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# Spoken Characteristics in Written Language: the Dialog Conference

Donna Hiatt

As computer bulletin boards and electronic mail systems multiply, an examination of the language used in them, including levels of usage, becomes increasingly important as writers consider the etiquette appropriate for this popular new communication medium. This paper examines examples from the Dialog Conference of CCC-INFO, Brigham Young University's computer bulletin board. CCC-INFO's patrons are all students, faculty, or others associated with the university. The samples gathered cover the period from December 12, 1991 to April 2, 1992. In the examples I quote throughout this paper I have retained misspellings and errors from the original messages.

As I was transcribing interviews for a folklore fieldwork project, I had difficulty in transferring spoken language to written language. Since *how* the interviewees spoke was as important to my project as *what* they said, I had to find ways to imitate spoken language with the written word. This was one of the first times I had critically examined the differences between spoken and written language. Most of the interactions people have with each other bear little resemblance to formal written sources such as a textbook. So when people desire to write in a way that simulates conversation, they must break many of the rules and standards of formal written language, creating their own conventions. The Dialog Conference, a computerized discussion forum in which people leave messages for each other on subjects ranging from politics to movies, exemplifies this blurring of mediums. Although it is a written medium, writers use diction, grammatical construction, and cues to imitate spoken conversation.

A striking characteristic of the diction used in Dialog messages is the frequent usage of informal and slang words. One writer refers to "all the whiney, gutless, mud-slinging, sweet-talking presidential hopefulls [sic]." These are hardly terms one finds in a formal essay, but they express her opin-

ion colorfully. Other writers talk about screw-ups, commies, radar cops (photo radar), bucks, a crap, get-togethers, a gotcha, King George and Wild Willie, getting nailed, squashing kids, and being messed. They use terms like pal, preachy, double idiot, sleeze, slick, duped, outrageous, awesome, and pie-in-the-sky. One writer said "I don't do long distance." Another called a politician a "get it done' kind of guy who doesn't put up with a lot of excuses or smoke screens." Interjections add to the writers' choice of words. Writers used the following: "Amen!" "Ah-ha!" "Ok, ok." "Wow!" "Ack!" "Augh!!!"

One device writers use in their selection of words is to imitate the sounds used in speech such as through syncope. Writers abbreviate of as "o'," because as "cause," old as "ol'," until as "'till," playing as "playin'," sort of as "sorta," information as "info," second as "sec," and yes as "ya." These mutations remind one of speech because people often leave off letters in words or slur words together when they speak.

Many terms used in speech seem redundant in formal written language. Some are used to stall for time as the speaker thinks. Examples of such throat-clearers which appeared in Dialog messages include uh, hmmm, ah, and heheh. Using an informal style, Dialog writers often begin sentences "Well," "In any event," "Anyway," and even "As for..." Other colloquial expressions which give the messages a casual tone include "I believe," "of course," "I guess," "blah blah blah," "who knows," "I'd dare say," "sure," "that sort of thing," "but believe me," "oh well," and "by the way." Dialog writers' choice of words clearly reveals an informal style imitative of spoken language.

Besides diction, writers use many different grammatical constructions to imitate spoken language. For example, they use many fragments. Usually, the rest of the sentence is implied. When someone wrote "Arguments anyone????," the reader knew by

the context that the sentence was an abbreviated way of saying the complete thought: "Does anyone have any arguments with this?" However the shortened form is more forceful because it is more brief. Alternately, the shortened form could also be a play on the structure of the idiomatic phrase, "tennis anyone?" thus inviting others to argue if they would care to.

In the following example, the words "would you believe" are used in the first sentence, then merely implied in the following two sentences.

Would you believe he's in a federal prison for mail fraud?? That the bulk of his 'political' efforts have been in the form of fund-raising? Or that he was jailed for pocketing those mailed-in campaign funds?

Another writer began a message in which he was replying to another writer: "My province? California." In conversation fragments are frequently used as speakers and listeners both use the immediacy of the context to easily construct the implied complete message.

