GTFO!! – Politeness and stylistic features as means of positioning in MMORPGs

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Abstract

OMG! Lol n00b :)! uber 1337! b00n you wiped us! When gamers, especially of MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) like World of Warcraft®, talk to one another they adapt language to their needs, as do all speakers. It is a common misconception that language expressions such as smileys, acronyms, leet and neologisms are a deterioration of current language. On the contrary, they can be regarded as instances of creativity, efficiency, in-group markers and compensation of missing features available in face-to-face communication.

This paper will not only describe the use and functions of stylistic features of the language of MMORPGs by drawing upon empirical data from an online-questionnaire and qualitative data from a language corpus, but also tackle the question of ingame politeness. Is conversation ingame really less polite than in real-life? By reference to theories of pragmatics, this paper provides insights into how politeness is perceived and used as an interaction strategy by gamers to position themselves in conversations.

1. Introduction

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

A sentence like in the example above is not unusual when gamers, especially of MMORPGs (Massively Mutliplayer Online Role-Playing Games) like World of Warcraft®, Lord of the Rings Online® or Star Wars the Old Republic® talk to one another. While for gamers such an utterance is a common way to communicate, non-gamers could be confused or even unable to understand the meaning of this sentence completely. 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 (:p) and the Asian inspired Anime-smiley or Kaomoji (^^).

Although the language used by gamers consists of several features expressing distinctive meanings and functions, non-gamers often dismiss the language of gamers as nonsense or even as a deterioration of current language. However, the stylistic features used by gamers are often an expression of creativity or efficiency. Moreover, my argument is that gamers use these features also in order to position themselves in conversation with other gamers. Whenever people talk with one another, they take a position in the conversation at hand since they want to achieve a particular effect. This does not necessarily have to be a hierarchical decision or a matter of power relations, even though scholars like Harré and Moghaddam (2003: 5) regard position as a "cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions[...]". For them a position is a certain place in a hierarchical setting or, as they refer to it, a story line like being a judge in the story line of a court trial. While not completely disagreeing with such a view, I would define *position* as a place in relation to other people and therefore the focus is on the underlying motivation and the perlocutionary effect the speakers want to achieve rather than the social conventions, rights and rules which are applied to a situation, genre or story line. Positioning, in my definition, is a matter of co-operation between the speakers involved and refers to the expression of one's position but also to the relation of the interlocutor's position. There are several positioning moves speaker's perform like claiming sympathy, building rapport, evoking closeness or attempting to place oneself in the in-group. Clearly, it can also be the contrary, meaning that the interlocutor positions himself or herself at a distance of the other speaker or marks him or her as "the other" and outsider of the group. All this falls under Widdowson's (1984: 85) notion of territoriality, the speakers' "own circumscribed life space of ideas, values, beliefs within which they find their essential security". Positioning moves are subtle acts including speech acts and extra-linguistic cues as well as making use of stylistic features and strategies discussed under the label of politeness theory. What is important is that "positions are always relational" (Harré and Moghaddam 2003: 7). Thus, an action always leads to a *re*action in the interlocutor(s). Like in a dance in which the movement of one dancer causes the other dancer(s) to move as well, the positioning

movements of one speaker leads to reactions in the other speaker(s), even if it means that the other speaker(s) or dancer(s) leave the (dance) floor. Crucially, like dancing, communication requires co-operation to some extent.

This paper sheds light on some usages and reasons why certain features are used and attempts to raise awareness of the manifold aspects of language used by MMORPGs players. It elaborates on the notion of positioning and how gamers use stylistic features but also politeness strategies in order to position themselves in conversations with others. Stylistic features and politeness strategies are closely related and intertwined as this paper shows since the stylistic features can be used as subtle layers to convey politeness strategies.

Clearly, it is a common belief and also supported to some extent by the survey which was carried out for my thesis, that people do not regard MMORPGs as a place where politeness matters. Surprisingly, perception and reality of the survey participants are not congruent. This ambiguity calls for a closer analysis of politeness and politeness strategies in MMORPGs. There are several questions which arise when researching such a field like if there is politeness in these games and if so how it is expressed. In how far does ingame communication follow principles of other types of communication? Which factors are of importance to the gamers when communicating with one another? Does politeness matter to gamers at all?

