

Applying Goffman's assumptions about communication to a new media environment

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1. Applying Goffman's Assumptions about Communication to a New Media Environment

In this paper we present research that is oriented toward both the past and future of symbolic interactionism (SI). There are many ideas about SI's future and what it could become. One such idea involves "beginning with symbolic interaction conceptual sensibilities; taking these symbolic interactionist sensibilities into new empirical areas...; [and] remaining open to new theoretical possibilities, as they emerge during analysis of empirical data" (Charmaz, 2008:52). Taking what has been proffered in previous scholarship, this paper builds beyond Charmaz's idea, specifically seeking to broaden SI's ability to deal *methodologically* with analytical descriptions of textually-rich new media environments.

Such environments are the most significant new empirical area to have emerged thus far in the 21st century. Scholars have increasingly conceptualized the internet, virtual worlds, mobile technologies, and other forms of digital interaction as an inextricable dimension of everyday life, emphasizing their mundane and political dimensions as well as the multiplicity of meanings that their users produce (Williams and Waskul, 2007). One particular thread of internet-based research that has emerged focuses on the use of digital communication technologies by diasporic groups, including populations dispersed either by force or choice (e.g., Adams and Ghose, 2003; Kaldor-Robinson, 2002; Mitra, 2000; Tynes, 2007). What these studies have in common is an interest in the interface between technological and

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social processes, and, more specifically, how social actors use technological artifacts to construct notions of culture, identity, and community. As a banal cultural artifact, the internet mediates the construction of identities through an infinite number of overlapping social spaces that are often contradictory in form and content. On the one hand, “a new set of possibilities for community and nation have emerged...because the technology has now provided the ability to communicate across the boundaries and limitations that the traditional community imposed” (Mitra, 2000:677-8). On the other hand, “space[s are] almost always organized like ethnic neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas where outsiders often are unwelcome and feel uncomfortable” (Mitra, 2000:680). Fernback (1997) similarly describes the internet in contradictory terms, as ‘sacred and profane, workspace and leisure space, battleground and nirvana, real and virtual.’ Moreover, it is “a repository for collective cultural memory...[and] an arena of power...a reconceived public sphere for social, political, economic, and cultural interaction” (p. 37).

This paper is part of a larger set of studies about ethno-national identity and interaction with textual media (see also Weninger and Williams, 2005; 2011). Taking up Charmaz’s call to bring together SI’s theoretical past with emerging empirical realities, here we take up four assumptions tendered by Erving Goffman in *Strategic Interaction* (1970), and apply them to non-face-to-face, asynchronous computer-mediated data. In this way we not only provide an example of Charmaz’s vision of the future, but explicitly add, in line with her implicit position, consideration of new *methodological* possibilities that may result in different interpretations of empirical data. This is accomplished through our use of corpus linguistic analysis, an emerging field within linguistics (Meyer, 2002), as a method for illuminating common patterns in textual data.

2. Background, Site, and Method

Our data come from an internet forum dedicated to discussions of the past, present, and future of Transylvania, a geo-cultural region in modern-day Romania with a history of ethnic conflict. Controlled by the Kingdom of Hungary from the early 11th century, Transylvania has been populated by ethnic Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians for centuries. After 900 years of Hungarian control, it was ceded to Romania in the Treaty of Trianon following World War I, leading to the emergence of irredentist movements both in Hungary and Transylvania. The early twentieth century was marked

by the Romanization of the region, including the (re)establishment of Romanian place-names, the expungence of the Hungarian language from public institutions, and the (re)distribution of land to Romanian peasants. During World War II, the ethno-national identity of Transylvania was again juggled via the intervention of Germany and Italy in 1940, and then Russia in 1945, with Romania ultimately regaining political control. With the collapse of socialism in the region in 1989, Hungarian minorities again sought reunification with Hungary, and the 1990s were marked by a resurgence of irredentism. Ethnic tensions have repeatedly played themselves out in the spheres of politics, education, labor, and scholarly and popular literature throughout the region's history.

As internet access spread across central Europe in the late 1990s, ideological polemics about the "rightful" heirs of Transylvania moved online, as with other ethnically-contested regions in Europe (Linstroth, 2002; Paasi, 2003; Tynes, 2007). Around 2000, the forum from which our data come was created by a self-identifying Romanian nationalist with the expressed purpose of providing a space for dialogue on Transylvania. Because of various linguistic competencies among participants in the forum, as well as the often explicit animosity among participants regarding other cultures and languages, much of the forum activity was in English, though Hungarian, Romanian, and even German were occasionally used. The forum was most active between March 2001 and September 2003, and we retrieved all posts (N=1,091) from that time period, and merged them into a single-text file for subsequent analysis. We had in mind at the outset that internet forums could be used in multiple ways, including as a *tool* for communicating, as a *place* for coming together, and as a *way of* being in the world (Markham, 2004). But because we weren't sure how this specific forum was being used, we imported all posts containing English (over 220,000 words) into WordSmith 5, a concordance program used by corpus linguists.

