

# Terrell Neuage 'Conversational analysis of chatroom talk' Case Study 6 Conversational Analysis

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## ***Case Study 6***

### CS 6.0 Introduction

Dialogue can be studied through its grammar (as I have done in Case Study 7) and through examining its preferred discursive patterns (Case Study 5) (Eggins & Slade; 1997: p.178). Grammar provides the “nodes” of speech; in the case of dialogue, the constituent “mood” structures of conversational clauses. In physical, live- interacting conversation, linguistics provides a system for analysing the assertion of rights and privileges stemming from the inequitable social roles in culture (see Bourdieu, 1989). Words very much define the speaker, and provide both him/her and the co-locuters with a settled repertoire of what can and can't be said, and how it can and can't be cast. However, in electronic 'talk' words do not so immediately define social roles. First, they must define ideas, or at least a continuum of speech practice, which can evolve into a conversation, as participants begin to “read” the cues for social positioning. This processing will, over a course of many turn-taking sequences, define enough about a speaker to allow others to have some awareness of their places within social structures: elements such as their social or cultural beliefs, and sometimes nationality, culture and standing. I have explored this notion of trying to ‘know’ more about a speaker from the words they use in individual case studies, suggesting that the relative lack of cues in chat is being

compensated by the semiotic loading of abbreviation and emoticon-graphic codings. In this section I want to examine what can be learned from how the “turn-taking” rules are operated within an on-line conversation. Do the same regulatory systems apply as those found in live conversation, or are there once again restrictions, and compensations?

Text-based chatrooms at first sight appear to offer an open, empty space. However, within previous sections of analysis of chat practice, I have been able to demonstrate that this is not quite the case. For chat-entrants such as B-witched (Case Study 5), the chat space was not at all “open”. For all his/her persistence, this chatter was “closed out” by other participants. And, as I have indicated earlier, it is true for chat as for all linguistic performances, that no participant enters an “empty” system. Chatrooms depend not only on language conventions drawn from broader speech communities and communities of practice, but have rapidly established their own complex codes of both locution and interactive behaviours. And finally, the technology of chat hardware and software: the screen and keyboard and modem speeds, and the limitations of the dialogue-box and line structure, all act upon “chat” as a communicative act.

Within conversation turn-taking is central. Without turn-taking, the chatroom is static. But does the system of turn-taking with chat follow that of non-electronic conversation, which in this thesis I refer to as ‘natural conversation’, or do the constraints of the chat space act upon this, as upon other areas of this particular communicative practice? In the case studies thus far it has been shown that

electronic conversation is dependent on the vehicle for the speech – the computer. Conversational analysis or sequential analysis is noting 'natural' conversation and understanding the conversations as regulated, to provide an orderly sequence of entrance spaces for participating members. A chatroom too is thoroughly bound by orderliness with its protocols, rules and structure. It is only within this order that sequential conversation can be carried on.

Electronic communication has received much analytical research. In my literature review in the section on online literature most of the material reviewed brings a sociological or psychological perspective to electronic chat. Meaning development in chatrooms can be shown to be dependent upon conceptualisation, as well as upon social formation (see Tannen, 1998, 1995; Turkle, 1995, 1996) What I have done in this case however is to go beyond the 'why' we communicate, into 'how' we exchange utterances. In this case I am using the most systematic and "fined tuned" of the linguistic investigation techniques, Conversational Analysis, within the Sacks tradition. Conversational analysis focuses on the sequential organization of talk, and the overlaps in various places in the transcript, focusing in particular on how participants contest and maintain "powerful" speaking positions, which enable them to lead and steer conversations. (ten Have, 1999).

### CS 6.0.1 Sacks

Conversational analysis (CA) is an outcome of an ethnomethodological tradition. Ethnomethodology is a sociological perspective, founded by the American sociologist Harold Garfinkel in the early 1960s to explain and understand meaning systems and

procedures between people and how they make sense of their social world. CA was developed collaboratively by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson to study ordinary conversation to discover if organizational details could be formally described. The idea is that conversations are orderly, not only for observing analysts, but in the first place for participating members (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973: 290; Sacks, 1984 a: 22). The field of CA is primarily concerned with finding the organization of social action located in discursive practices in everyday interaction. The first analysis came from detailed inspection of tape recordings and transcriptions made from such recordings.

I started to work with tape-recorded conversations. Such materials had a single virtue, that I could replay them. . . . I could study it again and again, and also, consequentially, because others could look at what I had studied and make of it what they could, if, for example, they wanted to be to disagree with me. (Sacks 1974, p. 715)

Due to most tape recordings being accomplished with the knowing of the participants they may not be as free as natural conversation would be without the presence of a recording device. Chatrooms provide an ethnomethodology format in which the researcher is able to lurk without the participants knowing.

The researcher is on exactly the same epistemological grounds as the room's other members. The researcher is looking at the screen, just as the others. All parties have exactly the same information, and all receive it simultaneously. If the researcher were to be able to record the chat room from the physical perspectives of all the room's other members, he or she would gather no data that could not be gathered by recording some other computer screen somewhere else

in the world. In this way the study of chat rooms avoids the epistemological difficulties that may arise in studying FTF interactions. (Parrish 2000)

## CS 6.0.2 Case Study chatroom

This case study is on a site dedicated to discussion of Web 3D graphics. It is a highly developed and supervised site, with its own help files as well as clearly defined rules and assistance and a 'Quick reference guide'. The headline for the chatroom states:

“Come and chat about Web3D and VRML and all things 3D, every Wednesday at 9:30PM Eastern, (Eastern is UTC-5) which is 2:30 UTC time (Thursday)”.<sup>[1]</sup>

Because this is a topic specific site, on the development and/or use of computer graphics, the purpose of the moderator in this chatroom is more one of leadership, rather than of keeping users from either going into other topics or abusing others.<sup>[2]</sup> To this extent, the site is inviting a use closer to that of the listserv, or of the older BBS services, in which professionals with a given interest met regularly for the purposes of common-interest debate and information exchange. The booking of a common “meeting” time on this site suggests serious purpose, rather than the more spontaneous development of conversation with strangers expected in a non-topic-defined chatroom. For this reason, I anticipate a more overt and analysable display of “regulated” conversational exchange.