While several scholars and researchers have already dealt with CMC (computer-mediated communication) like Crystal (2006), Baron (2000) and Herring (1996), only little research has been done in the field of language usage in MMORPGs. Especially the topic of politeness in games did not receive a lot of attention so far. The works of Grice (1991), Brown and Levinson (2009), and Goffman (1967) on cooperation and facework offer useful tools for dealing with aspects of politeness and its linguistic expressions. Although the concepts of politeness theory were not formulated to take online communication into account they can still be applied to all linguistic situations as a framework.

Yet, it is not enough to only review previous works when attempting to explore the topics of language usage in MMORPGs. Therefore, a self-compiled language corpus using data from chat-channels and official message-boards of games like World of Warcraft® and Lord of the

Rings Online® was used. At this point I would like to point out 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 of MMORPGs is outlined including the factors which influence communication in these games. In the following course of the paper, the results of studying the data sources concerning the use of stylistic features and politeness strategies in order to position in conversations are given and examples taken from the corpus are used to illustrate particular points and arguments.

2. The data sources

This paper is based on a survey I carried out for my PhD thesis project. It has been the basis for other papers and articles (see Kramer: 2010). The survey is a compilation of data gathered in MMORPGs, in the game (henceforth ingame) and from MMORPG gamers, thus qualitative data in form of a corpus as well as elicited data from a questionnaire. Both data sources complement one another and allow reassessing findings in the other data set.

The first data source 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 log-files. All in all, 1776 hours of ingame communication were recorded, 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 300000 characters. While the data taken from ingame communication, namely chat-logs of chat-channels (chat-rooms ingame) belongs 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 cover areas such as the gamer profiles, gaming behavior and language usage. While the first question sets give insights into the linguistic demographics and gaming behavior of the gamers, the third part inquires into the language usage of the gamers including the use of stylistic features and 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. 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. 88 percent of the participants are male and twelve percent are female gamers. These twelve percent 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 over time.

The common assumption of the public that gamers are loony, unemployed and addicted is not confirmed by this questionnaire. 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 or siblings but also with their romantic partners. Similarly, the general perception of the addicted gamer seems inaccurate as well. The results show that 26 percent of the participants play less than 15 hours a week, 21 percent play 20 to 24 hours a week and 14 percent play 30 to 39 hours per week. This seems comparable to many other hobbies 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 ingame.

The third part of the questionnaire dealing with the language behavior of the gamers, especially their use of stylistic features in certain situations and their attitudes towards politeness, will be discussed in the respective sections below. 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 present results of these questions and selected examples of language usage from the corpus which are particularly illustrative.

3. MMORPGs – Setting and influential factors

Before discussing and analyzing language usage of gamers, the communicative setting and factors which influence communication in it will be outlined in this section. 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 plays with each other online. While the name of the game genre includes the term role-playing, the assuming and acting out of a role of a character, the extent of the actual role-playing varies from MMORPG to MMORPG and from gamer to gamer.

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. There are several chat-channels available to the gamers in MMORPGs which have specific functions. The general chat-channels are used to search for other gamers to play with, search for items to buy or sell or advertise one's own guild[1]. Chitchat which has nothing to do with the game is discouraged in these general chat-channels. While the general chat-channels can be used and read by all

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[1] A guild is an association of gamer characters. A character can only be in one guild at a time.

gamers on the same server, other channels are more private like party channels, if the gamer is in a group of gamers (party), or the guild channels if he or she is a member of a guild. Gamers can only read and use these channels if they are in the respective group or guild. While the chat-channels are, like chat-rooms, one-to-many communication forms (c.f. Baron 2008: 22-23), there is also the possibility to privately message one gamer, so called whispering, which can be regarded as one-to-one communication (c.f. Baron 2008: 17-18).

Outside the game, most MMORPGs offer their gamers message-boards (or forums) to communicate. These can be used by the gamers to exchange about the game or anything else they are interested in. Message-boards provide the gamers with a platform for casual chitchat and small-talk discouraged in ingame chat-channels.

These communication channels are written forms of communication. As has been mentioned before, the only spoken type of communication in MMORPGs is VoIP chat, which has been disregarded in this survey for the already noted reasons. Furthermore, all but one channels of MMORPG communication, namely the message-boards, are synchronous forms of communication, meaning that the interlocutors are present while talking[2]. Besides these technical characteristics of communication in MMORPGs, there are also other factors affecting the way gamers communicate with each another.

