

Diary or Megaphone?

The Pragmatic Mode of Weblogs

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Abstract

This paper proposes a model for a functional classification of weblogs based on the communicative goals that their users associate with them. I argue that survey data, ethnographic research and linguistic evidence suggests a basic two-way split between weblog entries written to record experiences, for critical reflection and to release emotions (*ego blogging*) and those written to persuade, argue, discuss and comment on external events (*topic blogging*). I begin by describing the techno-situational factors that shape how blogs are written and how bloggers approach audience design in conjunction with their stylistic and topical choices. I then apply two basic principles from linguistic pragmatics, Grice's *Cooperative Principle* (Grice 1989) and Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance Theory* (Sperber & Wilson 1986) to two short examples in order to demonstrate how a blogger's *conceptualized audience* (CA), signaled by their linguistic choices, points to a blog entry's *pragmatic mode*.

Focus of prior research

Since their inception as 'logs of the web' in the 1990s (cf. Blood 2000), weblogs have become an increasingly versatile platform for the publication of different kinds of content by an increasingly diverse usage community. While the use of blogs in a variety of contexts, such as academic research (Suzuki 2004) and business (Sprague 2007) has become increasingly popular, the prototypical use of blogs as a medium for personal publishing by private non-professionals still dominates over other scenarios (cf. Sifry 2008). Blogging has been studied from various disciplinary perspectives, among them ethnography (Gumbrecht et al 2004, Nardi et al 2004, Schiano et al 2004, boyd 2006), communication studies (Kelleher & Miller 2006, Schmidt 2007, Stefanone & Yang 2007), political science (Drezner & Farrell 2004, Trammel 2006, Trammel & Kaye 2007), sociology (Adamic & Glance 2005, Ali-Hasan & Adamic 2007), computational linguistics (Argamon et al 2003, Mishne 2005, Schler et al 2006), linguistics (Herring et al 2005, Nowson et al 2005, Nilsson 2003, Puschmann forthc.), rhetorics (Miller & Shepard 2004, McNeill 2005) and organizational studies (Efimova 2004, Efimova & Grudin 2007, Jackson et al 2007). While studies from social disciplines tend to focus on the motivation of bloggers,

how they characterize their activity and on their interaction with others in sociocommunicative networks, studies from the technical fields tend to focus on the analysis and classification of tangible content (language data, links, comments) in relative isolation from what are perceived as intangible and opaque psychological aspects of blogging. Research from both directions has so far been concerned primarily with an adequate description of the emerging phenomenon of blogging itself and with methods for its description, rather than with a theory that (if tentatively) seeks to account for *why* individuals engage in blogging and *why* blogs take on a form that, while being highly varied at first sight, engenders the predictable occurrence of certain stable linguistic features. While there is a growing number of descriptions of blogs as textual products, of blogging as a practice and of the blogosphere as a sociocultural space from the perspective of different disciplines, the (cognitive) path from process to product remains relatively unexplored.

The impetus of this paper is therefore a) to differentiate those linguistic aspects which are mandated by technology from those which are the result of a conscious decision on the part of the blogger, b) to explain these choices via the relationship of a blogger to his projected readers and c) to point out how the result of these choices are reflected in language.

Functional and formal properties of blogs

Blogs have been studied with considerable non-technical and epistemic interest by scholars from areas such as rhetorics, genre theory and computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA). Like other types of computer-mediated communication (CMC), they pose somewhat of a challenge to genre theory in that they defy the unity of communicative purpose and stable discourse community that is generally seen as a prerequisite for genre integrity (Swales 1990), leading some scholars to avoid the term genre entirely (cf. Herring, who favors the expressions *emic mode* and *sociotechnical mode* to describe forms of CMC).

A range of functions is realized by very different individuals and, increasingly, organizations via blogs, yet certain usage patterns exist in regards to linguistic

properties such as tense, personal pronouns, time/place adverbials, discourse markers and metalanguage. While stylistic similarities between different genres do not necessarily pose a difficulty to functionally oriented genre theory, a differentiated explanation for the technologically induced stylistic stability of blogs has not been provided to date. Whereas in established domain-specific genres (e.g. legal language, medical terminology) function and discourse community together form an amalgam that has over time solidified into a formal genre tradition, this can hardly be claimed for blogs, which are both too young and too diverse in relation to community and purpose for a set of prescriptive rules to be actively enforced or followed.