Corpus linguists use technological tools to analyze relatively large amounts of natural language data to uncover "'association patterns': the systematic ways in which linguistic features are used in association with other linguistic and non-linguistic features" (Biber et al., 1998). A fundamental assumption underlying these investigations is that when people use language, they select from a large repository of possibilities (such as the English language) based upon their situational needs. Discourse analysts often study these choices by close examination of social interaction. Another way of studying linguistic choices is by describing frequent patterns in a corpus of texts and comparing them to patterns found

in reference corpora; typically, multi-million-word collections of general language use. Some scholars use corpus analysis as an empirically-sound means to study language variation (Aston and Burnard, 1998; Kretzschmar and Barry, 2005); others as an alternative measure of literary style (Kretzschmar, 2001). Corpus linguistic methods are also used by discourse analysts, since frequent patterns can reveal much about the social nature of the corpus of texts, including topical focus, tone, and even attitudes displayed. Corpus linguistics rejects mentalist or psychological views of language, placing emphasis firmly within the observable social realm, and concerning itself with the contextual study of meaning³ (Stubbs, 1996), and thus provides an intriguing methodological possibility for the sociological study of social interaction.

3. Patterned and Strategic Interaction

The symbolic construction of meaning, whether it refers to a person's identity, an artifact dug up from the ground, or a geo-cultural region, is predicated on situated interaction. In situations, how individuals communicate information with one another is simultaneously patterned and strategic. In *Strategic Interaction*, Goffman (1970) argued that the study of situated interaction is grounded in four assumptions⁴:

1. Human beings communicate information in standard ways.
2. A corpus of communicated symbols has expressive aspects.
3. The information contained in expressions pertains to the relationship between the individual and the situation.
4. Individuals interact strategically, purposively acting toward the physical and social environment through various communicative means.

Goffman's first two assumptions regarding strategic interaction concern communication versus expression. In his earlier work, Goffman (1959) uncovered various methods through which individuals *give* (i.e., communicate) meaning on the one hand, and *give off* (i.e., express)

³ Contextual implies both the need to examine whole texts instead of individual sentences and the imperative to relate textual analysis to its social embeddedness to understand how language as routine behavior achieves cultural transmission (Firth, 1935).

⁴ We have re-ordered Goffman's assumptions so that they fit our data analysis more clearly.

meaning on the other. Communicating emphasizes the direct transmission of information among individuals or groups, while expression has to do with information that individuals give off, often indirectly. Expressions may or may not be intentional. For example, one's gender, tone of voice, and mannerisms all *give off* meaning, regardless of individuals' intent to communicate information.

Reading the forum, it became obvious that "Transylvania" was of strategic importance to participants; its meaning shaped a host of other meanings, including insider-outsider distinctions and the legitimacy of claims related to ethnicity, language, and nationality. It was also evident that participants communicated information about Transylvania in patterned ways. In the remainder of this paper, we apply Goffman's assumptions to asynchronous, digitally-mediated (but nonetheless naturally occurring) interaction, and, in doing so, demonstrate the strengths of corpus linguistic methods for identifying standards, styles, and strategic aspects of symbolic interaction.

Assumption 1

The first of Goffman's assumptions that we consider explicates the more or less standard means through which people communicate. Here Goffman refers "to a special type of instrumental activity, the use of language or language-like signs to *transmit* information" (1970:5). In the Transylvania forum, information was communicated almost exclusively through textual means. We can study the standardization of this textual communication in two ways.

Technology

All posts in the forum were structured in the same way, as the following example illustrates:

[1] 1-Visitor's Name: MAGYAR
2-Homepage URL: TRANSYLVANIA DISCUSSION
3-You are from: ERDÉLY
4-Comments: ERDÉLY MAGYAR!!
5-Sign Time: September 11 2003 at 10:42:22
6-IP Address: 194.117.133.84

There were six data fields present. Whenever a forum member posted, the software filled in fields 1, 5, and 6 based on information provided in the account profile. Field 4 was the message field and, therefore, had to have

information in order to post a message, while 2 and 3 were optional fields and were sometimes left blank. All fields *communicated* information to the reader. For example: 1 informed others as to who is posting; 3 informed others of the person’s home or homeland; 4 informed those with knowledge of Hungarian that “Transylvania is Hungarian!!”; 5 and 6 communicated information about the time and location of the message. Field 2 appears to communicate the obvious, but we found many examples of participants updating their user profiles in order to communicate different bits of information. This post serves as a relatively simple, straightforward example of the standardized technological structure of communicated information in the forum.

