I'M BY DEFAULT POLITE – POLITENESS AND POSITIONING IN MMORPGS

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Abstract

MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) like World of Warcraft® require gamers to communicate in English regardless of their language competence in it. Therefore, English becomes the lingua franca of many gamers. Furthermore, gamers have to communicate efficiently with one another in high stress situations causing another linguistic challenge. These conditions do not lead to the assumption that politeness is of any relevance in MMORPGs but rather that these games are hostile and impolite environments. A survey investigating the language usage of gamers, including a questionnaire and a self-compiled corpus, sheds light on the language usage and politeness of gamers. This survey asks how and why gamers coming from different language backgrounds using ELF in MMORPGs utilize politeness to position themselves.

Keywords

politeness, politeness theory, gaming, ELF, MMORPG

1 Introduction

(1) *eh i gess you wiped us^^ can you pls do it better next time ? :p [sic]*

Such a sentence is a usual way of communicating for a gamer especially of MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) like World of Warcraft®, Star Wars the Old Republic® or Lord of the Rings Online®. It only becomes apparent when talking to a non-gamer how special the language of gamers has become. The given example is just a remark to another gamer, who caused the death of all party members (wipe), asking if he or she could please (pls) do it better next time. The negative emotions of this request are mitigated by the use of positive smileys like the smiley sticking out the tongue and the Asian inspired Anime-smiley or Kaomoji (^^). While the used language might appear awkward for non-gamers, there is another aspect which is often disregarded when speaking of MMORPG gamers. A large proportion of gamers communicate in English while gaming, yet most of them are not native speakers of English. MMORPGs require gamers to communicate in English regardless of their language competence in it, since gaming servers are not offered in every language. Therefore, English becomes the Lingua Franca of many gamers.

Besides communicating in another language than one's mother tongue, there are more challenges for gamers to overcome, for example high stress situations during gaming and the cliché of an offensive surrounding. These conditions do not lead to the assumption that politeness is of any relevance in MMORPGs but rather that these games are hostile and impolite environments.

This paper, being part of a PhD thesis project, provides a qualitative analysis of the language usage of gamers in MMORPGs and focuses on the use of politeness strategies by them. It concentrates only on some aspects of the survey. There are several questions which arise when researching such a field like if there is politeness in these games and how it is expressed. Does ingame communication follow principles of other types of communication? Which factors are of importance to the gamers while communicating with one another? How do they position themselves and which strategies do they use to do so? Which role does ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) play while gaming?

Several scholars and researchers have already dealt with CMC (computer-mediated communication) like Crystal (2006), Baron (2000) and Herring (1996). However, only little research has been done in the field of language usage in MMORPGs. Yet, if one is to advance from a descriptive linguistic approach that focuses only on the form language takes to how it functions in MMORPGs in particular with regard to politeness, one is confronted with almost no research done in this field. Topics like English as a lingua franca and politeness in MMORPGs have not been considered so far. Although the concepts of politeness theory were not formulated to take online communication into account they can still be applied as frameworks to all linguistic situations. The works of Brown and Levinson (2009) and Goffman (1967) on facework offer useful tools for dealing with politeness and its linguistic expression.

Yet, it is not enough to only review previous works when attempting to explore the topics of ELF and politeness in MMORPGs. Therefore, a self-compiled language corpus using data from chat-channels and official message-boards of games like World of Warcraft®, Lord of the Rings Online® and others was used to provide illustrative examples of language usage. It has to be mentioned that I limit myself to text-based communication in my study. Despite the popular use of VoIP (Voice over IP) chats meaning communicating using headsets, I argue that written communication is still prevalent when it comes to casual gaming, playing in random groups and contacting strangers. Since corpus data does not allow us to draw conclusions about speakers' attitudes concerning language features quantitative data from a questionnaire was used as well. Both data sources are discussed in the next section. Afterwards, the communication setting including a brief demographic description of the gamers is outlined and the results of

studying the data sources, particularly the questionnaire, concerning the use of politeness strategies are given.

