time when the question was sent. This might seem odd for a user to ask a question when he can see there is no one to answer it (the online/offline status of other users is indicated in every user’s contact list). Yet, such practice is common among ICQ users; it could be compared to leaving a note for the other user and glossed as “In case I’m offline next time you are on, please leave me a message answering my question.” This time, however, the users meet online, and once they meet they engage in a conversation bound by the norm of spoken discourse. As Sacks puts it “... for most types of conversation ... at the beginning of that conversation a greeting is a relevant thing to do” (Sacks 1992: 36), hence the answer to 1 is postponed until the greeting sequence has been completed.

According to Sacks (1992: 205), a normal greeting sequence is composed of an exchange of *hellos* and an exchange of *how-are-yous*, where the *how-are-you* sequence can provide the first topic, and has the function of orienting participants towards each other (Sacks 1992: 564). In the sample, in place of a *how-are-you* sequence, lines 4 to 9 are exchanged. Even though none of the lines contains a question, they still allow the participants to re-find each other, where line 4 shows what “SP/-\WN” knows that “9th” knows (where *yet* informs “9th” that although what he might have anticipated from previous conversation(s) is not actually the case, “9th” had every reason to believe that it would be), and line 6 adds some new information. In fact, the use of *and* at the beginning of line 6 could provide for interpreting it as belonging to the same turn as 4, as *and* is a marker of speaker continuation (Schiffrin 1987: 141). Line 6 is also a possible new topic, yet, it is very weakly taken up by “9th,” and subsequently closed by “SP/-\WN” in line 9.

Once the greeting sequence is completed, the thus far postponed question in 1 is brought back into the conversation. Interestingly, both participants return to it in lines 10 and 11 which, in fact, must have overlapped, each of them acknowledging the question with their contribution; “9th” opens a delay sequence (Sacks 1992: 529) by inserting a question, while “SP/-\WN” repeats and rephrases his initial question, marking the fact of repetition by the interjection *hey*.

4.2. Turn-taking

In the present paper the framework of Conversation Analysis has been employed to study turn-taking in the sample. According to Conversation Analysis turn taking is integral to the formation of any interpersonal exchange (Boden 1994: 66). In *The Business of Talk: Organizations in Action*, Deidre Boden compiles a succinct list of the “essential features of turn-taking:”

- 1) one speaker speaks at a time
- 2) number and order of speakers vary freely
- 3) turn size varies
- 4) turns are not allocated in advance but also vary
- 5) turn transition is frequent and quick
- 6) there are few gaps and few overlaps in turn transition

Put even more bluntly by Sacks, there can be no gap and no overlap. The analysis of the present sample revealed that in computer-mediated interaction all the above features hold, nonetheless their hold seems to be weaker. If they were seen as rules for smooth communication, they would be not so much violated but infringed. “The notion of referential distance—or how ‘far away’ in space and time one can get before losing the thread of the discourse—is stretched within electronic discourse...” (Davis and Brewer 1997: 129). One such example has already been pointed out in section 4.1. of this paper; between the “utterance” of line 1 and 2 there is an over twenty-hour gap. Another example of a gap that is not complained about is between lines 39 and 40. As *ok* in line 39 marks the end of the topic developed in lines 27-39, and is the only contribution provided at 21:28, it was most probably sent at the beginning of that minute. Also the sudden shift of topic in 40, unmitigated by any topic-transition device supports such interpretation of the transcript. All in all, gaps can occur and are not complained about.

Equally interesting is how overlapping talk is dealt with in the sample. Two instances of overlapping talk in the sample are lines 18 and 19, and lines 48 and 50. Even though the graphic layout of the exchange suggests that 19-20 is an insertion sequence, it is in fact a sequence parallel to 18-21. Unlike in face to face interaction, where whenever overlapping talk occurs one of the participants stops

(Sacks 1992: 45), in online communication, such as a message board session, not only are both overlapping turns, 18 and 19, completed, but they are also treated as legitimate adjacency first pair parts, and completed with a second pair part each, a confirmation in 21 and backchanneling in 20 respectively (for the use of discourse markers in this fragment of the sample see section 4.3.2.).

