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Clashing frames of self-presentation in instant messaging[*]

**Przeciwstawne ramy interpretacyjne
w prezentacji siebie w komunikatorze internetowym**

This paper presents an analysis of the linguistic means used to evoke two contradicting frames of self-presentation in real time one-to-one online computer mediated communication. Drawing from impression management studies and cognitive linguistics, as well as discourse analysis, the author shows how clashing frames of self-presentation can be evoked in order to offset the negative associations each frame may evoke. The sample is a corpus of over a thousand messages exchanged between native and native-like speakers of English via an instant messaging tool.

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs komputerowy, komunikacja za pośrednictwem komputera, ramy
                     interpretacyjne, analiza dyskursu
Key words: computer-mediated discourse, CMC, frames, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show how instant messaging users use language for the presentation of self. Specifically, what linguistic means are used to evoke certain conceptual frames. In order to do so, a sample of fourteen instant messaging exchanges has been selected, in which a little over a thousand messages were accumulated. The exchanges take place between people who did not know each other prior to the communication under analysis, they have only ever interacted online, and they participate

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in one-to-one casual (i.e. not task-oriented) communication. Section 2.1. of this paper is an overview of impression management research, it also addresses the question of why people engage in communication with strangers online and why they care how they present themselves to those strangers. Section 2.2. is a discussion of concepts useful in analysing the relationship between language and impression management, such as frames and Idealised Cognitive Models. The analysis and the findings are discussed in Section 4. The interpretation of the findings are included in the Conclusions.

1.1. Impression management and the incentive value of others

This section presents an overview of the basic notions of self-presentation and impression management. In order to orient themselves in situations, interactants make predictions about others (c.f. Goffman, 1990 [1959]; Berger and Calabrese 1975; Berger 1979). What is of interest for this paper is the fact that these predictions are also, and in the case of on-line communication solely, based on speech style and content (Berger 1979; Walther 2007). The purpose of making such inferences is to behave in a way appropriate for the situation. It is important because being perceived as "normal" rests on that, and this, in turn, is vital for the interaction to continue (Berger 1979: 131). However, the notion of what is "appropriate" changes its meaning as a relationships develops, and at a certain stage less formal behaviour is expected, so that the individuality of persons in the relationships can be highlighted (Jones and Davies 1965).

Moreover, regardless of the degree of formality of a relationship, the process of impression management occurs. Whether it is defined as conscious deception, a result of overlearned scripts, or something individuals believe to be their true identity (c.f. Goffman, 1990 [1959]; Tetlock and Manstead 1985; Jones and Pittman 1982; Schenkler 1982) is not significant for this paper, especially in view of the fact that the internet gives hardly any means of verifying how truthful interactants are.

The core question of this paper is *how* interactants engage in impression management. Before question is addressed, however, there seems to be a point in considering the reasons *why* people get involved in developing relationships at all, especially relationships of the kind developed via internet, where no immediate monetary or otherwise material gain can be seriously considered. One explanation proposed by social psychologists is the "reward and cost construct" (c.f. Berger 1979: 128). Berger has this to say about the value that relationships have for people:

when persons come to believe that others can satisfy certain needs, that is, the others have incentive value, we expect that efforts will be made to find out more about the person with high incentive value so that the perceiver can develop strategies for obtaining rewards from him (Berger 1979: 128).

A study carried out by Berger, Weber, Munley and Dixon (1977), revealed that *perceived supportiveness* was a strong antecedent to attraction. Among the types of support constituting the supportiveness factor were "understanding, reinforcement, loyalty, concern for welfare, liking, rapport, and help in reaching goals" (Berger 1979: 129). All of these can be achieved via the internet. In this respect, on-line interaction and relationships are at no disadvantage when compared with face-to-face ones, which explains why people would engage in communication with strangers online. As far as the motivations for impression management are concerned, the most valid in on-line interactions seem to be the validation of one's self image, and satisfying the need for support.

