

The (Non) Place of Politeness in the Twittersphere

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Abstract

This paper is a critical reflection on the (non) place of politeness in online communication, particularly in texts posted on web-based communication tools like “Twitter”. The wide diffusion of online communication platforms mirrors the consent over the fact that the high speed of such media enables people to interact in a way that has never been seen in the history of humanity. Although these tools enable the creation of “Internet social webs”, a form of representation of affective and professional relationships, the same tools have been unable to eliminate an evident contradiction in such interpersonal relationships. In other words, there is a spatial distancing of the bodies of the interlocutors, although conversely these users symbolically attach to each other by sharing cognitive and technical procedures guided by heuristic rules and repetitions of sequences (the logic of the machine). In the virtual world, flaws, slips and singularities are commonly seen as accidental elements, instances of implicatures (Grice, 1975) or ritualistic formulae of interaction that

do not take into account the “political” aspect that the linguistic practice assumes in the social-semiotic universe, where the interactions unfold in a permanent conflict of value positions. In this context, the notion of politeness as a performative behavior (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997) takes a transitory, ephemeral, non-relational configuration, or, in other words, politeness is a “non-place” (Augé, 1994) in the online universe, rather than the material surrounding of the performative behavior of Subjects. The theoretical background for this paper is the Linguistic Pragmatics approach (Mey, 1985, 1993, 2003; Rajagopalan, 2002, 2003) and the analytical descriptive methodology of micro-texts of randomly chosen twitters.

Keywords: Politeness, Pragmatics, Communication, Context.

1 The Pragmatic Perspective

THE USE THEORY we propose here is based on the process of production of language and on its producers rather than its final product, language itself. This approach privileges the world of users (MEY, 1993), that is, the dynamic social-semiotic universe where interactions unfold in a permanent conflict of value positions. Society, including the virtual context, is a sort of “axiological arena” where individuals are continuously creating texts. There is neither beginning nor end for utterances, only different language games, each of them embodying different attitudes and social positions. Language, in those circumstances, is not merely descriptive. It is rather a form of social-historic cognition that enables the individuals to perform actions in the world, at once intentional and politically, in order to change and create states of affairs, and, in a dialectic relation, turn themselves into Subjects of their own existence.

(...) that every act of language is potentially political, in that, even if I do not have conscious political motivations in making a given utterance, it is still capable of positioning me in a particular way vis-à-vis my hearer or reader, who may infer that I had motivations I didn't know I had. They may even be right. The point, though, is that I cannot control the way other people react to me, infer my motiva-

tions or construct an identity for me in relation to their own (JOSEPH, 2006: 17-18).

This idea reinforces the hypothesis that language is a political and epistemological “artifact”, a resource individuals use to do things in the world, not only to describe facts or to express inner states. Amidst the multiple uses, one should ask “how” and “why” language was used in that way, under those circumstances. For when people play a “linguistic game”, they do it intending both to find their own way in the cultural universe of meanings, and to assume a strategic position vis-à-vis other value attitudes expressed by other users of language.

Intentionality becomes, therefore, vital for Pragmatics. Intentionality should be understood as an active and singular process whereby the individual responds to certain objective (social and corporeal) conditions. It should not be understood as the expression of some inner state that supposedly acts in causal terms. If one claims that there is an intention, then what is being claimed is that the agent and the act are intelligible. In other words, the intention becomes meaningful out of the language and the context or operational situation in which it is used (SHIBLES, 1974: 121).

“We cannot describe language and its use outside the context of that use, viz. the society in which language is used”, according to Mey (1985: 11). In the local/virtual milieu, it means that Pragmatics should be expressed as the use of language in communication. In other words, as long as use is understood as communicative use, Pragmatics turns out to be an explanation of the inter-relation between language and the communicative situation in which it is used. This hypothesis places Pragmatics close to a General Theory of Communication (CAFFI, 2001), whose interests are the uses of the kinetic, visual and sound language of communicative acts of various intra- and intercultural situations. Thus, in the dynamics of signs and significations, a pragmatic perspective is always multiple, since it includes in its domains facts of utterance, inference, instruction, and also reflects upon the “being part of a form of life”, that is, the beliefs of a community.

