

The verbalization of experience in digital messages

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An early analysis of the narratives collected as part of Wallace Chafe's pear-stories project examined the verbalization of experience in the American English pear stories in light of the theoretical concept of "frames" and "scripts" (Tannen 1979). In addition, the Chafe-edited collection of papers based on the pear project included a chapter that compared pear stories told in modern Greek with those told in American English, exploring cultural differences in the verbalization of experience (Tannen 1980). The present paper extends both these approaches to the verbalization of experience in messages sent to family and friends through such social media as email, IM, SMS, texting and Facebook. The paper thus examines how frames theory continues to shed light on the verbalization of experience in digital discourse; demonstrates that systematic differences in the framing of messages pattern by gender and age, thus extending the notion that there are cross-cultural differences in the verbalization of experience; and, moreover, suggests that messages exchanged in everyday interaction through social media constitute a quotidian contemporary instantiation of verbalization of experience.

Following Bateson's ([1955]1972) notion of frames, I identify, in naturally-occurring digital discourse, "metamessages" -- that is, superordinate messages indicating how a message is to be interpreted. Framing in text messages can be problematic because of the brevity required (or permitted) by the platform and the lack of such cues as tone of voice, intonation, facial expression and body language. To illustrate with reference only to the openings of messages that verbalize experience in digital discourse, the single word "Hey," in a text received by a female college student from a male friend, can lead to extended discussion among her cohort as to the frame in which the message is intended: is it merely friendly or romantic? Is this the opening of a potential invitation to get together or of a verbal exchange only? One means of signaling the frame in which a message is intended is the use of punctuation. Thus the greeting "Hi" can be marked as friendly and warmly enthusiastic by the reduplication of the final letter: "Hiiii." The use of this feature, moreover, patterns by age and gender. Young people tend to use it more than older ones, and young women tend to use it more than young men. A young woman attests that she had to tell her mother to please add "i's" to her greeting, "Hi," because the single word-final "i" came across as cold. In this sense, the differences in the use of word-final reduplication of letters with regard to framing the message renders cross-generation message exchange as a kind of cross-cultural communication.

Using examples to illustrate the operation of framing as well as the patterning by age and gender in digital media exchanges, I thus extend analysis of the verbalization of experience, which began with the analysis of pear stories, to the emergent and fast-evolving use of digital media in everyday communication between family and friends.

References

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