1.2. Frames and Idealised Cognitive Models

In the literature the term *frame* is used to describe two phenomena. Tannen (1993) deals with *interactive frames*, which she describes as "structures of expectation" (Tannen 1993: 138; for interactive frames cf. also Jaworski 1994). The use of the term *frame* adopted in this paper follows that of Pamela Morgan (1997), and is to a certain extent based on the work of Erving Goffman, and others (c.f. Tannen 1979), as well as on the concept of George Lakoff's ICMs – *idealised cognitive models* (Lakoff 1987). The very nature of the present study requires the use of discourse analysis techniques.

In *Frame analysis: An essay on the organisation of experience* Goffman writes:

> Given their understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that that the ongoing world supports this fitting. These organizational premises – sustained both in the mind and in activity – I call the frame of activity (Goffman, 1986: 247).

However, Norman Fairclough argues that frames, schemata (cf. Cook 1990: 68–75) and *scripts* are all "types of mental representation of aspects of the world" (Fairclough 1999: 158), and goes on to say that "[u]se of these three terms is not standardised, and one finds them used in various senses" (Fairclough 1999: 158). Fairclough refers to a "particular type of activity" (Fairclough 1999: 158) as *schema*. Hence, while schemata represent types of activity, frames represent subjects or referents within an activity. "Frames

can represent types of person or other animate beings, … or inanimate objects, …or processes, …or abstract concepts" (Fairclough 1999: 159). For the specific purpose of this paper, this second application of the term frame seems to be more appropriate. It is also more synchronised with Lakoff's ideal cognitive models.

In *Women, fire and dangerous things*, Lakoff (1987) proposes that people organise their knowledge and understanding of the world

> by means of *ideal cognitive models*, or ICMs. […] Each ICM is a complex structured whole, which uses four kinds of structuring principles:
> – propositional structure, as in Filmore's frames
> – image-schematic structure, as in Langacker's cognitive grammar
> – metaphoric mappings, as described by Lakoff and Johnson
> – metonymic mappings, as described by Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff 1987: 68).

Of special interest for this paper are metonymic models. Lakoff argues that "[m]etonymy is one of the basic characteristics of cognition" (Lakoff 1987: 77) and that it is common for people to use one easily identifiable aspect of a thing to stand for the whole or for another aspect of the same thing. It has already been noted in this paper, that since in an interaction people have limited access to information, they make inferences based on what is available. Therefore it follows that metonymic models can be used for making such inferences or judgements. Three types of metonymic models are of special relevance here; these are *social stereotypes*, *typical examples*, and *ideals*. "Social stereotypes are cases of metonymy – where a category has a sociably recognised status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgements about people" (Lakoff 1987: 79). While social stereotypes are usually conscious, and can be overtly challenged, typical examples are most often "unconscious and automatic" (Lakoff 1987: 86). "An enormous amount of our knowledge about categories of things is organised in terms of typical cases. We constantly draw inferences on the basis of that kind of knowledge" (Lakoff 1987: 86). The third kind of metonymic models are ideals. Once again, a significant number of categories are understood in terms of "abstract ideal cases" (Lakoff 1987: 87). Lakoff explains the difference between a stereotype and an ideal by means of an example: "The ideal husband is a good provider, faithful, strong, respected, attractive. The stereotypical husband is bumbling, dull, pot-bellied" (Lakoff 1987: 87). It is noteworthy that these models can be culture specific (Lakoff 1987: 87).

Both ICMs and frames, being "mental representations of aspects of the world, […] share the property of mental representations in general of being ideologically variable" (Fairclough 1999: 158). Moreover, they are

activated by textual *cues* in the text. The idea behind this paper rests on the presupposition that elements of texts provide cues for particular frames. "Frame-evoking words and phrases, frame-evoking references and allusions, register markers (especially with respect to lexical choice and syntax), discursive style, …, and so on" (Morgan 1997: 276) can serve as these textual cues, or linguistic markers.