## CS 6.0.3 Questions

A question that I explore throughout this thesis is “Are non-

moderated chatrooms closer to casual conversation than moderated chatrooms, where there may be a perception of censorship, and attempts to steer the talk?"

My second question asks whether fewer participants in a chatroom make for a better and easier to follow discourse. Unlike the other chatrooms that I have used so far which had more users present, Chat 3D only had eight participants (Appendix 4 table 1). The chat logged for this study is available online [3] and permission to use this chat was obtained by the chatroom owner on November 13 2001 [4].

My first question is also concerned with whether a moderated chatroom provides a setting for 'natural' chatting. At this time there are not any bots (Internet robots simulating Artificial Intelligence) that are able to reproduce the flow of 'natural language' (See. Barr, Cohen, and Feigenbaum 1989). Natural language is the processing of written text or spoken language, using lexical, syntactic, and semantic knowledge of the language as well as any required real world information for written text plus additional knowledge about phonology as well as enough additional information to handle the further ambiguities that arise in speech for spoken text. The theories that are used to discuss the different case studies in this thesis are steps in the process of natural language understanding. To have a natural chat in a chatroom one would expect similarity to conversation in person-to-person conversation that would include turn-taking, having sentence structures and waiting for the completion of a sentence before responding to a previous speaker and a continuation of the same topic. In this case study there is a continuity of topic as it is a moderated chatroom, someone keeps the speakers on the topic. In Case Study 1 the participants kept the

chatroom on the topic of the storm as they do in Case Study 7 when the topic is about baseball. Therefore, there is an indication in a moderated chatroom that there is similarity to natural conversation as would be carried on in a person-to-person chat.

My assumption before analysing this room had been that moderation equals censorship. Knowing someone will correct or change or even suppress what we wish to say could alter the forms used in chatting. After visiting many moderated chatrooms at Talkcity.com and at Microsoft's chat server I realised for instance that few people are concerned with conventional spelling or grammar in a moderated chatroom. (See the afghan chatroom example below). There is, however, quite clear concern about content, and whether it fits the room's topic or themes. Content is important to maintaining turn taking in a moderated chatroom in the discussion below.

Unmoderated chatrooms can spontaneously generate forms of moderation if people in the chatroom attack or attempt to control others. In unmoderated chatsites the area of grammar and spelling is, curiously, one area where a participant can make an attack on another chatter – and yet I have not found an example of anyone in a moderated chatroom being concerned with spelling or grammar. I discuss grammar in Case Study 7.

In this case study when a new person arrives there is the usual chatroom greetings and shortly thereafter the other participators along with the new user, <Pauline> continue the conversation on web 3D animation. <Pauline> joins in at turn 51 and is immediately greeted by <web3dADM> whom <Pauline> apparently knows, as <Pauline> says <hiya sandy> in response to the moderator of the chatroom, <web3dADM>. <Leonard> also greets <Pauline> and after one line of greeting there is the continuation of the topic with

<Pauline> in line 65 saying <are there any add-ons compare vrml with x3d ??>.

51) <Pauline> hello there....

52) < web3dADM> hey pauline!

53) <Pauline> hiya sandy ! how are things going ?

54) <Leonard> blaxxun and Shout have browsers based on their proposals, but no ones proposals were adopted in totality

55) <Leonard> Hi Pauline

56) <Pauline> hi leonard !

57) <brian> what do u refer to when u say x3d then?

58) <brian> network lagged today!!

59) <Leonard> Think of X3D as redoing the infrastructure of VRML. It is not a change

60) <Leonard> in functionality, but a change in the language.

61) <brian> i thought it was a subset of vrml?

62) <web3dADM> x3d is VRML with an XML syntax

63) <Leonard> Of course, Core X3D is MUCH smaller than VRML - about ½ the nodes

64) <brian> to allow small client downloads

65) <pauline> are there any add-ons compare vrml with x3d ??

This is similar to the baseball chat in Case Study 7 when there are 13 greetings with the other 'captured' 142 lines being on the topic of baseball. After the greeting there is the continuation of the baseball topic. Also, in the baseball chat shown below, the majority of the greetings were from the speaker <NMMprod>. <NMMprod> has taken on this role to greet people as they enter the chatroom. As this was not a moderated chatroom where there is the moderator, <web3dADM>, who has the abbreviation ADM, following the title web3d, as representative of his role as administrator, it is not the 'official' role of <NMMprod> to greet people.

36.	/	^	<NMMprod>	2e.	hellotrix
37.	/	^	<CathyTrix-guest>	6c.	hiya
47.	/	^	<MLB-LADY>	3f.	h cathy
50.	/	^	<NMMprod>	2g.	hey trix
75.	/	^	<NMMprod>	2k.	hellotrix
82.	/	^	<<NMMprod>	2m.	Hi Molly!
90.	/	^	<Chris_Pooh>	10b.	Hey Mike
115. /	^		<Chris_Pooh>	10c.	Howdy MLB
119. /	^		<Chris_Pooh>	10d.	Cathy? you new here
125.	/	^	<MLB-LADY>	3j.	howdy pizza man

127.	/	^	<MLB-LADY>	3k.	hi chris
141.	/	^	<KnobbyChic-11>	11a.	Chris!!!!
147.	/	^	<Neeca-Neeca>	13a.	hey Chris!

In the chat3D chatroom the moderator <web3dADM> continues greetings and small-talk until turn 10:

10) <web3dADM> just got the Cult3D folks to agree to show up on March 3

The remainder of the chat is concerned with the topic of discussion that is three-dimensional software. By beginning with small talk and the greetings this chatroom is shown to be casual even though it is about a specific topic. The administrator, <web3dADM> even states this policy of casualness to <Justin>,

4) <Justin> my first visit here; what's normal?