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(s). 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, gamers utilize stylistic features to add meaning to their written conversations like smileys. These will be discussed and illustrated in the next section.

Another influence on communication in MMORPGs is the gamers' high stress factor. Gamers are under pressure and under a high amount of stress while gaming, especially when they are

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[2]   Talking refers in this context mostly to written communication

in a fight. Many gamers want to achieve something in the game, for example defeat a powerful enemy, gather valuable items and resources or just rise to the highest level possible in the game. These situations do not allow long-winded explanations or forms of communication but rather lead to specific linguistic choices and use of features for instance acronyms and neologisms which will be treated in detail in the next section.

A final factor which has to be kept in mind when dealing with language in MMORPGs, even though it is not necessarily valid to every gamer, is the role-playing aspect. Paradoxically, while MMORPGs have the term role-playing in their name, role-playing is not mandatory. Yet, it is an aspect which can influence linguistic choices and lead to the intentional omission of stylistic features which will be discussed in the following. At the same time it can also cause gamers to use specific politeness strategies.

4. Stylistic features

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, new words are invented and keyboard characters are used in unconventional ways.

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, one needs to learn to read them. Hence, the language usage in MMORPGs is of no pragmatic significance for non-gamers and therefore not understood. In the previous section several factors which make communication in MMORPGs different to communication in other settings and therefore give rise to other language features and usages have been mentioned. Knowing these factors helps understand language usage in MMORPGs and the stylistic features which will now be discussed in more detail.

A commonly known and understood stylistic feature used by gamers, but also on the Internet in general, is the so-called smiley. Crystal (2004: 38-39) defines smileys, also called emoticon, as: "a sequential combination of keyboard characters designed to convey the emotion associated with a particular facial expression."

Many gamers use smileys in order to compensate for the absence of paralinguistic cues and add another layer of meaning. Furthermore, smileys can save time as they allow for expressing attitudes and opinions easier than explaining them by means of words. At the same time they can also help avoiding misunderstandings. Yet, even the most conventional smileys may cause misunderstandings as even a smiling smiley can convey various emotions such as sympathy, joy, happiness, amusement or general good mood. The context is of great importance in order to decode the meaning of a smiley. There is no end to the inventive creation of smileys leading to a vast range of different emoticons which sometimes are not decoded easily (Kramer 2008: 56-60), as can be seen in the example below. There is even the possibility to reverse the reading direction of a smiley.

> Example (2) (: so one last chance where you either do what we say or I'll kick you out, I'm afraid S:

Another smiley type is the Asian inspired smiley which is referred to as "Anime-Smiley" (Kramer 2008: 58), "Kaomoji" (Nishimura 2007: 172) or "Bixies" (Runkehl et al 1998: 64), which was already illustrated in example one at the beginning of this paper. It is horizontally read and focuses on the depiction of eyes (e.g. ^^ ^_^ O.o 0_0) but sometimes also symbolizes other body parts like arms as in the example below:

> Example (3) >(^ _ ^)> Free huggles! No meanies!

Runkehl et al (1998: 98) also note the mitigating and emphasizing effect smileys can have in CMC. This can be seen in the previously given examples one and two in which the gamer uses a smiley to attenuate negative emotions of the message.

Smileys, it can be concluded, fulfill several functions and are used by gamers for different reasons and to achieve numerous effects. They can be used to evoke sympathy, closeness as well as antipathy and distance between interlocutors, convey emotions, avoid

misunderstandings but also cause them. Emoticons are a vital element for gamers to position in a conversation by either displaying their sympathy for their interlocutor or their antipathy. The given examples one and two illustrate how gamers use smileys to mitigate negative emotions of their statements. Example three presents an instance of a gamer who takes the position of sympathy and compassion for his or her fellow gamers by offering a playful, creative hugging smiley. Therefore, smileys can be regarded as a feature used to position in the territory of the interlocutor.

The results of the questionnaire show that smileys are known and used by all participants in almost all communication situations. The results indicate that the less familiarity a situation offers the fewer smileys are used. Gamers use smileys especially when whispering or messaging a friend (149 of 324 participants use them often, 83 always). It is also worth mentioning that the use of smileys is frowned upon in role-playing contexts and by strict role-players, especially in Lord of the Rings Online®. However, generally, gamers react more positively to requests when a smiley is used.