The exchange in lines 48-54, in turn, is interesting for more than one reason; lines 48-49, which make a single turn, and line 50, overlap not only in time and place of the conversation—they also have basically the same content, which fact is commented on in line 51, and confirmed in lines 52-53, apparently much to the satisfaction of both participants (on bonding role of *speech convergence* see Giles and Smith 1979).

4.3. Discourse markers

Discourse markers are an integral part of turn taking system, as they “are used to organize and hold the turn and to mark boundaries in the discourse” (Stenström 1994: 63). In this section nine discourse markers present in the sample will be discussed. These include: *ok*, *and*, *but*, *oh*, *so*, *I mean*, *right*, *well*, and *I see*. In the sixty-seven lines of the sample there are twenty-six occurrences of discourse markers altogether. As the use of discourse markers is bound by context, some insight into the propositional content of the exchange is inevitable.

4.3.1. *Ok*

There are ten instances of *ok* in the sample, in lines 17, 22, 27, 39, 47, 59, 61, 63, 65 and 66, two of which (lines 17 and 22) are preceded by *oh*. In one instance *ok* is preceded by *lol* and this cluster will be discussed in section 4.4. devoted to minimal responses.

When unaccompanied by additional discourse markers *ok* can fulfill one of the following functions:

- “respond to questions or requests” (Stenström 1994: 30, 66)
- “invite feedback” (Stenström 1994: 46, 66)
- “mark a boundary in the discourse” (Stenström 1994: 46, 66)
- “prompt a conversational closing” (Stenström 1994: 30, 66).

When, on the other hand, preceded by *oh*, *ok* is used to “acknowledge the clarification” (Schiffrin 1987: 81), as is the case in lines 17 and 22.

In the sample *ok* is used four times to “respond to ... [a] request” (Stenström 1994: 30, 66), in lines 27, 59, 63 and 65, although in the case of line 65 it is possible that *ok* serves two purposes; it both responds to a request (Stenström

1994: 30, 66) and “prompts a conversational closing” (Stenström 1994: 30, 66). Two *oks* “mark a boundary in the discourse” (Stenström 1994: 46, 66); in line 39 *ok* is used to close the exchange begun in line 29 and concerning “problems with the website,” in line 47 it is used to close the topic of “posts.” Finally the remaining instance of *ok* quite obviously “prompts a conversational closing” (Stenström 1994: 30, 66), as it is used in the very last, 66th line of the sample.

4.3.2. *And and but*

There are six instances of *and* in the sample, in lines 6, 18, 27, 29, 31, 60, all of which could be described as marking speaker-continuation (Schiffrin 1987: 141). Three instances are especially relevant to the discussion of turn-taking in the sample.

Line 27 is peculiar in that it contains a boundary marker *ok* followed by *and*, a marker of continuation. It is quite interesting why “SP/-WN” joins the close of the previous topic and the opening of a new topic in such a way. It might be because as line 27 is his third effort to close the topic of “strikes” (cf. lines 17-22), he wants to prevent his interlocutor from getting any more into the subject, so he immediately starts a new sequence by providing an adjacency pair first pair part. Yet, “9th” does not take his chance to talk, nor does he take up the subject—in line 28 he merely resorts to backchanneling, thus signaling that although he sees his chance to take a turn he has nothing to contribute (for the use of minimal responses by both informants see section 4.4.).

There is a similar instance of a boundary marker, line 17 *oh ok*, followed by a marker of continuation *and* in line 18. The overlap discussed in section 4.2. of the present paper must have resulted from this combination of discourse markers. It is characteristic that “SP/-WN” starts line 18 with *and*, which, as a discourse marker, “marks a speaker’s definition of what is being said as a continuation of his/her own prior talk” (Schiffrin 1987: 147), while “9th” opens his utterance in line 19 with *but*, which in turn used in discourse marks “a speaker’s effort to return to a prior concern” (Schiffrin 1987: 164), and at the same time marks the upcoming talk as contradictory to the hearer expectations (Schiffrin 1987: 158).

Lines 27-33 form a sequence illustrating yet another use of *and* in conversation. According to Schiffrin (1987: 128-141), a series of *and*-opened utterances should be followed by a generalization. Apparently, it does not have to be the producer of the series that makes the generalization, since in line 33 it is “9th” who produces a generalization.

