Figurative language expressing emotion and motivation in a web based learning environment

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate how figurative language was used by the participants of an online learning environment in order to express their emotion, feelings and motivation in their new learning experience. According to our results, figurative language mainly served as an original and specific linguistic feature through which people project themselves (their identity, emotions and feelings) in the online context. The research was conducted on a ten-week course, delivered at a distance via a computer conferencing system, addressed to 57 student teachers.

1 Introduction

The study was conducted on the premises that cognitive processes are closely related to the affective, emotional and motivational ones. This kind of strict relationship is borne out within the context of neurosciences (Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 1996), Artificial Intelligence (Picard, 1997; Dautenhahn, Bond, Cañamero and Edmonds, 2002), cognitive psychology (Hamilton, Bower and Frijda, 1988; Oatley and Jenkins, 1996; Frijda, Manstead and Bem, 2000) and social sciences (Elster, 1999; MacMullen, 2004), with positive effects on the educational context (Gardner, 1983; Volet and Järvelä, 2001) and on the context of web-based learning as well.

In the latter, the socio-affective dimension of learning acquires specific features as it is expressed and biased by written discourse. While some early approaches in the study of CMC emphasize the lack of non-verbal cues as a limit (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976), in more recent times, a number of studies have shown that written communication is able to actively stimulate and effectively enhance social and affective presence (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000).

In contrast with the view according to which students adopt verbal immediacy behaviours to make up for the lack of non verbal and vocal cues communicated online, we reckon that the expression of emotions and affectivity must not be seen as a substitute or a surrogate way to express the same emotional needs that may emerge in a face-to-face setting, but rather as a different and independent means to become aware of and to share emotional states. In this view, written communication is supposed to convey specific and unique social and emotional affordances (Kreijns, Kirschner and Jochems, 2002).

Following this line of thought, we investigated the uses of figurative language as one of the possible dimensions adopted to express emotions in online communication, quite often achieved by using language in original and creative ways. Hence our analysis covered not only metaphors and other figures of speech in their proper meaning, but any use of language aiming at expressing a non literal meaning, i.e. a meaning beyond the standard denotation of the used utterances.

2 Theoretical background

The study of emotions in online learning has been carried out through a number of indicators: the main emotions involved in the experience of starting a distance education course (Conrad, 2002; O’Regan, 2003), and student distress in a web-based course (Hara and Kling, 2000). McFadden, Herie, Maiter and Dumbrell (in press) propose a model of web-based education based on the assumption that emotional emphasis may facilitate constructivist learning goals.

The role of students’ online emotional appraisal of social conditions of learning has been studied in connection with research on motivation as well: emotion arousal influences the cognitive, metacognitive and motivational aspects of the
learning process, especially when they are socially oriented (Wosnitza and Volet, in press).

The affective and emotional functions of metaphors have been closely investigated in a number of studies as well. According to Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphor (2003), emotion concepts emerge as conceptual structures largely constituted by metaphor: emotion concepts are claimed to be social-cognitive constructions (Kövecses, 2002). Ortony and Fainsilber (1989) underlined concrete vividness as the main characteristic of metaphor and figurative language in the expression of emotions.

More generally, some authors (Gibbs, Leggitt and Turner, 2002) stated that figurative language is so special as it concerns emotional communication, which tightly reflects something about people’s ordinary conceptualizations of their complex emotional experience. In addition, it is considered a special communicative tool because it might create that sense of closeness and intimacy between speaker and listener that literal language cannot achieve (Fussell and Moss, 1998).

### 3 The method

The research context was a ten-week course delivered at a distance via a computer conferencing system, held during the academic year 2002/2003 by our institute, on the topic of educational technology. The course was addressed to 57 student teachers of the local Post-graduate School for Secondary School-teachers and was managed by 7 tutors.

After the course conclusion we noticed the great amount of figurative language produced by tutors and students that occurred in their written discourse as a spontaneous phenomenon.

Next to the instructional activities, the use of some familiarization and meta-reflection facilities was especially encouraged for socialization and reflection purposes. Focusing the analysis on expressions of self-disclosure, two communication areas (socialization and meta-reflection) were object of investigation, being the most concerned with the expression of emotions.

Following the most used approach in the literature about computer-mediated discourse analysis (i.e. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer, 2001; Herring, 2004), the single message (posting) was chosen as macro-unit of analysis, since it was recognized as the smallest meaningful, independent and exhaustive datum. Postings were analyzed to find the cases in which figurative language served to express the participants’ feelings. As a single posting could include more than a single figurative language instance (occurrence), segments of postings were considered for both quantitative and qualitative micro-analysis. The research was guided by the following questions:

- which images did the participants choose to introduce themselves to others?
- which images did they use to represent their learning experience?
- what kind of emotions were shared using figurative language?

