

The Power of Dots: Using Nonverbal Compensators in Chat Reference

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This paper analyzes the use of nonverbal compensators in librarians' chat reference conversations with college and university students. Comparing the transcripts of conversations with students who rated librarians as "very helpful" and "unhelpful" in a survey following the reference interaction, the data shows that the librarians' frequent use of certain compensators for the purpose of engaging, empathizing, or expressing continued thought is correlated to student satisfaction with the librarian. Specifically, the use of ellipses and dashes to supplant more traditional forms of punctuation, the purpose being to convey thought and interest in the patron's information need, is predictive of positive satisfaction levels. The implications for practitioners and instructors of chat reference include purposeful use of such compensators for specific purposes and the inclusion of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) in contemporary reference education.

Introduction

One central aspect of library 2.0 and emerging library services online is social interaction using CMC (Maness, 2006). Though trends in CMC are certainly toward the use of visual and audio formats, most synchronous communication online still involves written language, and certainly in libraries this "chat" medium is the primary way librarians communicate with patrons through web-based technologies. But effective CMC through written language is a skill unto itself: it appears to be not conventional written communication, but neither is it spoken; it is a unique form of written communication with qualities of both written and spoken language (Maness, 2007). If librarians are to, as guidelines suggest, "[use] a tone of voice and/or written language appropriate to the nature of the transaction" (RUSA, 2004), it is then necessary they understand the nature of this relatively new type of transaction.

This study will provide insight into the use of nonverbal compensators in chat reference with the intent of helping librarians foster a positive relationship with users, in order that librarians better understand what sort of language is most appropriate in chat reference. This understanding and resulting skill is necessary in order to facilitate the creation of library 2.0 environments.

Background

In a previous study, the author conducted a quantitative linguistic analysis of chat reference in thirty-one distinct conversations, fifteen of which included librarians rated as "very helpful," and sixteen of which involved librarians rated as "unhelpful" (Maness, 2007). The conversations were comprised of a total of 6,787 words, and were provided by AskColorado, a state-wide, multi-type library collaborative virtual reference service. That study quantified the use of grammatical and other linguistic tokens in an attempt to construct a linguistic profile of chat reference, comparing the profile

to student-to-student instant messaging conversations, and also contrasting the language of “very helpful” to “unhelpful” librarians.

Among other linguistic factors, the “tokens” of language that were included in that study were emoticons (CMC characters meant to convey emotion by symbolizing particular facial expressions), utterances (e.g. *hmm*), multiple punctuation (e.g. *?!* or *!!*), non-standard use of capital letters (e.g. *That is NOT what I WANTED*), and the use of more conventional punctuation in less than conventional circumstances, particularly the ellipse and the dash.

The language used by librarians was more grammatically formal than the language of students, and also tended to use less of these nonverbal compensators. However, librarians rated as “very helpful” used these compensators much more frequently than those rated as “unhelpful,” and did so disproportionately to their students: when librarians used nonverbal compensators more often, students did so less often. This study further quantifies and also qualitatively analyzes the librarians’ use of linguistic tokens that were most predictive of student satisfaction: ellipses and dashes, multiple punctuation, and utterances. It quantifies them not by token, but by supposed motivation for the use of the token. The purpose in this study is to find the intent behind the use of nonverbal compensators in chat reference, and to suggest best practices for their contextual use by comparing satisfied and unsatisfied patrons (all respondents who rated librarians as “very helpful” rated themselves as either “very satisfied” or “satisfied,” and all respondents who rated librarians as “unhelpful” rated themselves as “not satisfied”).

Methodology

Establishing the intent of a writer’s or speaker’s use of any linguistic token is fraught with inherent difficulty. Each communicative exchange is different, and any categorization of smaller units of language along intent is invariably simplistic. But it is valuable to group the use of such tokens in order to garner a sense of the best use of such tokens in such environments. Suggesting librarians use ellipses is helpful, but suggesting they use ellipses to convey a particular meaning that face-to-face nonverbal communication would naturally foster, is more helpful.