8) <web3dADM> NORMAL ;- ) I try not to be normal ;- ) nothing formal justin unless there is a guest

In the non-topic specific chatroom in Case Study 5 there was not any focus of a conversation. Because there was no topic to discuss the participants concentrated on greetings.

In the example below (see.

<http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/chat/afgan.htm>) there are personal attacks in regards to spelling. The unmoderated users here comment on each other's spelling, using it as so often occurs in unmoderated

chat, as part of the establishment of the “ground rules” for the chat: the constant readjustment of relational talk which dominates non-topic-specific talk, and bleeds over into topic-specific but unmoderated sites at moments of “crisis” in a given talk relation. .

[ZtingRay] what a dumb ass

[fRANKIE] excuse me i meant to say butch bitch

[ZtingRay] cant spell

[ZtingRay] butch

[fRANKIE] asshole ztingray (who can't spell himself

Table CS 6:1 Afghanchatroom

In comparison to the unmoderated chat for this case study the participators do not take their spelling seriously.

1) <Leonard> Sort night for me tonight...  
Gotta take my oldest to scouts

2) <web3dADM> sort night? ahhhh

6) <Leonard> Sort == new term for  
Short

I have another example of two different types of chatrooms saved

side-by-side at, [http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/bondage\\_christian.htm](http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/bondage_christian.htm).

Though both sites claim to be unmoderated they have a feeling of moderation due to their chatnames: 'bondage chat' and 'Christian chat'. These two chatrooms would attract people interested in the contextual themes of each chatroom, and not the content of the other chatroom. I will not investigate these chatrooms in this case study but I have mentioned them to demonstrate that themes may be as important as the actual conversation in a chatroom, in controlling the forms of talk. For example, it is clear which of the utterances below belong to either the 'bondage' or the 'Christian' chatrooms,

<Tape>: true,but would like to see what the nipples look like under latex

<MrMikl>: as long as dag is tied to a spoke?

<Cupid's Sister>

Dolly.....Nowhere that's just how I am.....I prayed hard to God for my father to recover....but God took him and now my father is in heaven

<Ann>

I'm singing that same tune Cupid's Sister. Still we have the love of Christ

Table CS 6:2 Bondage/Christian chat

Each of these exchanges achieves a marked consensual flow, but there is in the second a greater concern for grammatical exactness – including for instance the capitalisation convention for God and Christ – while in the first a much freer form of sentence structure is present. Coates (1998) has shown in many studies that such a distinction between formal and non-formal language use in natural conversation rests on an interesting intersection between class and gender – and here there is at least some suggestion that gender may be in play, with <Dolly> and <Ann> and <Cupid's Sister> preserving the conversational niceties, as Coates suggests. But in earlier analyses we have seen (at least ostensibly) female participants using the abbreviation/emoticon formulae of chat which breach formal speech rules – see for instance <Jenniferv> in Case Study 5, above. I do not wish to embark here upon a gender based study of chat, which might, if Coates is correct, either enable expert analysts to detect gender in chat even when on-line gender disguise is in play, or perhaps even indicate that all participants already do this, remaining alert to the subtleties of a gender regulated talk, learned from natural conversation. Instead, I am interested in whether the sorts of “ungrammatical” behaviours common in non-topic-specific chat, where the focus is on relational talk, are actually instead new forms of grammatical regulatory behaviour: the sorts of “anti-language” which I argued in Case Study 5 could be used for establishing and maintaining a specific “in-group” culture, against the broader mainstream behaviours of “intruders”.

## CS 6.1 Methodology

I use a conversation analysis<sup>[5]</sup> (CA) approach in this chatroom as

CA investigates the machinery and the structure of social action in language. The primary concern of conversation analysis is sequential organization, or the ways in which speakers organize their talk turn-by-turn. (Neuliep, 1996). Conversation Analysis (CA) grew out of the research tradition of ethnomethodology<sup>[6]</sup>. Ethnomethodology refers to understanding the meaning systems and procedures people use in doing what they do. Where, Functionalists<sup>[7]</sup>, Symbolic Interactionists<sup>[8]</sup> and Marxists understand the social world as orderly instead of chaotic and haphazard, ethnomethodologists assume that social order is illusory (much as it appears at first glance in chatrooms). The task in everyday life, as “we do what we do”, is thus to forge a means of ordering a particular task, to achieve common understandings – even if temporary – which enable us to carry out daily life processes. Applied to language by ethnomethodologist Harvey Sacks, this totally empirical and descriptive approach allows for the minute examination of the exchanges of talk, and the emergence of regularly recurring and reciprocal patterns of practice, which then act as structuring rules for talk. The CA or Conversation Analysis which Sacks and his fellow investigators produced (see for instance the work of Sacks, 1972; in collaborations with Schegloff, 1974; and Jefferson, 1974) has outlined a number of ruling structures around which talk exchanges are constructed, and which can be used to assess how conversations are formed, who among a group of talkers performs which roles, and why.

CA thus becomes a way of researching chatrooms that may lead to an understanding of the way in which words are produced and meaning is ascribed in these new spaces for talk. There is the sense in the literature to date that social interaction based on the turn-taking

conversation in a chatroom is a hit and miss affair - even chaotic (See for example, Reid, 1993 and Vronay, Smith, Drucker, 2001). CA assists in the making sense of these otherwise seemingly random or perverse acts of speech acts.

Conversational analysis looks at who is "leading" in the conversation. Finding who is leading may appear impossible in an unmoderated text-based chatroom where turn-taking appears random and where, unless the chatroom has a specific time frame, for example the chatroom is open only for one-hour a day, there is a never ending conversation. Who is leading would change at any given time whilst the chatroom is open. CA however is able to "read" the relational ploys of speakers at any moment of a conversation, extending over any number of "turns", from two to infinity – and is expert at detecting those moments when the conversational lead does indeed shift between participants.