### 4 Qualitative outcomes

The number of postings with figurative language was equivalent to 86 of 843 examined (10.2%), and the number of occurrences was 103, postings containing on average 1.19 occurrences.

During the analysis it was noticed that all the occurrences could belong to two alternative categories: some were related to the expression of participants’ Identity, some others to the expression of feelings and ideas towards the Context of the course (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Category’s typology</th>
<th>Iconic image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>I feel like…</td>
<td>disguise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We feel like…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I see you as…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I see them as…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I move as……</td>
<td>orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>CMC environment is…</td>
<td>give body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written communication is…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The course is…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The course subject is…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The computer is…</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Participants used figurative language both to give shape and body to themselves and to other participants, disguising their corporeity and making it move in different settings, and giving a body and a soul to objects. In other words, they recurred to figurative language with the effect of changing the shared ontological status of people and objects.

Thinking of the reasons why participants chose to use figurative language, emerged quite clearly that by acting as other people, or dressing up as animals, literature characters, cars and so on, they could explain their inner emotions, such as fear, frustration, anger, happiness, moderating, at the same time, their epistemic commitment towards the propositional content of their statement. For instance, for some participants it might have been difficult to explicitly acknowledge that they were very anxious because they could not understand what was going on in the online course, but they had...
no problem to state that they were in need of a lifeboat, since they felt quite shipwrecked (see below the full excerpt). Such disclosure was possible only with the reduced degree of epistemic commitment granted by figurative language.

4.1 Figurative language occurrences of Identity and Context

Especially during the first weeks of the course, participants recurred to the semantic field of navigation in order to express feelings related to the new learning environment.

In this way a little boat became, to all purposes, a vehicle useful both to represent a route and to explain feelings towards the learning experience:

“Until now my little boat passed off, without too many hitches…” - (II week)

This figurative idea was further developed by another student:

“Picking up the metaphor used by Irene, during this online activity I feel as I am in a paradoxical condition, on one side I’m navigating on the paper-boat of my “empiric” and improvised ICT competences, on the other, however, it seems to me that I’m sailing safe in this environment” - (II week)

Unfortunately, not all the seas sailed by the participants are so calm:

“Yesterday I’d like to use a virtual lifeboat; I felt as a shipwrecked” - (II week)

But not all the settings of figurative occurrences are placed in the sea. In order to explain the feelings towards their rhythm of participation to the activities, somebody wrote:

“In this brand-new activity, I feel somehow as I was a little turtle going slowly, slowly, slowly…” - (IV week)

and another participant echoed:

“I’m going slowly, uphill, but as an old 500 1 I’m proceeding determined, one step at a time, always trying to learn something new and astonishing” - (VII week)

The computer is the communication medium in the CMC environment and however transparent it may be, some participants felt its presence. In a posting, a student is invited to make a propitiatory gesture by ignoring the computer presence:

“You are MAD! Don’t you know that these devices have eyes, ears and tongue? Don’t you know that they love teasing and feel at the centre of attention? Of course I’m joking: PC infected me!” - (II week)

The course subject, as well as some postings and the reflection around synchronous and asynchronous communication, are objects of simile or comparison. A single posting might be a symbol of hope:

“I’m very grateful to the latter posting written by Giovanna. In this world, full of anxieties, a reassuring posting is like a dewdrop in the desert. Thank you” - (II week)

And again:

“I’d like to thank dear and nice Irene for her appraisal to my posting: you don’t know how much I appreciate that you sense a smell of “life” in my message - (IX week).

5 Conclusions and future directions

Self-disclosure has been an effective mean through which people reciprocally invite to open the door to motivation through the expression of emotions and feelings. All the examples reported a set of emotions of self-, other- and technology-directed type, expressed by means of figurative language. This latter has been a powerful detector of emotions and feelings involved in the learning experience (for a detailed analysis, Delfino and Manca, u.c.).

Figurative language has been a resource, among others, to create the new learning and social reality in which the participants were involved. For most of them it was their first online learning experience and they had to face several new problems including learning to communicate by written discourse in an asynchronous manner, familiarizing with communication technologies, and even practicing with learning and collaborating in group. Metaphors and figurative language helped them to understand a new domain of experience in terms of what was already familiar to them (e.g., images of movement to explain learning rhythms).

In the future, figurative language could also be adopted in the design and conduction phases of an online learning course, as a stimulus and a motivation to manifest and share those personal emotions and feelings always deeply involved in any new learning experience, by providing a framework for role assignment, identity, responsibility and intrinsic motivation.

References


1 A FIAT 500 is a popular Italian car from the 60’s, whose most distinguishing features are the compact dimensions combined with toughness and reliability.


M. Wosnitza and S. E. Volet. Significance of social and emotional dimensions in online learning. Learning and Instruction, in press.