2 The data sources

This survey deals with data taken from MMORPGs. MMORPGs are Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing games like World of Warcraft® or Lord of the Rings Online®. As the acronym implies these games are role-playing games in which a large amount of gamers simultaneously play online with each other. The gamers do not only play together but also communicate with one another using channels of communication available in MMORPGs like chat-channels, comparable to chat-rooms, ingame or official message-boards provided by the game developers.

One of the two main data sources of this study is a self-compiled corpus of communication in MMORPGs as well as outside of the games. The ingame communication data consists of chat-log-files. All in all, 1,776 hours of communication were recorded in the games, primarily in World of Warcraft® and Lord of the Rings Online®. Furthermore, the corpus consists of communication from official game message-boards and the official game websites. Summing up, the data collected from outside the game equates 300,000 characters. While the ingame chat-logs belong to the category of synchronous communication, the collected data from message-boards represents asynchronous forms of communication.

The second source used is an online questionnaire which was online from 1st June 2009 to 30th June 2009. A total of 324 gamers participated in the questionnaire consisting of three question sets with a total of 50 questions. The question sets are concerned with the gamer profile, gaming behavior and language behavior. While the first question set gives insights into the linguistic demographics of the gamers, the third part inquires into the language usage of the gamers including the use of politeness strategies.

Before the results of the questionnaire are given and discussed, it has to be mentioned that I am aware of the shortcomings and problems a questionnaire holds. The data collected with the questionnaire is open to variable interpretation and certainly has to be treated with caution. Doubtlessly, the results do not represent the full linguistic reality of MMORPGs. However, the results do provide markers and indications of certain tendencies and trends.

Given this, a summary of some of the most interesting findings will be given since parts of the first and second question set of the questionnaire do not provide data of interest for this paper. A widespread belief of the general public about gamers is that they are male, lacking social ties and easily succumb to the charm

of a game. However, the questionnaire shows that this is far from reality. While the result of the question concerning the gender of the gamers could be regarded as a confirmation that gaming is still a male domain, it also demonstrates a change in this domain. Eighty-eight per cent of the participants are male and twelve per cent are female gamers. These twelve per cent of female gamers do not only illustrate that there are female gamers but also raises hope that the cliché of the male gaming domain is smoothed out.

The common assumption of the public that gamers are loony, unemployed and addicted is not confirmed by this questionnaire. This gamer stereotype does not exist in the study since the results show that the participants come from a wide range of professional backgrounds and have social ties being family fathers or mothers, husbands or wives and play together not only with friends, siblings but also with their romantic partners. Similarly, the general perception of the addicted gamer seems inaccurate either. The results show that 26 per cent of the participants play less than 15 hours a week, 21 per cent play 20 to 24 hours a week and 14 per cent play 30 to 39 hours per week. This seems comparable to any other hobby including sports, reading or playing a musical instrument.

Interestingly, some participants underline the social aspect of gaming and mention that they come online in order to meet their friends and chat with them instead of gaming actively. This illustrates that playing MMORPGs does not mean the same to every gamer but can take on different shapes. Some gamers socialize ingame while others enjoy role-playing or completing quests and tasks in the game.

The results concerning the linguistic demography of the gamers will be discussed in Section 4. The third part of the questionnaire deals with the language behavior of the gamers, especially their use of stylistic features in certain situations and their attitudes towards politeness. In this part of the questionnaire the participants rate their usage of stylistic features in certain situations. In addition to rating situations and statements, open questions allow the gamers to give more insights into their language behavior and their attitudes towards features and strategies. The following sections (3, 5 and 6) present results of these questions and selected examples of language usage from the corpus.