CA has studied the social organization of conversational turn taking in the past by a detailed inspection of transcriptions made from audio tape recordings. With the advent of computers to log text-based chat conversations one is able to inspect huge amounts of data.

Chatrooms are thus a natural source for CA study of casual conversation. There is even already in place the notion that online communication is nothing more than casual conversation, (Murphy, Collins, 1997) and open to what is termed sequential analysis.

Criteria for Sequential Analysis include that conversational data must be directly observable which in chatroom it is and it can be saved for future research; all principles and rules of how conversation is structured in terms of exchanges-in-sequence is developed inductively, based on observable data. An analyses of any particular

conversational event when replicated by others should look essentially the same. Chatroom turn-taking at this point in time always looks the same; there is a username followed by the utterances. Some chatrooms have additions to this theme such as the ability by participator to change the font or colour of the chat or to include a sound but they all have a sequential nature – they do not appear side by side on the computer screen but indeed are followed one after another, line by line. Once the enter button is pressed there is no taking back what was said. If the chat can be saved, either by saving the screen shot of the chat or by copying and pasting or reading the chat logs the dialogue can be 'captured' for future reference.

Conversational analysis is one of three central themes that are the focus of ethnomethodology, the other two being “mundane reasoning” or the structuring of logical order within everyday thinking, and “membership categorization”, or the ways we regulate social order through techniques of inclusion and exclusion. Sociologists typically examine talk or conversation as a resource to learn something of people's attitudes, the ways people's lives are structured, and how people differ from each other in their values and assumptions. The ethnomethodologist, on the other hand, treats chat as a topic to learn how members of a community (in this case the online chat community) use properties of talk (e.g.: its sequential properties) in order to do things with words, such as to have an interaction in a chatroom. I have chosen a CA research approach for this case study as CA literature investigates the structure of social action in language which reveals how meaning is negotiated.

Conversational analysis first seeks to make an analysis of the data by studying the overall structure of interaction and sequence

organization within casual conversation. Secondly, CA, investigates the sequential patterns of speech. In CA, the data conventionally consists of audio-tape recordings of natural conversation, and their associated transcriptions. These are then systematically analyzed to determine what properties govern the way in which a conversation proceeds. The approach emphasizes the need for empirical, inductive work, and in this it is sometimes contrasted with 'discourse analysis', which has often been more concerned with formal methods of analysis, such as the nature of the rules governing the structure of texts (Eggins & Slade, 1997: p.56). My 'capturing' of "natural conversation" within chatrooms is through the saving of conversations into a word document, by-passing the need for transcription – although the many debates within CA on the interpretive colourings introduced by the selection of a transcription protocol (See Agar, 1983; Berelson, 1952; Moerman, 1988) are mimicked even in my cut-and-paste technique by the varying ways the extracts used in subsequent analysis can be represented (see Chapter 3, methodology).

## CS 6.2 Discussion

My purpose in this case study is to describe in detail the conversational relation displayed in topic-specific and non-topic-specific chat by isolating and measuring its primary components. Conversation process is rich in a variety of small behavioural elements, which are readily recognised and recorded. These elements combine and recombine in certain well-ordered rhythms of action and expression. In the live two-person confrontation there results a more or less integrated web of communication, which is the

foundation of all social relations (Guy & Allen p. 48-51). Chatrooms use many of these small behavioural elements, even evolving as we have seen new techniques such as emoticons, abbreviations and pre-recorded sounds provided by the chatroom, such as whistles, horns, or laughter. The full web of exchange however remains unmapped at this time to my knowledge (14 October, 1999).

What is important in CA is firstly the degree to which talk breaks into "turns" – sometimes reciprocally agreed, sometimes hotly contested among participants. Within chatroom conversation fragmented conversation is the norm. Rarely are full sentences made, although it is arguable that complete thoughts are. But within the chatroom dialogue there can be a break in the utterance clearly established, because the ENTER key is pushed on the keyboard, even if part way through the utterance. For example, below...

197) <Gordon> the funny thing is

198) <brian> sgi visual workstatio demos by sam chen are  
great

199) <web3dADM> yeah the new SGI NT boxes come with a great VRML  
intro

200) <Gordon> that when I try to view those SGI vrml, or any VRML with .gz  
extension to it

201) <web3dADM> yeah

202) <Gordon> Winzip take over

## Table CS 6:3

Because of the enter key there is the primary difference to person-to-person conversation or natural talk. It is as if one interrupts oneself. It can happen quite accidentally when someone is typing to hit the enter key and divide their conversation as <Gordon> does above.

During the event-pause the person who is speaking is writing the continuation of his or her text whilst others are inserting their utterances into the chat. When we look at a larger selection such as the six turns above we can see that there was a complete thought by Gordon who is expressing a frustration with the computer code in his or her program. Furthermore, these breaks in speech in the chatroom do function as a separate element in the verbal stream, similar to those Allen and Guy (1974) mention in their discussion of person-to-person talk. This introduces a “mechanics” of speech as a signifying act which includes a wide variety of meaningful techniques - in contrast to the behaviourists' view that language and thoughts are identical. To behaviourists, there is no 'non-verbal thought', all thought is seen as determined only by the language used (Watson 1930, Sapir 1929, Whorf, 1940, 1956). But CA – and now CA within the new conversational forms of the chatroom – is able to locate “meaningful” communicative acts in such calculated actions as pressing or not pressing the “enter” button; interrupting or not; over-talking or not; “texting” chat talk in abbreviations or emoticons, or in carefully regulated formal grammar and spell-checked entries. These ways of communicating are therefore forms of “language”, though not the same as language in person-to-person conversation.