In her paper devoted to self-presentation frames in a speech of Newt Gingrich, Morgan defines these frames as follows:

> …each of these 'frames' of self-presentation is a multi-element cognitive model with rich traditional linguistic and cultural components and associations, including presuppositions and entailment of inferences, through which society views, understands, structures and conducts itself and its activities. Because of this complexity, these cultural frames are often cognitively linked to each other by the same intersection or overlap of some of the elements of their idealised cognitive models. (Morgan 1997: 276)

While according to Morgan frames can influence each other, intersect and overlap, this paper presents a situation where two contradictory frames are used for self-presentation by participants of the interaction.

2. The material

For the present analysis, a sample of fourteen informants has been composed. The informants are five women and nine men, aged between seventeen and fifty-four, originating from Australia, Great Britain, and Ireland. Their contributions have amounted to between thirty to one hundred fifty messages per user, over a thousand messages altogether in the corpus.

3. The analysis

The frames of self-presentation are "culturally pre-formed pieces used to construct 'face' in the sense of self-image that speakers try to project on their hearers" (Morgan 1997: 276). Consequently, it can be expected that informants will aspire to those images and features of character that they themselves perceive as favourable. Throughout the chats informants make reference to at least ten frames of self-presentation: The Young, The Adult, A 'Real' Man, An Independent/Attractive Woman, A Good Mother, Success, A Housewife, A Sane Person, A Likable Person and An Interesting Person. The division proposed here is to a certain extent arbitrary; many of the frames overlap, some of them can be interpreted as sub-frames of other frames. E.g., one of the sub-frames of Frame 1: The Young is A Student

frame; both frames share many reference features, that could go under the label of "being carefree". However, another important reference feature of The Student frame are "school worries", which in turn evoke connotations concerning "work" and "responsibility", that are parts of Frame 2: The Adult. For the sake of space and clarity of the argument only these two frames are discussed in detail in this paper.

3.1. Frame 1: The Young

Within Frame 1: The Young two sub-frames can be identified. One could be labelled The Youth Proper, the other – A Student. They are sub-frames of the same frame because they share the connotations they evoke. A typical, or perhaps stereotypical, youth, apart from being young, is also carefree, inexperienced etc. A stereotypical student, rather than study, devotes his (for some reason the stereotypical student is male) attention to a rich social life, with all its consequences, such as late nights, late mornings, hangovers and lack of money, to name but a few. This frame is evoked by means of lexical choice (direct reference to studying or being a student), informal register (use of colloquial or taboo lexis, informal syntax, segmental level markers; contractions *gotta*, *gonna* etc.), frame evoking concepts and implicature.

In the sample, words that refer to A Student Frame directly are "high school", "study", "finals" and "lectures" as in examples (1), (2), (3) and (4) respectively (the numbers in brackets indicate the location of the message in the corpus, the original spellings have been retained):

(1) *anthony:: i go to high school, i'm in my last year and i hate every moment og it! (72)*
(2) *roxy: ok, I study as well as b single mum (598)*
(3) *Shabubu: Lol, I only have 5 months and then finals, … (773)*
(4) *Shabubu: Ah…. Makes you wish you'd gone to lectures don't it) (775)*

Informal register both increases solidarity and evokes The Young frame. As a matter of fact, this frame marker abounds throughout the sample. This may, to a certain extent, be interpreted in terms of economy; the internet is the realm where getting the message across as quickly as possible becomes more important than in face-to-face interactions because of the necessity to type in ones contribution. Nevertheless, economy does not seem to be the prime factor, especially when informants typed "yeah" instead of "yes", and "nah" or "nope" instead of "no". Informal register is realised by means of informal lexicon, examples (5) and (6) below, taboo words (7), informal syntax (8−10), and contractions (11, 12).