4.3.3. *So*

So is a “complementary marker of main idea units” (Schiffrin 1987: 191). It is used as such in line 26, the only instance of *so* in the sample. “9th” continues his point from line 19 into line 24, which is acknowledged by ‘SP/-WN’ in 25, and then concludes it in 26. *So* is not only used here “to preface information whose understanding is supplemented by information which has just become shared background” (Schiffrin 1987: 207), but it also marks “9th’s” readiness “to relinquish a turn” (Schiffrin 1987: 218). At the same time, since *so* “marks the relevance of the preceding turns to the topic, and thus completes the adjacency pair” (Schiffrin: 1987: 219), line 26 is probably interpreted by “9th” as completion of his multi-entry turn in lines 19, 24 and 26. All of those meanings and actions are acknowledged by “SP/-WN” in line 27, and since it is the third boundary marker on his part within the last two minutes, he finally proposes a new topic.

4.3.4. *I mean*

There are two instances of *I mean* in the sample—line 12 and line 43. *I mean* can serve two purposes: it “can preface clarifications of misinterpreted meaning” (Schiffrin 1987: 299) but it can also be interpreted as an attempt at reestablishing the serious tone of the initial question (Schiffrin 1987: 298). In the present sample in both instances of the use of *I mean* both of its functions were called upon simultaneously.

4.3.5. *Right*

The only instance of *right* in the sample is that in line 20. It is present in the slot right after a follow-up (line 19) to an answer (lines 15 and 16) to a question in line 11, and hence must be interpreted as feedback to, or acknowledgement of, the information provided by that answer. At the same time it “marks a boundary in the discourse” (Stenström 1994: 46), namely, closes the topic of “strikes.”

4.3.6. *Well*

There is only one instance of the use of *well* in the sample, towards the end of the conversation, which comes as no surprise as it is a pre-closing device (Schiffrin 1987: 102). Line 62 is interesting in that here the real-world context of both participants comes into play—“9th” excuses himself, his excuse is acknowledged in the next position and then there is a *well*-initiated utterance. Schiffrin (1987: 103-127) describes *well* as a discourse marker which connects its user to the interaction

when the upcoming contribution is not fully compliant with prior coherence options. *Well* can be also used to contradict the presupposition of the prior question. According to the *rule of confirmation* (Labov and Fanshel 1977: 100) “if A makes a statement about B-events, then it is heard as a request for confirmation.” Even though line 62 is not an overt statement about “SP/-\WN’s” events, it presupposes that “SP/-\WN” will still be online when “9th” has attended to his immediate real world context, which presupposition is first confirmed, and then contradicted in line 64.

4.3.7. *I see*

I see occurs only once in the sample. It constitutes the entire turn in line 25 and does not lead to a speaker shift (Stenström 1994: 5), therefore there can be no doubt that it functions as minimal response (Stenström 1994: 66). *I see*, just as *oh* or *right* mentioned above, simply acknowledges “9th’s” follow-up (see Stenström 1994: 66) in line 24 to his answer (lines 15, 16 and 19) to “SP/-\WN’s” question in line 11.

4.4. Minimal responses

There is some disagreement among researchers as to the status of minimal responses (for a review of terminology and literature on minimal responses see e.g. Heinz 2003: 1116); researchers “consider backchannel responses to be turns, non-primary turns or non-turns” (Heinz 2003: 1117). In *An Introduction to Spoken Interaction*, Stenström opts for the latter interpretation of minimal responses, arguing that “backchannels are not ‘proper turns’” (Stenström 1994: 5) as “they do not involve a speaker shift ... they acknowledge what the speaker says and generally encourage him/her to go on” (Stenström 1994: 5), and “backchanelling often takes place when the other party draws their breath” (Stenström 1994: 36).