2 The Text of Practice

A “Livre de Raison” is a book in which a 17th Century family man would note down everything he spent or received so as to control all his errands (DUBY & ARIÉS, 2009: 321). Like diaries, the books split time and action into a sequence of immediate stances whose maxim unit is the day that passed by. While focusing on writing the everyday, this form of story leaves narration and the quality of style out. At certain moments, the fragmented action mirrors the lived experience, health, the saints of the day. At other moments, birth, pain, a new piece of cloth. Everything is written in a very dry and direct language, even the structure. Duby & Ariès (idem, p.328) quote the Journal of Jean Héroard as the example of a Livre de Raison which, being written daily in a sequence of repetitive notes, registers the everyday life of Luis XIII without distinguishing between public and private spaces.

Boyenval (*apud* ARIÉS, p. 331) says that the private space is not there, in the books, in an immediate relation, but “between the lines of the text, it’s allusive, it’s only suggested to the reader. He is the one to capture the slightest expression of it and to create a mental image of it.” One can find a narrative of the 17th Century in which the dauphin’s and his wet nurse’s rooms are mentioned, but not described. The references and overlapping notes will help the reader reconstruct the intimate spaces related to the daily life of a prince or a baker. In 2009, British bakery Alboncafe (twitter.com/AlbionsOven) started using Twitter to warn its followers when a batch of fresh bread will be available. In Poland, singer Sara May, candidate to a chair at the Warsaw’s Board of Supervisors shared the following picture on the Internet as part of her 2010 campaign¹:

¹ The new versions of Twitter, featuring two columns, allow the user to see videos and pictures without having to leave the Webpage.



While Sara May's picture gets very popular, millions of users of the microblog depict the immediate instants of their day. Here a few comments mentioned by Nitrozac & Snaggy in "The Joy of Tech":

- a. the glutton who always shares what he is eating;
- b. the constantly depressed sick person, who reports the daily misfortunes;
- c. the boring user who doesn't stop signing up for retweeting promotions;
- d. the exaggerated retwitter;
- e. the killjoy who tells the end of a movie you haven't seen yet;
- f. the ones who think you care about the time they go bed etc.

The practice of Twitter and of Livre de Raison reconstitutes a mode of life, an experience, and an intimacy that is made public. It is an external gesture that also turns into a private one. These narratives are controlled either by the quantity – 140 tokens – or by the sensitive expression. They are repetitive and depend on the allusions and the fantasy of the reader, even though people seem to be comfortable about the succinct description of spaces and their most common activities.

“In the same day, at 10pm, my sister came home from Lairat, due to the disease of my wife, who hasn’t been feeling well in these days of labor”, says Charles Demaillason in the 18th Century (*ibidem*, p. 336). “Our undertakings are what matters, not the words, thus I won’t promise anything. I live in Bemowo, in Warsaw,” wrote May – whose real name is Katarzyna Szcsolek.

The narratives follow the same formula: allusions and implicatures. If we refuse to simply opposing time and space in which the narratives were made and imagine space as the product of interrelations, convergences and pluralities, then these narratives turn out to be social and historical localized practices, performed but not pre-formed (PENNYCOOK, 2010; BOURDIEU, 1990, 1977). This invites us to widen the analytical schemes far beyond our own culture, and acknowledge the epistemological differences between language activities in a Livre de Raison, in Twitter, in a blog or in the chat at a bar table in Brazil or Poland.

A focus on language practices moves the focus from language as an autonomous system that pre-exists its use, and competence as an internal capacity that accounts for language production, towards an understanding of language as a product of the embodied social practices that bring it about (PENNYCOOK, 2010: 9).

When a graduate student posts the following message on his website: “damn, I’m so sleepy, but I still have to finish all this reading” – he is actually reproducing a local practice, that is, an activity he repeats over time, a habit. It does not matter if he posted the text at home, at a cafe, or in the university. What he “tell us” in his short narrative is a manifestation of the local in the global. In other words, what happens in the twittersphere and the blogsphere has to be understood as a relocation of a local practice in global terms (PENNYCOOK, 2010), and this iteration – the possibility that the mark has of being repeated and changed at every repetition (DERRIDA, 1977) – needs to be taken in relational terms, and from certain perspectives.