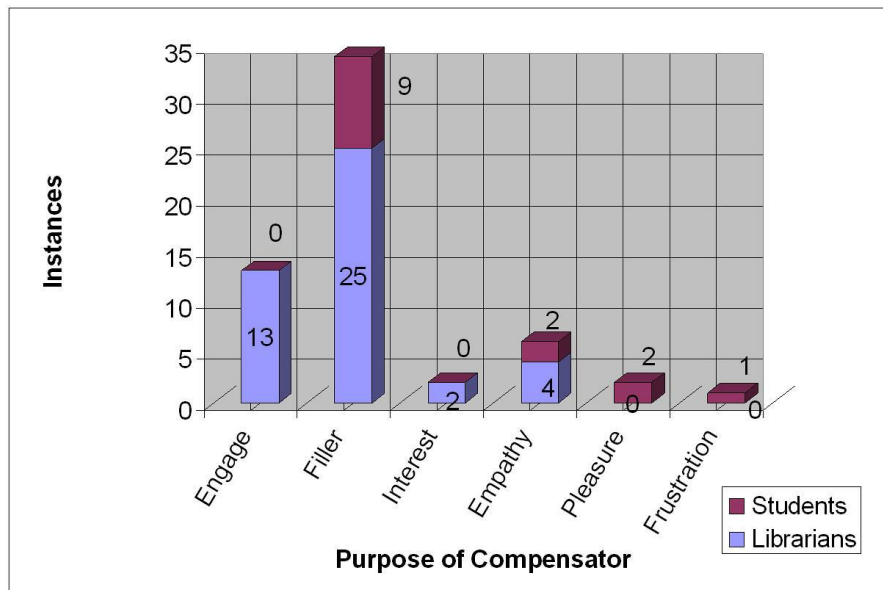
The nonverbal compensators used in these conversations were classified as arising from the intent to engage the patron, to express interest, empathy, pleasure or frustration, or to take the place of standard punctuation or grammar, here referred to as “filler.” In almost all cases, “filler” tokens were ellipses and were used in the place of a period followed by a capital letter to begin the next sentence—the ellipse was used to indicate the completion of one and beginning of another sentence. Generally, ellipses and dashes were categorized as engagement or filler; instances of multiple-punctuation were primarily considered to be expressing frustration; utterances expressed interest and empathy; and capitals expressed frustration.

Results

The use of such compensators by librarians rated as “very helpful” was frequent, significantly more frequent than students’ use of them.

In particular, the use of ellipses at the end and in the middle of lines was indicative of satisfied students. When they were used at the end of lines the supposed intent was one of engagement: its nonverbal face-to-face equivalent are facial expressions and body language intended to keep the listener intent on the speaker, waiting for the next thought as sentence to arise. The supposed intent of the use of ellipses within lines was “filler.”

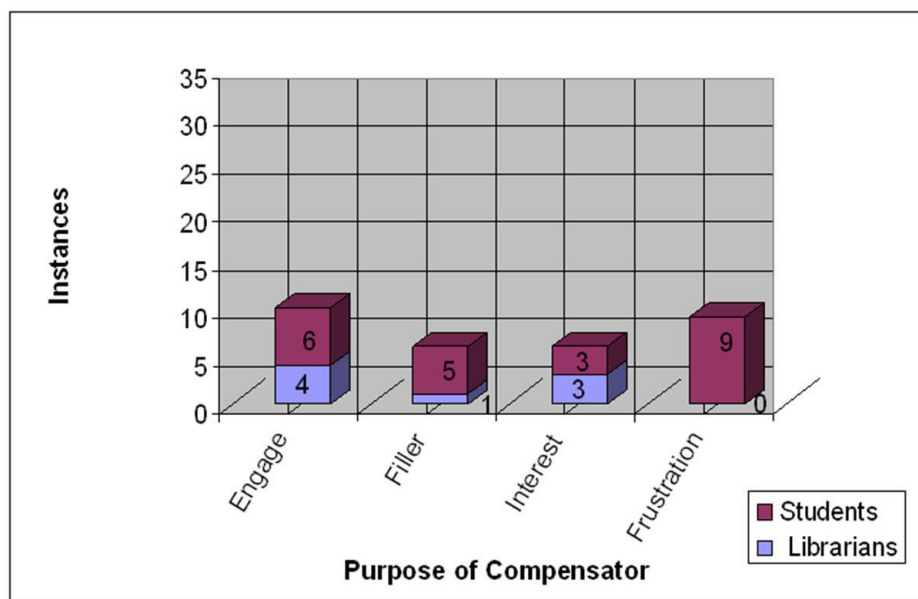
Image 1: “Very Helpful” Librarians Conversations