According to Coates 1996, the use of minimal responses, is “a significant part of a collaborative floor” (Coates 1996: 142). Minimal responses are a means by which speakers/hearers signal the fact that they are “present and involved” (Coates 1996: 143); “... once the floor is constructed as occupied by all speakers at all times, speakers have an obligation to signal their continued presence in, and acceptance of, the shared floor” (Coates 1996: 143). At the same time some researchers have noticed that “male speakers delay—deliberately mis-time—minimal responses in order to signal lack of interest in what is being said” (Coates 1996: 304). Also Fishman (1983: 96) notes that “the male usages of the minimal response display lack of interest.” Both uses of minimal responses can be observed in the present sample. In fact, it seems that throughout the interaction one of the

informants, “SP/-\WN,” uses minimal responses in the collaborative way described by Coates (1996: 42-45), while the other, “9th,” in the way described by Fishman (1983: 96).

Lines 35-38 illustrate the contrast between the use of minimal responses by both informants; “9th’s” contribution of line 35 is acknowledged by “SP/-\WN” in line 36, which is opened with *oh* as “SP/-\WN” recognizes old information (Zeck having problems) as conversationally relevant (Schiffrin 1987: 74), followed by an attempt at collaborative talk (cf. e.g. Coates 1996) and a possible new topic. This attempt is cut off in line 38 by a mere acknowledgement on “9th’s” part, and an instant switch back to the main topic in the same line.

“9th’s” contribution in line 38, namely *lol*, is an interesting feature of online discourse. It is supposed to be an abbreviation for “laughing out loud” or “lots of laughs,” but it has gained the status of a backchanneling device. According to Coates (1996), in the collaborative floor laughter plays a role similar to minimal responses, and signals “the continued involvement in what is being said” and “[speakers’] continued presence in what is being said” (Coates 1996: 146). Similarly, Stenström (1994: 6) observes that “another very frequent feedback signal is laughter.” Yet, the context of line 38 can hardly be interpreted as collaborative exchange, since the function of *lol* used in line 38 is clearly closing the topic of “Zeck.” Thus, it can be argued that the meaning of *lol* has been conventionalized into a minimal response of a status and use similar to e.g. *oh*. Such interpretation seems even more valid in view of the use of *lol* in line 61, where it is followed by *ok* and appears in the context similar to the aforementioned cluster of discourse markers, namely *oh ok* (see section 4.3.1.).

4.5. Adjacency

According to the succinct definition of an adjacency pair provided by Schiffrin (1998: 236) an adjacency pair is “a sequence of two utterances, which are adjacent, produced by two different speakers, ordered as first part and second part, and typed so that a first part requires a particular second part or range of second parts.” As “electronic discourse can alter or rearrange the sequential ordering of conversation’s adjacency pairs” (Davis and Brewer 1997: 3), establishing adjacency in the present sample proved to be quite problematic.

Lines 22 and 23 are probably a two-entry turn as they are uttered by one participant. Line 22 is an acknowledgement of line 21, and line 23 could be an evaluation of 19, or 21, or the entire exchange concerning “strikes,” since “speakers may acknowledge the clarification with approbation terms—*yeah*, *right*, *OK*—which are optionally preceded by *oh*” (Schiffrin 1987: 81). Most probably, the interpretation of 23 poses a problem only for the analyst, while it didn’t pose any

for the participants. Having no propositional content of their own, those two lines are definitely filling a next position (Sacks 1992: 526), although it is problematic to establish which line exactly they are adjacent to. Another interpretation could be that lines 22-23 are in fact one turn; such interpretation seems even more plausible once one pays attention to the fact that lines 17-24 were all typed and sent within one minute, which points to the fact that between the utterance of line 22 and that of line 23 hardly any time passes.

5. Conclusion

The question whether online communication is discourse is a rhetorical one. The orderliness of online communication is obvious, even from the layout of the transcripts. Also, it takes but a lay reading of the transcript to see that such mode of communication shares more features with spoken than with written discourse. The really interesting question concerning online discourse is “How is online communication (of the type analysed in this paper) different from face to face communication?” The present analysis revealed that there are some interesting differences.