Keywords

Corpus analysis offers a way to analyze the patterned forms of communication. Although the possible types of analysis depend on what software is being used for what purpose, all corpus-based investigations make use of the notion of keywords, words that occur significantly more often (in the statistical sense) in a given corpus than in a reference corpus of general English. Keywords thus indicate the semantic focus, or what people are talking about, in a given corpus. Comparing the forum corpus with the British National Corpus (a 100-million word corpus of contemporary spoken and written English), we generated a list of the top 100 keywords, which we subsequently categorized.

Table 1: Top 15 keywords

<i>N</i>	<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>%</i>
1	Hungarian	1,119	0.68
2	Romanian	917	0.56
3	Transylvania	717	0.44
4	Hungarians	547	0.33
5	Hungary	676	0.41
6	Romanians	532	0.33
7	Romania	601	0.37
8	Transylvania	276	0.17
9	Magyar	190	0.12
10	Transylvanian	146	0.09
11	Vlachs	111	0.07
12	Erdély	108	0.07
13	Ardeal	89	0.05
14	Magyars	88	0.05
15	Kolozsvár	75	0.05

Table 1 shows the top 15 keywords and the significance of geo-political locales and ethnic labels in forum posts, while Table 2 exemplifies three additional categories of interest that emerged through inductive analysis of the keywords.

Table 2: Analytic categories of keywords with examples

<i>Initial categories</i>	<i>Sample keywords</i>
Geo-political locales	Hungary, Romania, Transylvania, Erdély
Ethnic labels	Vlach, Dacian, Magyar, Slavic
Names of historical figures	Corvinus, Menumorut, Anonymus, Vajk
Cultural terms	history, language, belongs, ancestors
Expletives	stupid, fuck, ass

These five categories illustrate both the patterns of communication and the strategic choices in language use assumed by Goffman. Further analysis showed how interaction occurred primarily through a geo-historical semantic frame—participants made reference to geo-political locales and invoked historical figures, used ethnic labels and cultural terms, as well as expletives significantly more often than what is typical in English.

The keyword list points to the significance of specific words as representative of the overall semantic orientation of forum posts. Keywords, as exemplars of communicative content, are produced by participants who have likely imagined the consequences of a particular text for others involved, their likely responses, and how those responses might bear on the participant’s desired outcomes (Mead, 1934). Thus, keywords represent participants’ choices, and are exemplars of strategic interaction as well. Yet keywords are insufficient to fully understand meaning in context. We must examine how keywords repeatedly co-occur with other words. Such an analysis provides better understanding of the patterns of meaning that emerge over the corpus—not just communicated, but expressed meaning as well.

Assumption 2

Another of Goffman’s assumptions is that “discursive statements seem inevitably to manifest a style of some kind, and can never apparently be entirely free of...contextualized meanings” (1970:9; see also Sacks and Garfinkel, 1970). We emphasize “style” as referring to how the form of the posts themselves, the way participants choose to communicate semantic content, expresses information. Following from the previous assumption that communication is typically standardized, here we show how the corpus

exhibited stylistic qualities and how they related to contextualized meaning. We do this by focusing on individual posts and across the entire corpus.

Participants strategically chose the content of their posts; the resulting text had styles (analytically separate from the content) that generated their own symbolic value. In other words, how forum participants chose to communicate semantic content *expressed* information. Qualitative analysis revealed that individual posts ranged from monologic to dialogic, from respectable to vulgar, from substantive to rhetorical, and from pedantic to populist. The following two posts represent some of these styles.

[2] Visitor's Name: Hungaria man

Homepage URL:

You are from:

Comments: fuck you! Transylvania belongs to Hungary not to Romania your fucking Romanian gipsy.

Sign Time: March 07 2001 at 07:47:30

Ip Address: 194.237.76.4

[3] Visitor's Name: MAGYAR ATTILA

Homepage URL: Csíkszeredai Sportklub – Bukaresti Dinamo 10–0

You are from: KOLOZSVÁR

Comments: Csíkszeredai Sportklub – Bukaresti Dinamo 10–0 (5–0, 3–0, 2–0). [...]