(5) *roxy:*   *yep (604)*
(6) *roxy:*   *yea that's ok with my (614)*
(7) *Dale:*   *shitty here also (286)*
(8) *Shabubu* *Lol, how ya doin?? (743)*
(9) *Shabubu* *…what ya do? (747)*
(10) *Shabubu* *Yep. What you been up to anyway?? (789)*
(11) *anthony:* *i'm gonna learn to fly … (73)*
(12) *roxy:*   *cya later (618)*

Of all the linguistic markers present in the messages, frame evoking concepts abound. These concepts are; "having fun", and "partying": "drinking" (example (16) applies also to partying, by use of the words "clubbing" and "DJing"), as well as "late nights and mornings":

(13) *angel:*   *having fun hey good girl lifes to short hey :) (43)*
(14) *angel:*   *have lots of fun before you settle with the right one (44)*
(15) *angel:*   *movies dinner bbqs with friends partys and lots more (50)*
(16) *everything:* *i love music. Computers, clubbing, drinking, djing a bit of everything really. i love films (459)*
(17) *Dale:*   *the occasional 1*
Dale: *or 3 (314−315)*
(18) *Daniel:*   *…have a beer for me (367)*
(19) *Daniel:*   *just got home a while ago*
(20) *Daniel:*   *out having a few drinks with friends (350−351)*
(21) *Daniel:*   *got to get up early in the morning … (361)*

It should be noted, that the exchange in example (17) took place at 3.30 a.m. of "Daniel's" time. Also example (20) makes direct reference to "drinks". In example (21) there is no direct reference to getting up late, yet such a remark implies that it is not usual for "Daniel" to get up early.

In the two examples, once again, no direct reference is made to youth, or students, or any of the features connected with the two and stated above. What's more, on the surface the two informants seem to be saying something quite contrary to "I'm young".

(22) *cribbage:* *nice age wish i was that young again i could do all the same things and more lol (265)*
(23) *vicky:*   *me im 35*
                        don't hold that against me :-) (923)

Yet, these are just appearances, for when "Cribbage" claims he has not learnt anything, hence the nostalgic wish to do "all the same things and more", and "Vicky" implies jokingly that being thirty-five is old (having learnt that her interlocutor is twenty-three), they are in fact claiming the right to be young by means of an implicature: inability to learn from ones mistakes is associated with youth, and only very young people think that people over thirty cannot be trusted.

3.2. Frame 2: The Adult

There are contexts where being young can also be associated with being irresponsible or even lazy. After all, a typical student does not work, but studies, while a stereotypical student does not study much, but parties instead. Perhaps this is why many informants appealed to Frame 2: The Adult, in order to avoid those negative associations of the otherwise positive Frame 1. Once again, the label "The Adult" is just a term used to encompass a number of sub-frames that share the purpose of elevating one's position in the exchange, or claiming the position of authority. Hence, Frame 2 could be divided into two major sub-frames. In a way, they are built in opposition to Frame 2: The Youth.

While the negative connotation of The Youth frame could be that of laziness and irresponsibility, The Adult of Frame 2 is responsible and busy, e.g.:

> (24) *if: thats the job love got to finish before I go home I usually average abt 50–60 hrs a week (526).*

On the other hand, the positive value of ageing, and the only one able to compensate for the negative connotation of it, is experience, and qualities that, if only theoretically, follow from it, such as knowledge, tendency to be realistic or concerned; c.f. examples (25), (27) and (26) respectively, where "anyway" suggests that despite his young age the subject realizes that life plans may not always be executed.

> (25) *Iceman: You should enjoy life while your young, don't worry about money. We can't take it with us when we're gone (485)*
> (26) *anthony: that's the plan anyway (75)*
> (27) *Sam   there aren't many jobs here at the moment (657)*

Frame 2 is evoked by means of lexical choices – frame evoking words such as "work", "busy" and phrases expressing obligation: "have to", contraction "gotta" – as well as syntactic choices, such as past and present perfect tenses, "used to", declaratives, imperatives and "should" constructions and a lecturing style.