### CS 6.2.1 Adjacency Pairs and Turn-taking

Conversation analysis recognizes the existence of turn-taking procedures and adjacency pairs within conversations. In chat rooms, one turn can be presented amongst multiple utterances with intervening totally unrelated statements. The conversation does not stop to wait for one person to finish a turn that he or she did not conclude in one utterance. Adjacency pairs are one method by which people structure conversation. When one asks a question, one expects an answer. In turn 47 below <brian> says <still confused about x3d> and <web3dADM> sympathizes, <so are most people brian> and ten turns later <brian> is still without a result to his or her confusion, <what do u refer to when u say x3d then?>. The topic then shifts to discussing x3d for the next thirty-five turns.

47) <brian> still confused about x3d

48) <web3dADM> so are most people brian

49) <brian> r u talking about blaxxun and shout3d implimentations or something else

50) <Leonard> They are still debating some wrapping issues

**pauline joined.....**

51) <pauline> hello there....

52) <web3dADM> hey pauline!

53) <pauline> hiya sandy ! how are things going ?

54) <Leonard> blaxxun and Shout have browsers based on their proposals, but no ones proposals were adopted in totality

55) <Leonard> Hi Pauline

56) <pauline>hi leonard !

57) <brian> what do u refer to when u say x3d then?

The turns above were interrupted by a new person entering the chatroom and others giving greetings. Interruption by people leaving the conversation and speaking with someone else is not the only splitting of conversations to occur in a chat-flow.

Due to the accidental hitting of the entry key an utterance can be split before it is completed as below shows,

40) <Leonard> I will be offereing it on-line through Digital University sometime this

41) <brian> can't make it

42) <Leonard>spring

Speakers can have adjacency pairs to their own turn-takings. In the following turns <Leonard> gives two different utterances in a row, one is a question and the next is a statement. Both turns are taken before anyone responds. <web3dADM> answers the first question, even though not personally addressed and then responds to <Leonard>'s statement.

21) <Leonard> Anyone used Xeena?

22) <Leonard> 3D just arrived today

23) <web3dADM> no it's on my list

24) <web3dADM> ahhh great Len

Two linguistic theories that concern the relationship between language and thought are 'mould theories' and 'cloak theories'. Mould theories represent language as 'a mould in terms of which thought categories are cast' (Bruner et al. 1956, p.11). An example of mould theory is The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Cloak theories represent the view that 'language is a cloak conforming to the customary categories of thought of its speakers' (ibid). (Daniel Chandler The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/~dgc/whorg.html>). In sum, this debate asks, is language bigger than and outside of its social use, or is social use in itself what forms and reforms language?

The American linguist Benjamin Whorf believed that speech is culture bound. He points out that words used are uniquely determined by specific cultures so that it is impossible to fully equate the thought processes of two persons from different cultures, even though they appear to be saying the same thing (Whorf 1956: 221). Extending on the work of Edward Sapir (1929), Whorf developed the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis'. This hypothesis combines two principles. The first is linguistic determinism, which states that language determines the way we think. The second is linguistic relativity, which states that the distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other

language (Whorf 1956).

## Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states:

'We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there. On the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our mind'. (Whorf, 1952, p.5).

Language thus becomes a "determining"; or at least a structuring, set of regulatory practices. As such, its systems must be observable in action, in order for it to operate consensually within given culture. Elements of the system can be deduced from any given speech exchange (including in the case of my study, those of CMC "talk"). Many such elements have been analysed. For instance, "sequence probability" (Allen & Guy p. 79) refers to the likelihood that any given verbal act will not be followed by just any other verbal act. An assertion usually follows another assertion and not a question (Allen & Guy p. 189).

When discussing language determination we need to ask whether an individual's analysis of their world links to their particular acquisition of their language's vocabulary and whether people in different cultures analyse the world in different ways linked to differences in the vocabulary of their language?

In chatroom conversation the "voices" have to be separated by participant speakers in order to follow the sequencing and turn taking. The difficulty arises when a speaker responds to different speakers, instead of staying with one particular voice. We always

know who is speaking in a chatroom because the username prefixes the talk. However, we do not always know to whom the speaker is responding unless they use the usernames in their postings or there is a theme being responded to. Below it is clear that <Justin> is commenting to <web3dADM> without any name being used. In this case it is also clear because it is the next line.

10) <web3dADM> just got the Cult3D folks to agree to show up on March 3

11) <Justin> what's cult3d

Dialogue about Cult3D continues until turn 21 between only three participants, <brian>, <web3dADM> and <Justin> when <Leonard> introduces a new topic, however the over all topic is still about computer animation.

21) <Leonard> Anyone used Xeena?

Though in the following it is not clear who is being referred to though it would be assumed the speaker is addressing the whole room,

51) <Pauline> hello there....

The regulatory systems are thus placed under increased pressure to stay on topic. After returned greetings by two of the five,

<web3dADM> in turn 52 and <Leonard> in turn 55 the conversation continues on with the animation topic,

59) <Leonard> Think of X3D as redoing the infrastructure of VRML. It is not a change

From my study of chatrooms I have found that it is typical that only a portion of the chatters will respond to someone new in the group. This is unlike person-to-person conversation where a new person entering a room will be acknowledged by others in the same space – dependent on the size of the group. In a real-life situation when there were only eight people in a room as there are in this room and a new person entered and said 'hello' the person would be greeted by all the others, not just two.

This study seeks to establish whether such pressure simply increases participants' competence in speech exchange relations, or actually alters the regulatory systems. The language system<sup>[9]</sup> is altered as speakers talk in a chatroom. There have not been any studies I have found that shows that chat behaviour, were it to extend beyond the relatively brief technological "shelf-life" I have suggested it is likely to enjoy, could permanently alter face-to-face talk. Online conversation is a genre of communication that cannot be replicated in person-to-person conversation. However, within individual chatrooms language systems change from word usage to emoticons or other symbols – if one user begins using emoticons, abbreviations or as below (from Case Study 7) numbers then others often follow.