Sign Time: February 10 2003 at 13:13:10

Ip Address: 194.117.133.84

There were clear differences in the content and style of posts [2] and [3]. For example, [2] used ethnic and sexual expletives to frame cross-cultural interaction. [3] was also framed via inter-ethnic comparisons, but through posting football match scores instead of vulgarities. Yet the contextualized, expressive meanings were quite similar: both posts expressed the superiority of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania, by equating Romanians with Gypsies (an ethnic group derogated by both groups) and by pointing to the match score differences. Goffman further clarifies our point that “even a written text examined in terms of the semantic meaning of the sentences can be examined for expression that derives from the way a given meaning is styled and patterned...” (1970:9).

This need not occur only at the level of close qualitative analysis. Taking a more quantitative approach, we found patterns of expressive meaning across the corpus using the concord function of Wordsmith 5,

which displays all the occurrences of a target word in context, and presents them in individual concordance lines. It also tells us which other words occur frequently in the vicinity of the search word (i.e., its collocates). Table 3 reports a sample of contextualized meanings associated with the word “Transylvania,” which was among the top keywords of the forum corpus⁵.

Table 3: “Transylvania” and its collocates

<i>Word</i>	<i>L5</i>	<i>L4</i>	<i>L3</i>	<i>L2</i>	<i>L1</i>	<i>Center</i>	<i>R1</i>	<i>R2</i>	<i>R3</i>	<i>R4</i>	<i>R5</i>
Transylvania	0	0	1	0	2	717	2	0	1	0	0
and	15	11	16	12	6	0	37	5	10	27	16
Hungarian	5	13	28	7	1	0	5	21	8	2	5
is	9	5	6	3	0	0	51	3	2	3	7
Romania	1	2	3	3	0	0	0	4	31	18	8
belongs	0	0	0	1	0	0	57	8	0	0	0
was	5	5	4	0	0	0	34	3	7	3	3
are	10	16	8	6	0	0	3	10	0	3	5
Hungary	3	5	2	3	0	0	0	3	28	12	4
Romania	2	2	19	1	0	0	0	5	10	8	2

The words *Hungarian*, *belongs*, *Romania*, and *Hungary* appear frequently within five words to the left and right of *Transylvania*. Moreover, there are particular clusters of words that appear frequently enough for Wordsmith 5 to identify (see Table 4). These clusters have no inherent meaning, yet the grammatical structures suggest the enactment of social identities grounded (literally) in claims to geo-political space.

Table 4: Frequent clusters surrounding “Transylvania”

<i>N</i>	<i>Cluster</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>Length</i>
1	TRANSYLVANIA BELONGS TO	59	3
2	BELONGS TO ROMANIA	26	3
5	BELONGS TO HUNGARY	20	3
8	TRANSYLVANIA IS HUNGARIAN	13	3
9	HUNGARIANS IN TRANSYLVANIA	12	3

⁵ The table shows the number of occurrences of the word “Transylvania” ($N=717$) along with words that most frequently appear within a span of five words to its left and right.

These clusters' statistical presence provides us with clues as to where to aim qualitative analytic tools that can better contextualize their meanings, both within individual posts and the larger dialogic chains to which they belong.

Assumption 3

A third assumption Goffman makes regarding interaction is that the information contained in individuals' expressions pertains to the relationship between the individual and the situation. Here again we distinguish between the content of an expression and its stylistic properties, just as Geertz (1973:6) did when discussing "boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes" and whether those were "twitches" or "winks." Their meaning, i.e., the information contained in their expression, is to be found within a larger definition of the situation. Individuals' orientations to the online forum, including the types, contents, and styles of posts, simultaneously shaped and were shaped by language use. Their orientations were also visible through various modalities of expression. We uncovered several expressive methods that linked participants to a larger definition of the situation. The most common methods were username choice, capitalization, expletives, and repetition. Usernames often invoked specific identities, including ethno-nationalist (e.g., "Magyar" or "Dacian Warrior") and those signifying historical figures, such as "Burebista," used by Ceausescu to signify the 2000-year old continuous Romanian state, and "Csaba Királyfi" (Prince Csaba), alleged son of Attila the Hun, and forefather of the Transylvanian Szeklers)⁶. A second method was capitalization. As most internet users are aware, capitalizing often symbolizes heightened emotional expression. Post [5] demonstrates the use of capitalization, along with expletives, language choice, and repetition, to communicate an aggressive orientation toward the situation.

[5] Visitor's Name: TB UKD

Homepage URL:

You are from: HUNGARY HUNGARY HUNGARY

Comments: ÍGY VOLT,ÍGY LESZ! FUCK YOU romnia! LESZ MÉG
bUKAREST MAGYAR FALU!!!