What is “particular” for a local practice cannot be statically considered, much less reduced to a mere commitment to the tradition. The

focus on the semiotic reality has to take into account the political implications of everyday interactions from the local uses without losing sight of the global. In other words, to understand the semiotic diversity in terms of political uses of language and of performances that embodied the rites of the daily life but are not restricted to it.

In such bodily productions resides the sedimented history of the performative, the ways in which sedimented usage comes to compose, without determining, the cultural sense of the body, and how the body comes to desorient that cultural sense in the moment of expropriating the discursive means of its own production. The appropriation of such norms to oppose their historically sedimented effect constitutes the insurrectionary moment of that history, the moment that founds a future through a break with that past (BUTLER, 1997: 159).

3 The Non-Place of Politeness on Twitter

Mey (2001: 59) notes that the “disembodiment of information is typical of the way we deal currently with the contacts between people”, and hastens to add that “what matters here is to see that practice, as human activity, cannot be fully disengaged from the human”. In other words, the act of sharing some sort of knowledge will always be placed in some corporeal context, and therefore in a local setting. Currently, people run a considerable amount of their everyday lives on the Internet, but this practice is established without a consideration to the corporeal and local (social) coordinates of the creation setting.

As Heller (2000: 17) says, “the everyday life is the full life of man, and when he is born, already placed in an everydayness, he will have to learn to live with rules of social interaction”, especially the rules of politeness due to the regulating functions that the polite behavior perform in the negotiations of personal identities. Etymology will help us, since the terms “politics”, “police” and “politeness” share the same root – *polis*. The gestures of the body and the tongue disrupt asperities (in its double meaning) and embody an outstanding image which will rend meaningful the practices of every community.

It is in the plural everyday life that people perform the negotiations and adaptations of the objective data of the immediate situation and, to the same extent, of the perceptual psychological data. I mean by “psychological” the cognitive and emotional individual elements. The emotive elements can be translated as affective and committing dispositions that are necessary for the unfolding and continuity of interactions. These movements build up the Subject and his body. In this social elaboration, we will never know where language ends and the body begins; or where language begins and the body ends. The body is not mere “repository” of past experiences and the transit of future expectations; it is rather the fragmented result of diverse social roles that the individual performs since he is given a name at birth. Such naming, a political act that renders visible the human form, turns out to be the major trap – once it is tied to past interpretations, it requires a constant monitoring so as not to slide to a “non-place”.

The idea of place (space) goes beyond the physical world in which we interact. “Space is a social construct that anchors and fosters solidarity, oppression, liberation or disintegration” (MA, 2002:131 *apud* PENNYCOOK, 2010: 62). This means that sliding to a non-place is a representation in which the mediations are basically made by words and its allusions: “vocabulary has a central place because it is what weaves the tissue of habits, educates the gaze, informs the landscape” (AUGÉ, 1995: 108).

Obviously, the space is a construction, which implies a performance. How can someone be displaced from such elaboration? In the case of the microblog Twitter and the other virtual “communication” media, there is a spatial distance between the bodies of interlocutors, and a simultaneous symbolic approximation among people due to the fact that they share cognitive and procedural resources led by heuristic rules and repetitions of sequences. In a nutshell, it is the logic of the machine. The technique establishes from the outset how things will be displayed and the illusion of being before the other. Before the computer, the illusion obliterates what one knows about digital technology and the historic novelty, in such a way that there is a “naturalization” of the mechanic processes that conciliates the irreconcilable: the inanimate and the performative.

The “infections” of the machines are a good example of the illusion

that obliterates the perception of events. In other words, while reproducing automatically around the virtual world, the computer viruses are considered performatic, spontaneous forms of nature. This script, the computer virus, is a binary code, very similar to the pyramidal structure of the genetic code of a DNA molecule. However, no one will call it “organic”! Only a demiurge, but this divinity probably would not be able to fully explain what happens inside the machines and what kind of data flows through the screen and circuits due to the speed and amount of “disembodied” information.

The user of Twitter deals with the transmission of data having the sensation that he is interacting and assuming a value position in the virtual semiotic universe when he is, in fact, sending synchronic narratives, mechanic fragments of a daily life without corporeal presence.