98.	<NMMprod>	if you like the yanks press 3
-----	-----------	-------------------------------

99.	<dhch96>	1111111111
100.	<BLUERHINO11>	got it
101.	<dhch96>	1111111
102.	<smith-eric>	5555555
103.	<dhch96>	11111111
104.	<dhch96>	111111
105.	<CathyTrix-guest>	2I hate the Yankees
106.	<smith-eric>	don't have a 3
107.	<Pizza2man>	12456789

As shown in this case study people can reply using the same expression as the speaker before:

- |  |
|--|
| 165) <Pauline> lol, hopefullly is a family site, sandy ! ;-) |
| 166) < web3dADM> lol think so!                               |

And in Case Study 3,

- |                          |
|--------------------------|
| 1. <SluGGiE-> lol        |
| 2. <Mickey_P_IsMine> LoL |

In face-to-face communication there are many layers of signals to decipher before meaning can be ascribed, i.e. gestures, facial expressions and etc. In electronic 'talk' we have eliminated all but the actual typed symbols to find meaning. Within a chatroom conversation it is therefore impossible to construct nuances of talk as would be developed in person-to-person conversation. Developed layers of meaning need more than one utterance and when there are dozens of chatters involved individual utterances often become lost.

Conversational analysis focuses on the actual performance as it is realized in the social context. Language to CA theory however ultimately sees the communicative means as a social goal which holds the human social systems and cultures together (e.g., Sacks 1992). Does this lift the seeming inconsequence of non-topic chat into something meaningful and socially important?

### CS 6.2.1 Moderated/Unmoderated

Chatrooms can be moderated or unmoderated. The case studies I have looked at so far have been unmoderated, so that people can come and go and say what they please at anytime. There are two types of moderated chatrooms. The first is the one I discuss here, where a moderator maintains the topic discussion either by making those not appropriately contributing leave the chatroom, or by bringing the discussion back to the original topic. The other moderated chatroom is for an expert or a known person such as an actor or sports person to answer questions. This I refer to as edited-moderated chatroom – although in Australian use this is more often referred to as a "web forum"; see for instance many examples at [ABC.net.au](http://ABC.net.au), used to allow audiences to discuss news and

documentary content with expert guests and journalists following radio or TV broadcasts. In these chatrooms the user sends their message to a moderator, who selects and posts messages for the person the chat is based around to answer.

In any type of moderated chatroom there is thus some practice of censorship and I will discuss in this case study whether casual chat is possible in an area which is moderated. Most unmoderated chatrooms are open to the public, usually no one is in charge, and what transpires between the participants is built around the "conversational" turn taking that I am investigating. Some chatrooms, however, may have someone who overlooks the interaction, or a method to silence someone who may be a threat to the community sense of the chatroom. For example, some chatrooms have warnings: "If you witness any obscene or rude behaviour, please email me at..." Or a notification is posted on the chatroom site stating that any of the following will not be tolerated: 'Abusive language, Disrespect of others, Causing a disturbance, Purposely annoying others'.

A moderated chatroom can have different levels of moderation. At its most extreme in controlling content is the chatroom where participants write in their 'talk' and a designated person reviews what they say and either allows it to become visible for the other chatters or deletes it so no one else can see it. This makes a chatroom very topic specific and helps to keep the interchange between speakers on one subject or to keep out unwanted material, such as sexual or political information which is not suitable for the general public. It is

also a method used by chatrooms which have a 'guest speaker' such as a sports, theatre or political person who currently has a high profile.

The formality introduced by such restrictions: - the sense of being under surveillance, not only maintains topic, but also tends to produce a more conventional formality in language and presentation: even a certain "literariness" to postings, which often arrive as extended paragraphs, with levels of grammatical and lexical correctness which suggest a visit to the spell checker en route. (See for instance, <http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/unmoderated.htm>) More interesting is the topic-specific site with less formal moderation: where, as in the case I am examining here, the moderator sets up the time and date and stands back for contributions – or jumps in him/herself to the debate, relating to content rather than to regulatory concerns. Here I am more easily able to compare the "expert chat" which I can anticipate will still be content lead, with the more "relational" chat of non-topic-specific sites, and so examine what it is which is producing different language forms in the talk of the two types of site.

### CS 6.2.2 Bound by orderliness

The problem of measurement anchored in a complex phenomenon is that it can contain thousands of discreet elements within a short time span. Allen and Guy have identified some twenty types of basic elements in the action matrix of "live" two-person conversation. Many of these elements are not available to current chatroom speech, as

they rely on physical cues for interpretation. In addition, social relations which can impose limits on conversation are not useful in chatroom analysis. In face-to-face conversation participants must be concerned about the impressions which they make on the others (Goffman 1959:33). Prior to electronic communication conversation has been considered a 'reciprocal and rhythmic interchange of verbal emissions' (Allen & Guy, 1974, p. 11). However this definition is antiquated. With synchronous interaction conversation should no longer be considered a merely verbal phenomenon. The absence of such regulatory features in electronic talk is marked by the emergence of the practice of "flaming", or intense escalations of abusive exchange (Lea, O'Shea, Fung and Spears, 1992; Mabry, 2000; Turkle, 1996). Many of these elements are not available to current chatroom speech, as they rely on physical cues for interpretation. In addition, social relations which can impose limits on conversation are not useful in chatroom analysis.

### CS 6.2.3 Flaming

Not every chatroom has flaming, just as every conversation does not have insults as part of the dialogue. Flaming is another communicative tool, and often is because someone needs attention or is bored or frustrated with the content in the chatroom. Most chat rooms have rules of not allowing flaming within the room. In this case it may be just <fRANKIE> who is having a difficult time with everyone.