Sign Time: March 09 2001 at 16:35:55

Ip Address: 195.8.39.226

⁶ For more on how usernames orient individuals to situations, see Williams (2003).

All of TB UKD's posts were in Hungarian, suggesting a lack of English proficiency. Yet s/he chose English in this post, as well as capitalization, to highlight his expletives, which were aimed at Romanian participants. Note the use of small font in the word *romnia* [sic] as well as the first letter of *bUKAREST*, both of which are proper names and should be spelled with capital letters⁷. Violating capitalization rules in patterned ways (i.e., capitalizing everything except the Romanian proper names) suggests the expressive and strategic nature of interaction. We found other instances of switching between languages and repetitive posting that further supported Goffman's claim that expressions are used strategically in interaction.

These methods pertain to expressed meaning rather than to communicated information. They do not transmit content in the semantic sense, but are, rather, manipulated technological and linguistic resources used by participants to express their orientation (attitude, emotions, evaluation) toward the immediate situation (the discussion forum) and the larger situation (Transylvania).

Assumption 4

Individuals rely on information, expressed and communicated, to define and, thus, to act toward situations. Information is used strategically as individuals purposively act toward the material and social environment through language use and other communicative means. This is the fourth of Goffman's assumption, as he put it: "self-conscious intentional efforts are made to acquire information from local events, with the purpose in mind of using this knowledge to deal with these events" (1970:10). To the extent that individuals were aware of their and others' definitions of the situation, they adapted their lines of action to build a consensual definition. Our data shows that participants interacted strategically, manipulating the technological and linguistic culture of the internet forum to define the situation according to their own purposes.

Looking at all the posts together provides rich analytical insight into how the technical dimension of language and the technological dimensions of the internet forums were strategically utilized by participants to structure interaction. The comments field allowed the largest amount of space for users to communicate information and to express aspects of self and other. Many comments consisted of theories allegedly rooted in historical facts as

⁷ The whole comment translates: "This is how it was, this is how it will be. Fuck you Romania. The time will come when Bucharest will be a Hungarian village."

to whether Transylvania belonged to Hungary or Romania. Other comments were fragments of insults directed toward a particular person in the forum or an entire ethnic group. Embedded among and between collective memories and name-calling we found what was at stake: people's beliefs and desires for the future of Transylvania as a geo-political place. Some users expressed this through the stories they told and "facts" they held as true. Though a participant might not outwardly claim a national identity, one was often revealed through expressed and/or communicated meanings.

By analyzing individual's posts in the forum, we were able to see more than individuals' relationships to nationalism, self, and the internet. Certainly the discussions about the region of Transylvania allowed people to make claims about selfhood as seen through usernames, where they claimed to be from, and the semantic content of their posts. Further, those who claimed to be Hungarian, Romanian, or just Transylvanian could be seen to "exude expressions" (Goffman, 1970:7) through their computer use. Their behaviors are thus not so far removed from those of the many different types of people Goffman studied in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, where he noted that "when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity, so that it will convey an impression to others, which it is in his interests to convey.... Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner" (1959:4).

4. Conclusion

Many scholars have used Goffman's best-known terms — front and backstage, face, frames, and so on — as sensitizing concepts in their own work. In this paper we have explicitly dealt with the assumptions that underlie one of Goffman's less cited works on strategic interaction, and applied them to a relatively underprivileged area of sociological research: asynchronous computer-mediated interaction. Additionally, we have introduced corpus linguistic methods as a viable, quantitative tool to complement the more traditional qualitative methods used in SI. Corpus linguistic studies make clear the utility of large corpora for highlighting the patterned ways in which people use language to communicate and express meaning. Meaning is seen as emergent from everyday language use rather than being inherent or subjectively derived. This approach thus fits well

with interactionist concerns regarding the significance of the social vis-à-vis the mental when studying human action.

In his analysis of strategic interaction, Goffman appealed to what he called “extraordinary situations” (1970:3), which give the social scientist clearer insight into the largely taken-for-granted assumptions that orient individuals to situations. Through the combination of symbolic interactionist and corpus linguistic methods we have demonstrated that, at least in textually-rich environments, extraordinary situations are not needed to provide such clarity. Rather, we simply need to use appropriate tools for capturing and analyzing the means through which individuals orient to the situations around them. While our application of Goffman’s assumptions was necessarily brief, we hope that our analysis will provide some impetus for further consideration of corpus linguistic methods for SI. This is key, in our view, for increasing SI’s theoretical and methodological purchase in the social sciences.

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