The use of these “fillers” was the intent most indicative of satisfied patrons. There are many possible interpretations of this observation, and it is here supposed that the use of these tokens may contribute to satisfaction because they express continued thought, and therefore interest in and attention to the patron’s need. The use of the ellipse within a line somehow conveys to the patron the librarian’s effort in filling their information need.

Contrasting these conversations to the conversations of librarians rated as “unhelpful” produces rather dramatic results.

Image 2: “Unhelpful” Librarians Conversations



These conversations use significantly less nonverbal compensators. They are less diverse (only four purposes as opposed to six), and the nonverbal communication that does take place is driven more by

students than librarians, a dramatic contrast to the conversations of “very helpful” librarians. Perhaps most interesting is the difference in use of fillers by librarians. “Very helpful” conversations included twenty-five tokens for this purpose (primarily ellipses, but also dashes), while “unhelpful” conversations included only a single instance.

Conversations wherein librarians were considered “unhelpful” by the patron appear to be nonverbally-deficient conversations, perhaps indicative of communication barriers, or even part of a larger issue that Radford (2007) terms “relational barriers.” This data suggests that using these tokens, particularly the ellipse, in ways to manage the nonverbal communication of the interaction, perhaps by intimating interest and engagement, is an effective way to provide a welcoming environment for information needs. Librarians rated as “very helpful” seemed to preemptively mitigate the need for patrons to use nonverbal compensators to express complex emotions and needs by using such compensators abundantly themselves. Effectively, librarians who are nonverbally expressive in chat reference eliminate the need for their patrons to nonverbally express themselves. They create an environment where patrons feel they are understood.

Other variables can of course be more contributory to the patrons’ satisfaction than the librarians’ use of nonverbal compensators, but their abundant use is overwhelmingly indicative of that satisfaction as well. More linguistic and communications research in chat reference and related CMC issues is needed, but it is apparent from this study that librarians who are skilled in nonverbal communication via CMC are likely to be successful in chat reference.

Conclusion

As library 2.0 develops and libraries continue adopting CMC as a method for providing reference, the profession must seek to understand it. This study suggests that librarians make frequent and specific use of nonverbal compensators in chat reference. While the use of such tokens is certainly part of a larger issue—an overall familiarity with CMC—it does appear that the use of ellipses and other tokens is an important part of that larger skill set. However, it does not appear from this data that librarians must use anything other than conventional grammatical forms—ellipses and dashes—in order to communicate effectively. Using such linguistic tokens to convey interest, effort, and engagement in the patron’s information needs appears to be strongly indicative of satisfied patrons.

Contemporary reference education and training should also include topics in CMC. Librarians staffing library 2.0 reference services need to develop the communication skills emerging in web 2.0 environments. Research, collaboration, and practice foster professional discourse that allows librarians to theorize and practice the sometimes serendipitously simple effective use of language. In face-to-face reference, eye-contact, posture, and other nonverbal communication is of the utmost importance in creating a positive relationship with patrons; in chat reference and CMC, the power of the ellipse, of simple dots, can make all the difference.

Acknowledgement

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