113. <fRANKIE> you are so low you have to have an umbrella to keep the ants

81. <fRANKIE> because you and texas asshole rose eat fried donkey dicks- (excuse me... pig dicks) on rye bread.... together

#### Table CS 6:4 Flaming

In the seemingly chaos of nonlinear communication there are protocols and netiquette<sup>[10]</sup> which without a chatroom moderator or a self-regulated environment breaks down into incoherence. Aside from the social rules to adhere to the same standards of behavior online that one follows in real life there are unwritten rules of respecting other people's time and bandwidth, as well as their privacy. Most importantly though is being in the right chatroom with the right utterances at the right time. If a room is moderated and this is not enforced by any one, others in the room may insist that the offending party changes their talk or else changes their room. In this case study I have saved 500 turn takings and every turn is on the topic of 3D animation unless it is a greeting of a person coming or going into the chatroom even though no one censored the talk. Even when there is disagreement as below (see, <http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated.htm>), even hostility in a chatroom, it is usually the theme or topic of the chatroom which provides a sense of orderliness.

[fRANKIE] fuck you texas rose. you need to be sent back to afghanistan, where they make your type behave

[ZtingRay] If those bastard terrorists would stay in their own damn country... .that would be great

**Table CS 6:5**

When someone has a different tone it is still about the same topic,

[AmericanExpress.] WHAT AFGHANISTAN NEEDS IS A DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT - ELECTED BY ALL THE PEOPLE.

[ZtingRay] GOD BLESS THE USA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Table CS 4:6

In the following series of turn-takings the moments when the participants self-regulate are signified as well as moments of leading; moments of contesting and moments of adding to the discussion are shown.

Participant	What is happening in this conversation
111) <brian> so did len say x3d not finalised yet?	adding to the discussion

<p>112) &lt;web3dADM&gt; x3d is not finalized yet...yes true i think the final spec is due by siggraph time this summer but a lot should happen at the web3d conference too</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>113) &lt;brian&gt;is a lot of business done there?</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>114) &lt;web3dADM&gt; yeah quite a bit i suppose....most of the working groups meet</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>115) &lt;brian&gt; there's not a lot of info about the BUSINESS of web3d</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>116) &lt;web3dADM&gt; ahhh you mean money business?</p>	<p>Contesting what was said prior</p>
<p>117) &lt;brian&gt; maybe someone should write a regular column i'm interested in what makes some of these companies tick!</p>	<p>Leading – introducing new information for the topic</p>

118) <brian> eg. blaxxun, shout etc	This is a continuation of 117) but due to the enter button being hit it shows as another turn
119) <pauline> am back...	
120) <web3dADM> hi there	
121) <pauline> hi again. ;-)	
122) <web3dADM> well I'm writing lots ;-)	
123) <brian> yeh, you're the info hub!	<u>self-regulate</u> – here after four turns of greetings and <web3dADM> writing <well I'm writing lots ;-)> with the smiley emoticon at the end <brian> reminds <web3dADM> that it is time to continue with the topic, <yeh, you're the info hub!>
124) <web3dADM> seriously...get the new "3D Magazine" issue on web3d	Leading – introducing new information for the topic
125) <brian> ok we'll probably get it here in oz in a few months! :(	adding to the discussion

<p>126) &lt;web3dADM&gt; ecommerce is certainly a good app...should help</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>127) &lt;web3dADM&gt; it may be up on there web site soon www.3dgate.com</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>128) &lt;brian&gt; thanks</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>129) &lt;pauline&gt; are there a lot of e-commerce sites doing vrml or 3d ??</p>	<p>Leading – introducing new information for the topic</p>
<p>130) &lt;web3dADM&gt; definitely growing</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>131) &lt;brian&gt; seems to have taken of (relatively) over the last 6 onths</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>
<p>132) &lt;web3dADM&gt; ahhhh! www.3dgate.com has the new issue!</p>	<p>adding to the discussion</p>

Because the topic of the chatroom is not breached except for a few greetings there is only one incidence of self-regulation in turn 123. In most chatrooms self-regulation occurs when someone tries to get a speaker back onto a specific topic or to refrain from a particular strand of talk.

In Case Study 1 the topic is about Hurricane Floyd and there is only one attempt at self-regulation and that is in turn 125 when <Zardiw> reacts to <SWMPTHING> saying <smpthting.....go back to your SWAMP> in reaction to <SWMPTHING>'s turn of <i SAW A BUS LOAD HEADING ACROSS THE GEORGIA STATE LINE THIS MORNING> in turn 117. In that chatroom this technique worked with <SWMPTHING> making one last comment on Mexican roofers, <WHAT A ABOUT THE CONTRACTORS WHO HIRE THEM?? THEY OUGHT TO BE TRIED FOR TREASON DURING A NATIONAL EMERGENCY LIKE THIS> in turn 133. The next turn from <SWMPTHING> is back to discussing where Hurricane Floyd is, <WHERE IS THE BLASTED DEVIL AT RIGHT NOW>.

### CS 6.3 Conclusion

Conversation analysis holds that talk is an orderly affair. It is “organized by use of machinery deployed in and adapted to local contingencies of interaction across an immense variety of social settings and participants” (Zimmerman & Boden, 1991, p. 8).

Conversation Analysis is a useful analytical tool for chatrooms where there is direct dialogue without the ‘noise’ of IRC that shows everyone that signs onto the chat server. For example in the IRC chat below there are only two utterances in thirty-six turns; the remainder show someone joining or leaving or an action such as kicking a user off out of the room taken by a user:

1. *** asim has joined #beginner
2. *** A-SirD-Bot has left #beginner
3. *** A-SirD-Bot has joined #beginner
4. *** nybbler905 sets mode: +b *!*@200-184-112-212.intelignet.com.br
5. *** nybbler905 sets mode: +b *!*@203.135.47.1
6. *** we2 was kicked by ^BeginBot^ (banned from channel)