Another grammatical construction, run-on sentences, appeared along with the fragments. In several cases, the writer uses a comma to join two complete sentences. For example, one person wrote

I must say I wish you'd run for office some time, we need someone with your insight and ability to get to the heart of the matter in these political confusions that seem to constantly descend upon us.

The use of run-ons corresponds with an abundance of conjunctions. Strings of sentences are joined together with ands and buts, creating one long sentence. For example, speaking of socialized medicine, someone wrote

But believe me, the vast majority are not suffering. It has its problems yes, and its a tax drain, but in the overall picture, its worth it.

This also shows a sentence beginning with "but," which is common. "And" was also used often to begin sentences.

If you read aloud a sentence formed with many conjunctions, it sounds like a common spoken sentence. A formal sentence would not sound as natural when it was read aloud. Both fragments and run-ons also serve to simulate the rhythm of spoken language in the written messages. One of the main qualities of the messages on Dialog is that you can easily imagine how the message would sound if spoken aloud. One of the key ways that writers do this is using cues. A cue is a device a writer uses to indicate how a

sentence should be read. For example, the following quote uses parentheses, capitalization, and a dash as cues:

I'm from Canada, and despite my dislike of socialism (I'm usually quite the conservative soul), the national health plan is one thing I like - A LOT !!!!

A common cue, the parentheses, indicates an aside, a break in the sentence. In spoken language, these breaks are indicated by a change in the tone of the speaker's voice. This quote also uses capitalization for emphasis. A speaker's voice would become more forceful on these words. Out of 84 messages I looked at, this device was used 25 times. The dash indicates a pause. Speakers use pauses for dramatic effect and flow.

Other cues are also used for emphasis and for flow. One writer, to emphasize an entire line, set it off from the rest of the message by double spacing before and after. (Messages are automatically single spaced by the primitive word-processing program used by the Dialog system.) This same writer also emphasized the word "another" by writing it "another." The dashes are an abbreviated way of underlining the word for emphasis.

In other messages, commas are used not only where they are called for by traditional rules, but also whenever the writer wants to indicate a pause. Some writers, such as the one quoted above writing about socialized medicine, use a comma after every phrase or group of words: "This gives me great satisfaction, knowing that in an emergency room, they look at my injuries first, not my wallet."

Writers also often use ellipses for flow. They indicate to the reader either a pause or that the sentence is dwindling off without being completed. For example, after an extended exchange of messages on socialism, a writer asserted "That's it pal.... So quit thinking I some kind of a Commie...." In another example, a person wrote "Maybe I was just lucky...?" These ellipses show the sentence trailing off. When combined with the question mark and the "maybe," the reader knows that the writer was not really feeling lucky, but said that facetiously.

A more complex cue is the use of quotation marks. Writers often use single quotes in place of double quotes, probably because they are faster to type. Similar to standard written language, quotation marks are used to indicate a title or to indicate that the writer is repeating someone. Unlike standard written language, quotation marks are also used as a cue to indicate how to read the message. In the following example quotation marks are used where the inflection of a speaker's voice might change:

I find it irritating that they find it necessary to use ANY label; I find it disgusting that they have to use a 'Politically correct' label.

Another writer uses quotation marks to indicate that she is being ironic when she describes the actions of the officers in the Rodney King case as "overzealous."

Writers also use quotation marks to indicate their voice inflection or emphasis when they mimic another's expression, as in the following example:

Granted, a G movie will contain less 'bad' stuff than an R movie, but the lines between PG, PG-13, and R are extremely vague.

In another example the writer placed quotation marks around the phrase "young Narm." The spelling and quotation marks together indicate that the writer wishes to imitate a Utah accent. Quotation marks serve as a device both for quoting others and for bringing in the qualities of spoken language.