3 Factors of MMORPG communication

Recalling the example of the introduction, non-gamers are faced with numerous peculiarities when hearing or seeing communication between gamers. Apart from incorrect spelling and strange acronyms, gamers invent new words and use unconventional keyboard character combinations. Gee (2003: 17)

refers to these features using the umbrella term semiotic which is “[...] just a fancy way of saying we want to talk about all sorts of different things that can take on meaning [...]”. For Gee computer games in general, therefore also MMORPGs, and many other fields are semiotic domains in which signs and any set of practice take on a certain meaning in a certain situation. In order to be able to understand the signs and what they convey, you need to learn to read them. Hence, the language usage in MMORPGs is of no pragmatic significance for non-gamers and therefore not understood. There are several factors which make communication in MMORPGs different to communication in other settings and therefore give rise to other language features and usages. Knowing these factors helps understanding language, as in the previously given example.

A crucial factor influencing the language usage in MMORPGs and in computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general is the absence of paralinguistic cues. In normal face-to-face conversations facial expressions, gestures and the sound of the voice help interlocutors to interpret the utterances of the other speaker. Yet, in MMORPGs all but one channel of communication are written forms of communication, hence these cues helping to interpret meanings are missing. In order to compensate for these missing paralinguistic cues, smileys are used by many gamers. Furthermore, smileys can save time because they allow for expressing attitudes and opinions easier and better than explaining them using words. At the same time they can also help avoiding misunderstandings. However, even conventional smileys can also cause misunderstandings as even a smiling smiley can convey sympathy, joy, happiness, amusement or general good mood. The context is of great importance in order to decode the meaning of a smiley (cf. Kramer 2008: 60). Runkehl et al. (1998: 98) also note the mitigating and emphasizing effect smileys can have in CMC. This could be seen in the previously given example in which the gamer uses a smiley to attenuate negative emotions of the message.

Another factor which influences communication in MMORPGs is the gamer's high stress factor. When gaming, especially when the gamers are in a fight they are under pressure and under a high amount of stress. These situations do not allow long-winded explanations or forms of communication. In order to speed up conversations and to communicate efficiently gamers use acronyms and neologisms which stand for certain terms and tactics ingame, as can be seen in the following example:

- (2) *Dont initial aggro! **DoT** him to death! [sic]*

A gamer gives tactics to his or her fellows saying that the other gamers, especially the gamers playing a class with little armor on, should not get the attention of the enemy first (initial aggro) but instead use damage over time spells (DoT) to kill the enemy. The acronym DoT is lexicalized by the gamers and is treated as a single word itself. It is not unusual to see certain acronyms transformed into words by adding tense markers to them (cf. Kramer 2010: 140).

While it is clear that the usage of acronyms is useful during an ingame fight where it is a matter of life or death, gamers also use acronyms while not being involved in a battle, for example when searching for other gamers to play with, as in the example below:

(3) *LFG heal and DD for ICC 10*

Here, a gamer is looking for a group (LFG) in particular for a healer (heal) and a damage dealer class (DD) for the ten person dungeon Icecrown citadel (ICC10) in World of Warcraft®. This is definitely an elaborate and long-winded sentence compared to the acronymic version of the utterance. The acronymic way of looking for a group is the common and preferred way of searching for other gamers, as the participants of my questionnaire state. Even though efficiency is not necessary when searching for a group, it is still preferred by the gamers. Another reason why acronyms are favored by gamers in many communication situations, also when using message-boards which allow proof-reading and planning one's messages as they are not a synchronous form of communication, is the creation of an insider code (cf. Kramer 2010: 139-140).

It is not unusual for speech communities to create terms or new meanings for existing words not only to make communication easier and more efficient but also to be different from others. So, it immediately becomes apparent if someone answering to the request given in Example 3 by asking what *DD* means that the person is not an insider, not a pro (professional gamer) but a noob (a newcomer to the game). Revealed as noob, the gamer will definitely not be taken into a dungeon like Icecrown citadel as it is a difficult undertaking. As Consalvo (2009: 308) points out, the use of neologisms and acronyms in MMORPG communication is not only a means of efficient game-play and fast communication but also a marker of membership of the gamer community. Hence, in order to position oneself as a member of the community, gamers use acronyms and special terms to indicate their knowledge of the insider code.