7. *** asim was kicked by ^BeginBot^ (banned from channel)
8. *** young-male has joined #beginner
9. *** BARNITYA has joined #Beginner
10.*** CRONOS405 has quit IRC (Ping timeout)
11.<primz1> <b>dont know much about it</b>
12.*** Guest39262 has joined #beginner
13.*** DjNitin has quit IRC (Ping timeout)
14.*** nybbler905 sets mode: -b *!*@203.135.47.1
15.*** AlertMe has left #Beginner
16.*** sweet49 has joined #beginner
17.*** `Peer_Away` sets mode: -b *!*@202.151.228.95
18.*** ET is now known as Guest10473
19.*** kitty-mews sets mode: -b *!*joaoa@*.intelignet.com.br
20.*** nybbler905 sets mode: -b *!*@200-184-112- 212.intelignet.com.br
21.*** erin22 has joined #Beginner
22.*** jooe has joined #Beginner
23.*** Neo has joined #beginner
24.*** nybbler905 sets mode: +b *!*@ppp06-iligan.mozcom.com
25.*** Guest39262 was kicked by nybbler905 ( Clone Removal of *!*@ppp06-iligan.mozcom.com)
26.*** Neo was kicked by nybbler905 ( Clone Removal of *!*@ppp06-iligan.mozcom.com)
27.*** ci-be-rawit has quit IRC (Ping timeout)
28.*** adam has joined #Beginner
29.*** jooe has left #Beginner
30.*** jabin has quit IRC (Quit: )
31.*** sand`and`scent is now known as depths
32.*** dbztoolkit has joined #Beginner
33.*** guitarguy18 has joined #beginner
34.*** Guest49543 has joined #beginner
35.*** Elaijah has joined #Beginner
36.<dbztoolkit> <b>whats going on in here</b>

An IRC chatroom on <http://www.irc.org/>

With Internet based chatrooms that are not on an Internet Relay Channel (IRC) only a moderator can remove someone from the room unlike the IRC rooms where there may be several people who have permission to dislodge a participant from the room. According to

conversation analysis, turn-taking is integral to the formation of any interpersonal exchange. In *The Business of Talk: Organizations in Action*, Deidre Boden (1994, p. 66) compiles a list of the “essential features of turn-taking”:

one speaker speaks at a time

number and order of speakers vary freely

turn size varies

turns are not allocated in advance but also vary

turn transition is frequent and quick

there are few gaps and few overlaps in turn transition

From the non-IRC chatrooms this list by Boden is true, it is also true in the IRC chat above but the speakers need to be separated from the noise of the participants coming and going.

Unless one is lurking the participants in chatrooms demonstrate their knowledge of the chatsite they are visiting in order to be accepted or rejected by others in the chatroom. The signaling of one's status as an insider or not is important to establish dominance. In this chatroom on computer animation it is clear that <web3dADM> is the leader or moderator in this case study, not only because of the abbreviation for administrator (ADM) behind the web3d part of the username but because there <web3dADM> provides answers to questions people ask in the chatroom regarding the chatroom itself,

4) <Justin> my first visit here; what's normal?

8) <web3dADM> NORMAL ;- ) I try not to be normal ;- ) nothing formal  
justin unless there is a guest

<web3dADM> is also known by a first name 'sandy' showing the community that develops in a chatroom,

52) <web3dADM> hey pauline!

53) <Pauline> hiya sandy ! how are things going  
?

Conversational analysis of chatroom talk shows adjacency pairs and turn-taking common to the techniques of CA and the primary difference as this case study and others have shown is the interjection of conversation before a thought is complete, due to the enter button and the long periods between utterances that are filled with other streams of talk.

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[1] The url for this introduction is at: <http://web3d.about.com/mpchat.htm>

[2] I have used this as a moderated chatroom because this is on a specific topic and the owner of the chatroom was in the room at the time and answered questions as well as maintained the dialogue. However, on the site for this chatroom in the "guidelines" section it states: 'First things first. This is an unmoderated chat room. Your About.com Guides may be

present during scheduled events but the Guides do not constantly monitor their chat rooms on a 24 hour basis and, therefore neither the Guide nor About.com, are responsible for any content and behavior in the chat rooms.'

[3] <http://web3d.about.com/library/chatlogs/2000/blcl020900a.htm?once=true&>

[4] I requested permission to use the logs for this chat from the owner (moderator of the site) "Sounds cool...no objections at all...good luck finishing ;-)

Sandy" <http://web3d.about.com/mbiopage.htm>

[5] There are many interpretations of Conversation Analysis. Several which I will base this brief look at CA as it applies to chatrooms I cite below:

"Conversation Analysis is a disciplined way of studying the local organization of interactional episodes, its unique methodological practice has enabled its practitioners to produce a mass of insights into the detailed procedural foundations of everyday life..." (Paul ten Have)[5]

The central goal of conversation analytic research is the description and explication of the competences that ordinary speakers use and rely on in participating in intelligible, socially organized interaction. At its most basic, this objective is one of describing the procedures by which conversationalists produce their own behavior and understand and deal with the behavior of others. A basic assumption throughout is Garfinkel's (1967: 1) proposal that these activities – producing conduct and understanding and dealing with it – are accomplished as the accountable products of common sets of procedures. (Heritage & Atkinson (1984).

[6] See appendix4 the glossary for an expanded definition and sources on

ethnomethodology.

[7] See <http://www.uni-saarland.de/fak4/norrick/vlda.htm> for an essay on Functional theories of language (ethnomethodology and - more recently - in discursive psychology. See Sacks, H. (1972 a) 'An initial investigation of the usability of conversational data for doing sociology'. In: D. Sudnow, ed. *Studies in social interaction*. New York: Free Press: 31-74

[9] 'The system of a specific language at a specific time, seen in abstraction from its history; from its use on specific occasions and by specific individuals; from other systems of culture, knowledge, etc.' The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics, © Oxford University Press 1997.

[10] There has been much written on netiquette. Basically "Chat-Netiquette" is chatroom etiquette, the do's and don'ts of online communication. Netiquette covers both common courtesy online and the informal "rules of the road" of cyberspace.