Another type of cue is used to prevent misunderstanding. My husband left a private message for me on Dialog which upset me because of one sentence. I mentioned this to him later and discovered that he hadn't written the sentence seriously. If I had heard him say it, I would have known by his tone that he meant to be humorous and would not have found the message annoying. This is a problem for many writers on Dialog, especially when they are being ironic or sarcastic. Since they don't meet the people face-to-face with whom they exchange messages, they can only rely on the written medium to express themselves. To prevent misunderstanding, they cue the reader that they are being humorous by writing "<grin>" or simply "<g>" after a sentence or by making a sideways smiley face. This type of cue serves the same function as tone of voice and facial expression do in conversation.

In an example of this cue, one person wrote to another: "Thanks for not being so close minded as Calvin gets to be sometimes. (now watch my signon vanish.... :->)." In "signon" a person enters their name and secret password to gain access to the bulletin board. Calvin is in charge of the bulletin board and controls who can sign on to use the bulletin board. The writer wanted to make sure that people, especially Calvin, realized that he was kidding, so he added a sideways smiley face to the message.

The following example uses both the grin/smiley face cue and a device called echoing. If a person wants to directly address what another writer has said, they may copy or "echo" a portion of the other writer's message in order to clearly establish the context for the message they are writing. An arrow (->) indicates the echoed portion.

-> me, just as the grass and flowers aren't going to be too

-> queasy about using me for fertilizer when the time comes.

-> ;-)

Yeah, but it still makes >me< a little queasy... ah, well... my husband is the only one who really has to put up with me. <grin>

Note the "queasy" smiley face created by a semi-colon, a hyphen, and a curly bracket (;-)), as opposed to a regular smiley face made from a colon, a hyphen, and a square bracket (:->). This example clearly illustrates the conversational quality of these messages. This is the end of a series of messages discussing the relative advantages of vegetarianism and meat-eating. This person begins her message by directly and immediately answering the previous message, which she echoed a portion of. She also uses ellipses for pauses, square brackets for emphasis, and conversational diction such as "yeah," "ah, well," and the expression to "put up with." "Put up with" is an example of the large use of colloquial phrasal verbs in Dialog Conference messages. Also in this series of messages is an interesting variation on the <grin> cue: "It always kinda grosses me out seeing all those cellophane wrapped hunks of bloody muscle in the grocery store... <shudder> ick!" The square brackets seem to be used by Dialog writers for any imitation of physical actions that meaningfully accompany speech.

The example above used echoing to establish context. Some writers do not know how to use echoing. But since each message indicates the subject of the message, as well as the writer and who they are replying to, they begin without bothering to establish the context. One writer begins "I agree. R rating alone does not make me go or stay away." If these messages followed rules for formal writing instead of imitating conversations, the writer would have been required to clearly explain the context before expressing his views. In other examples of this conversational quality, writers begin messages with "Now we are getting the idea," "Not so," and "Ah-ha!"

A final example illustrates many of the techniques used to imitate conversation in the Dialog Conference. The first set of lines is echoed by the writer of the second set of lines, and those lines are echoed by the writer of the last lines.

TC> what can a fulltime working student do with his wife

TC> that she will enjoy?

FE> Well, speaking as a female... um, well.... no, never

FE> mind... this BYU's BBS.

Perhaps that should be qualified to ...what can a full-time working student do with his wife that she can enjoy and can be discussed on this BBS... (Probably not a lot... :-) )

This writer has echoed and then commented upon an exchange between two other writers, using their initials to indicate who is speaking. This message uses colloquial word choice such as “um,” “well,” and “never mind.” It breaks traditional rules of grammatical construction by using fragments. It uses as cues ellipses to indicate pauses, parentheses to indicate asides, and a sideways smiley face to indicate humor. If this exchange had been written in a formal style, it would have been difficult for the writers to gain as much depth in implications as they do here by using a conversational style.

Communication is difficult to describe. Grammars have attempted to capture rules for language

use, but they work within the framework of formal (i.e., grammatical) usage. They never approach explaining the depth of meaning and expression found in an everyday conversation. Recognizing the advantages of casual speech, the writers of Dialog messages have developed conventions to duplicate many characteristics of conversation. The qualities of the messages left on this computerized bulletin board are captured in the name of the conference—Dialog. Like a dialogue in a story, the exchanges imitate spoken conversation within the limitations of the written page.