Acronyms and neologisms are two stylistic features which are tightly interconnected and used by gamers for similar reasons. For example, 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:

Example (4) 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 gamer and is treated as a single word itself. It is common practice of gamers to transform acronyms into words by adding tense markers to them (see Kramer 2010: 140).

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

Example (5) 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 (see 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 five 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. Positioning as part of the group is just like claiming common ground with the interlocutor working on human's urge to be involved with others.

While efficiency is a driving force when using acronyms and neologisms in ingame communication, other features such as leet do not make communication faster and easier but more difficult. According to my questionnaire, leet or 1337 is one of the lesser used features in MMORPGs. 66 percent of the gamers claim to not use leet at all. Leet is derived from elite and refers to a sort of code in which numbers and symbols substitute letters in a word in order

to visually represent them. Therefore, the transcription of the word leet is 1337. Since it is up to the speaker which letters to replace by which symbols, leet is certainly not a feature which makes communication faster but more complex. The prevalent reason for using leet is creativity and enjoyment of language play (see Kramer 2010: 141).

Example (6) How me get c00l gr33n n4m3 on ze forums liek you ? O.o

Example six illustrates the usage of leet. The o is replaced by 0, the e by 3 and the a by 4. The deliberate incorrect spelling as in *ze* for *the* and *liek* for *like* is a basic feature of leet and can be regarded as an instance of playfulness and creativity (Kramer 2008: 73-74).

Creativity and displaying individuality are not the only reasons why leet is used, but also the creation of an insider code. Leet is a marker of group membership and is promoted by game developers who offer merchandise with leet messages printed on them. However, there is also a certain rejection of leet as it is sometimes regarded as immature and childish. There is a certain discrepancy between the devaluation of leet and the deliberate demonstration of it (Kramer 2008: 74-75). Leet is therefore a very special stylistic feature when it comes to positioning oneself. On one hand, a speaker using leet positions himself or herself as member of the group and as a creative and playful gamer. On the other hand, leet puts the speaker in an odd position, even in a position connoted with childishness and immaturity. Since leet is a less used feature by gamers with slightly negative connotations it is used by gamers for specific purposes, either to provoke, for irony or to show off the knowledge of this feature.

Clearly, there are several other stylistic features which would be worth discussing such as iteration, capitalization or actionmarkers (see Kramer 2008; Dittmann 2001), yet, the scope of this article does not allow such a detailed analysis of all language features of MMORPGs. However, the four briefly discussed features in this section provide insights into the usage of language in MMORPGs. They are particularly illustrative for the matter of positioning in conversations. As could be seen using the example of smileys, stylistic features are used by gamers for several reasons like evoking sympathy and closeness, showing antipathy and distance but also mitigating negative emotions. The latter will be of particular interest in the following sections where politeness strategies are discussed in more detail. Apart from

emotive conveyance of meaning, displaying one's membership to the group is a crucial aspect of the positioning in conversations which is performed by using in-group neologisms and acronyms. Presenting oneself as member of a group and claiming common ground with interlocutors is also a crucial factor in politeness strategies.

5. Politeness ingame

There is the common assumption, as has been mentioned already, that MMORPGs are hostile surroundings in which politeness does not matter. This assumption is supported by the results of the questionnaire in which the majority of the participants feels that the gaming surrounding is more hostile than real-life. Yet, at the same time all of the participants but ten claim to be polite to other gamers ingame. 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 interesting to examine the reasons for being polite given by the participants of the survey. One of the reasons to be polite to other gamers given by the participants is that it gets them better responses. In order to achieve what they want, they use politeness. Closely connected to this motivation is another reason for polite behavior stated by the participants, a tit for tat system. Gamers claim to use a tit for tat system in which they are friendly to gamers who are friendly to them, and impolite to those who are unfriendly 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.

Before continuing in examining what politeness ingame and for gamers looks like, it appears useful to define what politeness actually means. 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. Scollon and Scollon (2001: 46-48) and Locher (2004: 55) refer to the two aspects of face in terms of involvement and independence. This terminology is more intuitive and shows that a speaker wants to be involved with others but at the same time also independent and free. Just like in the already mentioned notion by Widdowson (1984: 85) of territoriality, one wants to protect one's personal, private space and yet in order to communicate and interact with others, which is another human urge, one has to lower the barrier to allow entrance.