Among the words evoking The Adult frame via reference to work are those making direct reference, such as "work", "job", etc.:

> (28) *cribbage: not fun hard work at times but i enjoy the pressure of the pace (219)*
> (29) *Dale::   yes, I work for an air ambulance company so it is part of the job (290)*
> (30) *Daniel: looking for work at the moment (372)*

Other vocabulary items evoking Frame 2 are those evoking connotations with work, such as "busy", "business associates", etc.:

(31) *everything: …I went to the cinema and then to the pub for a meeting with my business associates. we have a radio station going on air on monday (441)*
(32) *roxy: busy with study and family that's bout is but takes up my time (623)*
(33) *roxy: yea but its time comsuming (625)*

In example (33) the "busy" sub-frame is evoked by the reference to lack of time.

Another feature of The Adult is responsibility and the fact of having responsibilities. The cue leading to this interpretation are modal verbs and phrases expressing obligation, such as "have to", "must" or "got to":

(34) *cribbage: I got to go now its time to do some work around the house (267)*
(35) *Dale: anyway I must go. Have a 5:30 start tomorrow. … (337)*
(36) *if: thats the job love got to finish before I go home I usually average abt 50–60 hrs a week (526)*
(37) *Shabubu   Lol, I only have 5 months and then finals, I have to pass so I can pay off debts :((773)*

The above examples are interesting in that they not only evoke the responsibility frame by explicit use of a verb of obligation, but also by the implicit reference to various responsibilities, such that adults have. The same can be said about example (38):

(38) *Susi: well a part time cleaner :(but if it pays some bills i don't care (820).*

Here the presupposition is that there are bills to be paid, and that it is "Susi's" responsibility to pay them.

The sub-frame of experience seems to be a powerful one. Subjects appeal to it by making reference to the fact that they experienced something, such as living in a different country, or continent (39), alternatively that they have experience of something, such as teaching or working with computers:

(39) *cribbage: I lived there before I moved to Australia (241)*
(40) *Sam   i have been working computers for years (652)*
(41) *Sam   I used to teach friends how to use computers*
     Sam   got a bit tired of it (662–663)

The use of present perfect and past tense is a logical consequence of the message referring to experience.

The second syntactic cue evoking the frame of experience is the subjects' use of declaratives. As subjects seem to be "talking from experience", the presupposition here is that they are experienced, which puts them in a position of authority, which in turn entitles them to pass judgement:

(42) if: *oh well that's life love (559)*
(43) *roxy: well they certainly bring love into ur life that's for sure (588)*
(44) *vicki   nah you def ned friends (977)*
(45) *cribbage: its best when you know someone to take you to places (255)*

These judgements are reinforced also by the use of lexis, such as "certainly" and "for sure", "def" for definitely, and the superlative in examples (43), (44), and (45) respectively. Furthermore, example (45) is in fact implicit advice, another marker of experience frame. The examples (46)–(48) are explicit advice:

(46) *Iceman: You should enjoy life while your young, don't worry about money.*
          We can't take it with us when we're gone (485)
(47) *angel: have lots of fun before you settle with the right one (44)*
(48) *roxy: well that's good take it while you can (608)*

where only the first clause in example (46) uses the modal verb "should", customary in advice, while the second clause is indicative. Examples (47) and (48) on the other hand are unredressed imperatives. The presupposition here is that the person who gives the advice is in a position to do so, implicitly by virtue of his and her experience.

The most powerful realization of presupposed authority is assuming the role of the expert. It may be done by means of giving advice, as in the examples above, or by lecturing as in examples (49) and (50), where the first line of each example is an answer to a specific question, but the second respective line presupposes the teacher-student relationship between the participants of the exchange.