Another factor which influences communication in MMORPGs which has to be kept in mind is the English as a lingua franca (ELF) factor. English can definitely be regarded as a lingua franca of gamers in MMORPGs because of the

formal setup of the games. One of the first divisions of gaming in MMORPGs is segmenting the gamers based on region. Most MMORPGs provide the gamers with regional servers for the following regions: Europe, United States, Asia and Pacific. Gamers are regardless of their language background forced to play on the server of their region. The regional servers are divided into language servers; this is the second division. Depending on the MMORPGs, different language servers are offered. Normally, there are English, German, French and Spanish servers. World of Warcraft® additionally provides the gamers with Russian and Italian servers to play on. The server language refers to the official language of the server, therefore the server language is expected to be used in the chat-channels and support by official game-masters is only provided in the respective language.

It is clear that no gaming company can provide game servers for every language, therefore it comes as no surprise that the English language servers are the most frequently used servers. My study shows that of the 324 participants in my survey 291 play on an English language server. Further findings on the language background of the participants and elaboration on the ELF factor are given in the following section.

4 A concise linguistic demography of MMORPGs

While the vast majority of the survey participants, namely 291, play on English language servers, only 126 of them regard themselves as English native speakers. All in all, 324 gamers from 42 different countries stating to be native speakers of 36 different languages participate in the survey. At this point it is important to mention that the participants are allowed to enter more than one mother tongue answering the question which native language(s) they speak. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a wide range of spoken native languages. Following English as the most widely spoken native language are Dutch (41), Swedish (31), German (30), Danish (23), Finish (20) and Norwegian (17).

Furthermore, the gamers are asked to state which other languages they speak. Yet, it has to be noted that there is no differentiation between second or foreign language in this context, as it is problematic to convey the concept of first, second and foreign language within a questionnaire. Not surprising, English is the most spoken other language of the participants with 197 gamers, followed by German (95) and French (75). Thirty-one languages are listed as other languages spoken by the gamers. It is important to mention at this point, however, that the answer to this question does not allow any conclusions on the proficiency of the gamers in the given languages.

The prominence of English as the most spoken foreign language of the gamers combined with the fact that 291 gamers play on English language servers, allows the conclusion that English is used as a lingua franca by many gamers. As I have mentioned before, the proficiencies range from beginner levels to native like competence. This has to be kept in mind as another factor influencing communication in MMORPGs: not all gamers are equally skilled in English and yet they are forced to use it.

The ELF factor on the English language servers leads to many mixed language guilds (ingame associations of player characters). The majority of the survey participants claims to be in a guild in which not the same native language is spoken. In these cases English is the favorite choice of the gamers to communicate. There are, of course, also guilds on English language servers which choose their members based on language background, therefore there are Dutch or Danish guilds on English servers. Yet, many gamers focus on achieving something in the game, hence the gaming skills are often more important in a guild than the language background of the gamers. Similar to guilds, English is also the favorite choice of communication in random groups and in raids (groups of more than five persons) in which not the same native language is spoken. Interestingly, 86 gamers also claim to use ELF when playing with their friends. This shows that MMORPGs are a social activity in which gamers from different countries and language backgrounds meet and become friends.

What this section illustrates is that in MMORPGs gamers are confronted with several obstacles while gaming. Besides being in highly stressed situations in which they want to achieve something, and being bereft of paralinguistic cues which are important in order to avoid misunderstandings, they are also confronted with the fact that they very often have to communicate in a language which is not their mother tongue. The latter obstacle also includes the difficulty of different levels of proficiency in English which could cause problems while communicating. Keeping all these factors in mind makes it difficult to believe that politeness could be of any relevance in MMORPG communication. How should gamers be polite when they struggle with all these already mentioned problems?

5 Politeness ingame

According to Holmes (1995: 5) politeness “refer[s] to behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour [sic]”. Politeness is therefore active, conscious and intended behavior allowing speakers to position themselves in conversations. Goffman’s (1967: 5)

notion of the face as the public self-image of a person is of importance when dealing with politeness. Brown and Levinson's (2009: 61) refined definition of the face, dividing it into a positive and negative face is crucial in the following discussion of politeness strategies used by gamers. The positive face is the want of every person to be liked, accepted and appreciated by others. The negative face refers to the want of not being imposed on. When speaking to others it always comes to a balancing act, as hearer and speaker have these two sides of the face and neither want to threaten one's own face nor the face of the other person. Yet, threats to faces or, as Brown and Levinson (2009: 65) call them, face-threatening acts (FTA) are committed to some extent in every conversation. Therefore, speakers developed strategies to redress and minimize the threats they commit.