One of the salient rules of Conversation Analysis is that “in a single conversation people talk one at a time” (Sacks 1992: 32). However, lines 18-21 form two parallel sequences occurring in a one to one conversation. What is more, neither of the participants seems to be put off by that fact; once the second part for each first part is provided, they simply continue their conversation. This might be due to the fact that the internet users are accustomed to chatrooms, where, more often than not, turns are distorted because of limited space provided for a participant’s entry, and, since chatrooms are multi-participant, many parallel conversations take place simultaneously (cf. Parrish 2000). Otherwise, it might be the case that the participants do not notice that their turns overlap, or they only realize it once they have already sent their contribution. Therefore, the situation where no one stops at the occurrence of an overlap might be due to the fact that the contributions are typed, and hence take more time to be produced. It is also worth noting that if they occur, parallel sequences are never continued over one adjacency pair. It seems that in online discourse overlapping talk is not a violation, but an undesirable deviation from the norm.

Online discourse also poses problems for the analyst, such as the one in line 27, namely finding adjacency pairs. Since paralinguistic cues such as intonation are absent, one can only rely on the memory of face to face communication to decide that *ok* in line 27 would be a separate tone group and hence does not add to the propositional content of the rest of line 27.

Finally, there seems to be a kind of online-specific minimal response, namely *lol*. It has some propositional content—it acknowledges that the utterance it follows was funny, but its use is not restricted to places where its gloss “laughing out loud” or “lots of laughs” are appropriate.

On the very first page of her book, *An Introduction to Spoken Interaction*, Stenström states: “Spoken interaction is a joint, here-and-now activity which is governed by two main principles: speakers take turns, and speakers cooperate” (1994: 1). In online electronic discourse the turns that participants take are visible even in the layout of the record, or transcript. The use of discourse markers, and especially minimal responses, which can be observed on a closer analysis of the contents of the transcript, on the other hand, points to the cooperative character of the transaction that constituted the sample of the present paper.

References

- Beaman, Karen. “Coordination and subordination revisited: syntactic complexity in spoken and written narrative discourse.” In *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*, edited by Deborah Tannen, 45-80. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1984.
- Biber, Douglas. “An analytical framework for register studies.” In *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Register*, edited by Douglas Biber & Edward Finegan, 31-56. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Boden, Deirdre. *The Business of Talk: Organizations in Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- Brown, Gillian and George Yule. *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Coates, Jennifer. *Women Talk*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Davis, Boyd H. and Jeutonne P. Brewer. *Electronic Discourse: Linguistic Individuals in Virtual Space*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.
- Fishman, Pamela. “Interaction: the work women do.” In *Language, Gender and Society*, edited by Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae and Nancy Henley, 89-101. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1983.
- Giles, Howard and Philip M. Smith. “Accommodation theory: optimal levels of convergence.” In *Language and Social Psychology*, edited by Howard Giles and Robert St. Clair, 45-87. Oxford: Blackwell, 1979.
- Heinz, Bettina. “Backchannel responses as strategic responses in bilingual speakers’ conversations.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 35 (2003): 1113-1142.
- Johnstone, Barbara. *Discourse Analysis*. Malden: Blackwell, 2002.
- Labov William and David Fanshel. *Therapeutic Discourse Psychotherapy as Conversation*. New York: Academic Press, 1997.

- Neuage, Terrel. *Conversational Analysis of Chatroom "Talk"* [unpublished PhD dissertation 2002]. <http://se.unisa.edu.au/boo.htm> (29 January 2003).
- Ochs, Elinor. "Planned and unplanned discourse." In *Syntax and Semantics, vol. 12: Discourse and Syntax*, edited by Ted Givón, 51-80. New York: Academic Press, 1979.
- Parrish, Richard. "Conversation analysis of Internet chat rooms." 2000. <http://polisci.wisc.edu/~rdparrish/Chat%20Rooms%20for%20Web%20Site.htm> (16 June 2003).
- Sacks, Harvey. *Lectures on Conversation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- Schiffrin, Deborah. *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- . *Approaches to Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita. *An Introduction to Spoken Interaction*. London: Longman, 1994.
- Stubbs, Michael. *Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
- Tannen, Deborah. *Analysing Discourse: Text and Talk*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1982.
- . *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1984.

About the author

Aleksandra Górska is currently completing her Ph.D. dissertation in the School of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The dissertation is titled *Instant Messaging as Conversation*, and focuses on the typed yet interactive communication in instant messengers, within the framework of Conversation Analysis. Her research interests include computer-mediated communication, discourse and conversation analysis.