(49) *if: it means the opposite of helping*
     if: as in making things difficult for you (543–544)
(50) *Daniel: its a back injury*
     Daniel: its from being thrown forward and then back real fast (383–384)

4.3. Frame clashes

As becomes apparent from the above discussion, the two contradicting frames – The Young and The Adult – are very productive throughout the corpus. That this frequent use is a self-presentation strategy rather than a lack of consistency on the part of IM users is evidenced by the cases where the subjects make reference to the two frames within a single message, as in example (51) where the imperative points to authority, a part of The Adult frame, while the reference to "fun" appeals to the Young frame:

(51) angel: have lots of fun before you settle with the right one (46)

Another example of the clash of the two frames is (52) where the reference to "high school" points to The Young frame, and the reference to work points to The Adult frame:

(52) *anthony: i go to high school, i'm in my last year and i
hate every moment og it! i work selling boats,
and i like rock climbing and rock music, ska
music and punk music mostly. what about u? (72)*

The purpose of such discrepancy, or lack of consistency, appears to be to resist the negative associations that each frame may evoke. E.g., as it has already been mentioned, The Young, despite its undeniable positive connotations, can also evoke negative ones, such as carelessness, etc. On the other hand, The Adult frame can potentially evoke unfavourable associations as well; "responsible" can be reinterpreted as "boring", "experienced" as "old", and so on.

4. Conclusions

Consistent with impression management research, the term *impression management* is often applied to "self-conscious deception of others". However, according to Jones and Pittman (1982), and Schlenker (1980) it may result from socialisation which leads to acts being performed without much reflection on why they are performed. Also, it may be possible that people truly believe in the identities they claim (Baumeister 1982). In the case of the present analysis it is impossible to opt for any of the interpretations, as in order to know whether informants are trying to deceive or actually believe in the images they wish to impose on their interactants, one would need to be able to compare with the actual real-world state of affairs. This is of course impossible. The main advantage of the internet, it being a means of communication operating over large distances, proves here to be its disadvantage.

Another emblematic feature of the communication via internet is the lack of extralinguistic information. There is no intonation, tone of voice or body language to rely on. It gives a researcher an opportunity to analyse language in isolation. Similarly, as far as self-presentation is concerned, informants had to rely solely on what they were able to communicate via language only.

It is interesting how a large number of subjects appeal to a limited number of frames of self-presentation. This is not just a matter of the sample being reduced to fourteen subjects only. The reason why the subjects of the experiment described in the present paper appeal to the same set of frames of self-presentation might be the fact that they come from countries within the same cultural influences. The most popular frames, such as The Young, The Adult, or An Interesting Person reappeared throughout all message

sessions. All of the frames, those discussed in this paper as well as those not discussed here, are evoked using the same types of linguistic markers, the most basic, obvious and effective being lexical choice, as well as reference to frame evoking concepts.

Throughout the experiment subjects present themselves as open-minded, fascinating people of many interests and large experience, responsible but not boring, caring but tough and independent. Frames also sometimes clash, for example The Young frame and The Adult frame discussed in this paper are by definition at odds with each other, and yet they are invoked sometimes within a single utterance. It is argued here that this might serve the purpose of ruling out unfavourable connotations each frame could evoke when isolated.

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przedstawienia ram interpretacyjnych wzbudzanych przez interlokutorów w trakcie komunikacji natychmiastowej w internecie. Badanie przeprowadzone jest na próbce 14 rozmów (łącznie ponad 1000 przesłanych wiadomości) 'jeden na jeden' między osobami, które się wcześniej nie znały i nigdy nie miały ze sobą kontaktu innego niż online. Aby wyjaśnić, dlaczego użytkownicy internetu nie tylko chcą komunikować się z obcymi osobami, ale także pragną zrobić na nich pozytywne wrażenie, w artykule zawarto przegląd badań nad 'zarządzaniem wizerunkiem' w codziennej komunikacji. Narzędzia analizy dyskursu zostały zastosowane, aby ujawnić mechanizmy kognitywne odpowiedzialne za tworzenie wizerunku interlokutorów. Na przykładzie dwóch ram interpretacyjnych – Młody oraz Dorosły – zaprezentowane zostały środki językowe używane do niejako 'wywoływania' danych ram, co ciekawe czasem także obu przeciwstawnych ram w jednej wiadomości. Wydaje się, że przeciwstawne ramy wywoływane są naprzemiennie lub nawet razem po to, aby zniwelować potencjalne negatywne wartości lub skojarzenia, które dana rama może za sobą pociągać.