When researching games, in particular MMORPGs, the common belief is that these games are hostile surroundings. Even MMORPG gamers themselves regard the games as more impolite than real-life outside the game. The majority of the participants of my survey also feels this way. Yet, at the same time all of the participants but ten claim to be polite to other gamers ingame, as some of them say they are by default polite to others. This constitutes a discrepancy between reality and perception. While the gamers state to be polite themselves, they feel that the ingame surrounding is offensive. It is difficult to say if the participants lie and portray themselves as friendlier than they are or if impolite gamers are not participating in the survey.

It is clear, however, that there are negative forms of play and communication in MMORPGs like trolling which describes behavior that should provoke or offend others for one's own amusement. This is a common negative behavior also observable on the Internet in general (cf. Hardaker 2010: 224). Another negative form of communication is flaming which can be defined as offending and insulting others for a certain reason. Flaming includes calling others words or shouting at others which is depicted in online communication by using capital letters (cf. *ibid.*: 224). Furthermore, grieving an umbrella term including models of behavior like ganking and corpse-camping has to be mentioned. Behavior summarized under grieving is, in my definition, forms of play used by some gamers to destroy the fun of others and to demoralize them. This can be, for example, repeatedly killing another gamer, or that one gamer repeatedly takes away the enemy of another gamer. These negative forms of play and behavior do exist in MMORPGs. Yet, there is also politeness ingame, even though gamers do not have the feeling that MMORPGs are surroundings in which it matters.

The participants of my survey claim that for them ingame politeness is important. The gamers' motivations for being polite are revealing. The participants,

for example, mention that it gets them better responses from other gamers if they are polite and therefore, to achieve what they want, they are friendly towards others. Similarly, gamers state to use a tit for tat system meaning that they are polite to gamers who are polite to them. These motivations can be compared to what Watts (1992: 51) regards as a driving force for politeness, namely egocentric motivations in order to manipulate the outcome of a conversation towards the speaker's intention.

It is not surprising that the results of the questionnaire show that gamers prefer efficiency to politeness in a situation of urgency. If there is an ongoing fight, it is easier and more logic to just call *Inc* for *incoming* than to write a long-winded, polite sentence. Just like in real-life, politeness has to give way in situations of emergency and urgency causing speakers to commit FTAs.

Another aspect of politeness worth mentioning is the intentional use of politeness and impoliteness as means of role-playing. The participants of the survey note that they use politeness as a tool depending on the character they play. Based on the character's background story, class or race they make different use of politeness or impoliteness. Certain races or classes appear to be predestined to be impolite like rogues, undead or deathknights. The following extract from the questionnaire illustrates how gamers differentiate between their characters:

- (4) *Spiritbane is the polite one. When Mordenna was still on an RP realm (before Doomhammer transfer) she was talkable but didn't really have time for chit chat. Not rude or intentionally offensive, but to the point and stupidly honest. She didn't have a filter between her mouth and her brain.*

6 Politeness strategies in use – the wipe

Finally, I will discuss one of the core questions of my questionnaire which gives insights into how gamers use politeness strategies in order to position themselves in conversations with other gamers. The following situation should be imagined: The gamer is in a random group of gamers and one of the party members causes a wipe (the death of all party members) by a beginner's mistake but refuses to take advice. The question is how the gamers would react. It is clear that such a situation leads to a FTA because the participant imposes on the other gamer as no one wants to die over and over again.