(. . .) a text is not detachable from a living being speaking one time only, in its own name, in the first person (. . .), in a manner that is at once spontaneous, intentional, free and irreplaceable. Performativity, therefore, excludes in principle, in its own moment, any machinelike technicity (DER-RIDA, 2002:74).

Due to the disembodiment of messages from a human to another in the virtual world, the political instances of politeness are reduced, or kept on Twitter as a form of control of indiscipline and resistance. The user has to previously accept the rules and avoid sending messages that might cause “problems” to himself or to the others. Thus, the gestures, at once repressed and empty, turn into simulacra, lexical items and images that do not hold an organic collectivity, thus permanently sliding to a non-place.

The non-place effectively exists, but in this space the coexistence among humans disappear, and allusions measured in units of time abound: 140 words is the limit to transform anonymity into a lifeless act with no room for history. The very identity of the users of electronic media is defined by a technical routine shared in the worldwide web. To put it differently, people symbolically interact by sharing access rules, handling and using standard semiotic resources (animation, text, image, sound), which are equally deployed anywhere in the planet.

Alone, but one of many, the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or with the powers that govern it). He is reminded, when necessary, that the contract exists. One element in this is the way the non-place is to be used (...) (AUGÉ, 1995: 101).

When getting to the Twitter website and signing up for an account, the user will start to slide to a space (a non-place) full of texts that will let him know how to be a member of a solitary individuality and an illusory practice. The sensation of being “here and now” chatting with the world and sharing information is so alive that a user will never accept the idea that his acts are reduced to a machinelike technique portrayed by emoticons. The signs of the machine are effusively used to enact the joyful experience of the user. They are almost a sematology – from the Greek ‘sema’, signal; ‘logos’, discourse, as the term is used in Spiritualism, i.e., a communication of spirits through the movement of still bodies.

4 Enfimtwitter



There is no event without experience, observed Derrida (2002: 72). How do we coordinate, then, the elusive moments of Twitter with the everyday living, the local practice? If the global is a re-location of the local, why does everyday practice, when transformed into hypertext, gets to fade away, becomes a palimpsest, enters the provisory and ephemeral, the non-place?

Language is not an autonomous system which pre-exists use. It is rather an experience of practice, that which is embodied and sedimented in a social, political and, above all, somatic space. Language is an experience that, in the virtual space, is reproduced in an insensible way, without organic coordinates. The virtual abstraction is, nevertheless, another instance of the “arts of doing” (CERTEAU, 1990), whose strategies are in such a way developed that the living ones have the impression they are faced with a differentiated space when they are dealing solely with a set of circuits and programs. The ideological question of the Subject

is subjected to the non-place, and cognition disappears into symbolic manipulation, undertaken in a mechanic and deterministic way.

We are facing currently the same indecision the Elizabethans did when having to deal with typography. Thus we have to find out and propose new explanations for the changes in the forms of experience and cognition. The perception we have of the world does not unfold in a “natural” or passive way. It is a socially and politically “situated” knowledge. If in the virtual world the corporeal *hexis* is subjected to a non-place, then one has to scrutinize which experience is this that tries to deal only with the “know-that” instead of the “know-how” (performatic).

In this perspective, this essay has complicated the use and the user in order to get into the domain of praxis and the adequate awareness of what one is doing. It is necessary to watch out in order not to fall into the “fetishism of the commodity”, where the artifact turns into a Subject. Twitter exists as a human techno(logy), period. The displacement of the polite (political) acts into a non-place is part of the illusory objectivity which veils and masks the presence of subjectivity. In this context, Marx’s quotation becomes even more invaluable: “Sie wissen es nicht, aber sie tun es” (They don’t know what they are doing, but they are doing it. KONDER, 2002: 48).

When facing the political impact caused by the leaking of confidential cables by Wikileaks, one could suggest that the hypothesis of political-somatic erasure of online communication (particularly on Twitter) is a mistake, and that Marx’s quotation does not apply to all users, especially the members of Wikileaks board of advisors. However, the major difficulty is to know how our words should be taken (in a perlocutionary sense) and whether the acts are intentional or not (AUSTIN, 1990:99).

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