When speaking to others it is always a balancing act, as both interlocutors have these two sides of the face and neither of them wants to threaten his or her 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. Such strategies and how they are utilized by gamers are illustrated in the next section using one of the core questions of the questionnaire.

Like in real-life there are situations ingame which do not allow the use of politeness strategies and require the speakers to commit the FTA or, as it is called in politeness theory, go bald on record. 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 ingame 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 one gamer differentiates between his characters:

> Example (7) 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.

The gamer notes how he or she makes different linguistic choices depending on the character's background story. Therefore, the role-playing aspect has to be kept in mind when researching language usage and in particular politeness strategies as the acting out of a background story of a character can influence linguistic choices.

6. The wipe – politeness strategies in use

Finally, I 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:

> Example (8) L2P FFS NOOB!! /kick

Rather than offending the other gamer by saying *Learn to play for fucking sake noob*, 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:

> Example (9) 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 ten.

> Example (10) 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 (see Brown and Levinson 2009: 129). The gamer seeks the cooperation of the other player and tries to involve him or her in solving the problem by using an inclusive *we*. By this the gamer tries to preserve the freedom of the other player to decide and act. 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 *little* attenuates the FTA. These expressions, which House and Kasper (1981) refer to as downtoners and understaters, "modulate the impact of the speaker's utterance" (Watts 2003: 183). 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, off-record strategies are rare. Such off-record strategies (see Brown and 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:

> Example (11) 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. But not only the

problem is merely hinted at, also the agent is avoided. Instead of directly addressing the gamer who caused the problem, the utterance is not directed to one single player but a general statement. Such careful and cautious hinting is not often used in such situations as my survey shows, only ten participants (3,09%) used an off-record strategy. A possible reason for this could be that off-record strategies often fail to succeed as they are not straight forward enough.

While the common perception is that MMORPGs are offensive surroundings, gamers go at 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. 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 even prevent the whole success of the undertaking. Therefore, it is better for gamers to use strategies to manipulate the other player towards their personal 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 one's reputation by being impolite because it lowers the chances of getting help in the game.

7. Conclusion

This paper shows that gamers of MMORPGs have to meet several linguistic challenges while gaming and various factors influence their language usage. The rich gamers' 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 and missing paralinguistic cues, 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, 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.

As Watts (2003: 263) put it "(Im)politeness$_1$ is an area of discursive struggle in social practice in every society and in every language". I would reformulate this statement claiming that it is not necessarily politeness or impoliteness but rather positioning in conversation which is a discursive struggle. Yet, the word struggle appears to be slightly hostile therefore I prefer to return to my metaphor of dancing I used in the introduction. Hence, positioning is a discursive dance in social practice in every society, language, game and practice in which speakers communicate with one another. Politeness strategies like stylistic features are instruments to cause certain effects in the interlocutors and to achieve goals. They are means of positioning.

As could be seen in this paper, gamers of MMORPGs use several stylistic features and politeness strategies to position themselves and others in different ways in conversations. Evoking sympathy or antipathy, claiming common ground, displaying membership in a group and closeness but also distance are only some of the subtle nuances which can be brought about by smileys, acronyms, neologisms, leet and other conversational strategies. The notion of the face with the positive and negative sides of the face is itself a perfect example of the nuances of positions and balancing acts speakers perform in communication. Since the involvement of the positive face and the independence of the negative face are two sides of the same coin or two positions, they cannot be combined easily. Yet, speakers and hearers attend to both of them. As speakers we constantly intrude the personal territory of others and let them intrude ours because we have the desire to be free and secure in our privacy and at the same time involved and close to others.

Clearly, this paper can not portrait the complete linguistic reality of MMORPGs, nor can it explore the complete notion and concept of positioning as it only scratches the surface of this topic. The concept of positioning in conversation and gaming certainly needs much more concretion and more exploration based on data, which is attempted in my PhD thesis. But this paper can be used as a starting point to research communication in computer games, in

MMORPGs in particular, and the concept of positioning. It gives a glimpse at the creative processes and the obstacles gamers face while gaming. Gamers, as maybe all humans, try to achieve something in a conversation and they do so by positioning themselves using strategies and instruments, be it ingame or in the real-world.

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