One would expect the participants to react with a flame or going bald on record by stating things like:

(5) *L2P FFS NOOB!! /kick*

Rather than offending the other gamer by saying *Learn to play for fucking sake noob*, which 14 participants did, gamers use strategies which Brown and Levinson (2009: 101) call positive politeness. This means that the participants try to work on the positive face of the other gamer by showing that he or she is appreciated and liked, as can be seen in the following example:

(6) *It's ok if you make mistake, we are all doing mistakes. But, you should accept advice because it's good for you. Not for now, but for future cases. [sic]*

The gamer uses a strategy towards the positive face of the other person by claiming common ground and using solidarity. By mentioning that all gamers make mistakes, the dispraise is minimized and the other gamer is shown that he or she is still appreciated. Furthermore, the gamer provides an incentive for the other gamer noting that following advice will pay off in the future.

It is also common for gamers to mix redressing strategies like in Example 7.

(7) *Hmmm (insert name here ^^)..do you think we could try it again a little better next time dear? Its not really your fault but its a little annoying :) [sic]*

By asking the other gamer if he or she could possibly do it better, the participant aims at the negative face of the other person (cf. Brown & Levinson 2009: 129). Instead of ordering the other person and thus imposing on the gamer, redressing the utterance as request and mitigating the negative emotions by words like *possible* and *little* attenuates the FTA. At the same time positive redressing strategies are used by claiming common ground calling the other gamer *dear*. Clearly, the gamer also uses an ironic tone to manipulate the other gamer to some extent. Finally, the use of a positive smiley mitigates the negative emotions of the utterance. Gamers commonly use smileys in such situations, as my study shows.

While positive and negative politeness strategies are commonly used in the questionnaire (105 times), off record strategies are rare, only ten participants used them in this situation. Off-record strategies (cf. Brown & Levinson 2009: 211) mean that the intention of an utterance is not immediately clear and a problem is only indicated, as in the following example:

- (8) *There are strats written on (popular and well known fan site), probably a good idea to read up on them before attempting a boss*

The participant hints at the other gamer's mistake by mentioning that there are strategy guides on gamer websites describing difficult encounters. By noting this he or she hopes to manipulate the other gamer to follow the advice of the other party members.

While the common perception is that MMORPGs are offensive surroundings, gamers go to certain lengths to use careful redressing strategies which are common in real-life outside the game as well. Instead of imposing on others, gamers use several layers of politeness strategies when communicating with others. Some gamers position themselves on common ground and as part of the in-group, others take a position which leaves the interlocutor his or her freedom. One reason for this is an egocentric motivation. If a gamer insults another gamer he or she is questing with, he or she might snap and leave the group all together. This would leave the group one member short and would either slow down the group or prevent the whole success of the undertaking. Therefore, it is better to use strategies to manipulate the other gamer towards your goal. Another reason is that gamers remember impolite players and do not help them anymore. Bad reputation spreads quite easily on a server. Thus, it is unwise to endanger your reputation by being impolite because it lowers your chances of getting help in the game.

7 Conclusion

This paper shows that gamers of MMORPGs have to meet several challenges while gaming and various factors influence their language usage. The rich gamer's language including acronyms, smileys, neologisms and other features is a result of the challenges gamers have to face. But even though they are confronted with obstacles like high stress situations, missing paralinguistic cues and using a language which is not necessarily their mother tongue but rather a lingua franca, they still use strategies of politeness to position themselves in conversations. Politeness exists in MMORPGs. Yet, not necessarily in order to be nice to others or to be by default polite, as some participants state, but rather as a strategy of communication to achieve one's goals. While it is the common belief that MMORPGs are an offensive surrounding, this study shows that the gamers are well aware of politeness and use it intentionally as a tool to achieve purposes and to manipulate their interlocutors towards their intended goals. In that sense, using politeness strategies is more efficient than offending others.

This paper clearly cannot portrait the complete linguistic reality of MMORPGs, but it can be used as a starting point to research communication in computer games. It gives a glimpse at the creative processes and the obstacles gamers are faced with while gaming. No matter if it is the mother tongue or ELF, gamers, as maybe all humans, try to achieve something in a conversation and they do so by positioning themselves using strategies, be it ingame or in the real-world.

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