The physics of blogging

As with other forms of computer-mediated communication, the similarities in terms of form the we encounter in blogs can be partly explained with situational factors that shape the user's conceptualization of what a blog is. This conceptualization takes precedence over 'free' stylistic variation, i.e. it is not a creative or deliberate choice of the blogger, nor a socially enforced prescription, but a constraint induced by the technologically mediated situation. For example, the near-synchronous, sequential interaction with a fixed number of participants in an online chatroom leads to a conceptualization of chats in terms of spoken conversation, resulting in a high frequency of stylistic features that improve communicative economy, such as lowercase spelling, lack of punctuation, frequent ellipsis, abbreviation, cliticization, and use of acronyms (Werry 1996, Herring 1999). Emoticons and situational self-characterization are used to compensate for the lack of non-verbal information that is of vital importance in face-to face interaction to reinforce social relationships (Bays 1998).

Similarly, blogs are characterized by affording their users unlimited floor time in a quasi speech situation that is potentially interactive but not encumbered by the constraints of synchronous communication. Furthermore, while bloggers can be assumed to think of an audience (see below) when writing a post, the concrete readership is invisible to them – they are not cospatial, not even in the sense of a frame (in Bays' words). The relative lack of comments or links that is characteristic of many blogs means that that no specific topical focus is forced onto the blogger – she is free to set her own agenda with every new post.

As will be outlined in the rest of this article, the frequent characterization of blogs as conversations (Scoble & Israel 2006) has less to do with actual interactivity than with the presence and availability of linguistic structures that users associate with spoken discourse.

Blog deixis

Blogs are typically published with standardized software packages and either self-hosted or part of a larger network (WordPress.com, Blogger.com, LiveJournal.com). The precise meta-information that comes with a blog entry is

highly standardized across packages and platform. The following information can be considered canonical (adopted from Winer 2003):

- title
- text
- tags / categories
- **author**
- **time of publication**
- **location of the item on the Web**

Author, time of publication and the location of the post differ from the other fields by constituting extra-textual (as opposed to meta-textual) information that is automatically associated with the situation and not freely assigned by the blogger. This information makes deictic language possible, i.e. use of the first person pronoun (always referring to the blogger-publisher credited with the post), use of temporal adverbs (relating to post publication date as the point of reference) and spatial adverbs (either relating to the blogger's location at the time of publishing or conceptualizing the blog or the Internet as a whole as a space).

Example 1:

I took the GRE on Saturday and got a 1420 (I almost typed 1240 which is decent, but not nearly as impressive). 690 verbal, 730 quantitative. I am pretty happy. With the one really good rec letter and two decent ones, I think I have a good shot at going to a really good school.

The event the blogger in Example 1 refers to (“the GRE on Saturday”) is retrievable via the contextual (temporal) information automatically added by the blogging software. The reader can deduce that a specific Saturday (the one preceding Monday, July 14th 2008, the date of publication of the post) is meant and the rest of the post is a comment on the results of the test.

Blogs are deictically anchored to the blogger, in the sense that there is a speaker whose contribution is retrieved and evaluated along with the most basic contextual parameters (*who-when-[where]*). In contrast to spoken discourse, the blogger's contributions can be planned, revised and edited, but cannot effectively target a specific, exclusive listener. They are cognitively mapped as a kind of mediated, asynchronous, persistent and carefully controlled speech event with a complex audience structure.

Why blog?

Blogging is an activity that Internet users engage in for a broad range of different reasons. Blogs can focus on the blogger herself (events in her life, her experiences, thoughts or feelings) or on the external world (politics, business, entertainment, technology, sports). In both variants we see the world through the lens of the blogger, but while she herself also plays the starring role in the first type, she restricts herself to the part of director in the second. With every post, the blogger can choose the direction she wants to take and topically balance her own topical involvement with an external issue. The two directions act as the ends of a scale, the most reliable

indicator for the parameter's value being how bloggers think about their audience, an aspect that is reflected in surveys, ethnographic studies and the language of blog posts.

A report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project released in July 2006 points to the quite narrow and decidedly reflective conceptualization that most bloggers have of their activity:

The Pew Internet Project blogger survey finds that the American blogosphere is dominated by those who use their blogs as personal journals. Most bloggers do not think of what they do as journalism.

Most bloggers say they cover a lot of different topics, but when asked to choose one main topic, 37% of bloggers cite “my life and experiences” as a primary topic of their blog. Politics and government ran a very distant second with 11% of bloggers citing those issues of public life as the main subject of their blog. (Lenhart & Fox 2006: ii)

Similar results come from Technorati's 2008 State of the Blogosphere report (Sifry 2008). The category 'Personal/Lifestyle' is named by 54% of all bloggers interviewed to play a role in their blogs, with other areas lagging significantly behind. While the majority of participants names a number of topics that they cover (five being the average) the dominance of 'personal' over other categories is notable. Furthermore it is notable that other categories contain items that can be described as broad and generic topics of interest that are unrelated to the blogger as a private individual, in contrast to the self as the central topic.

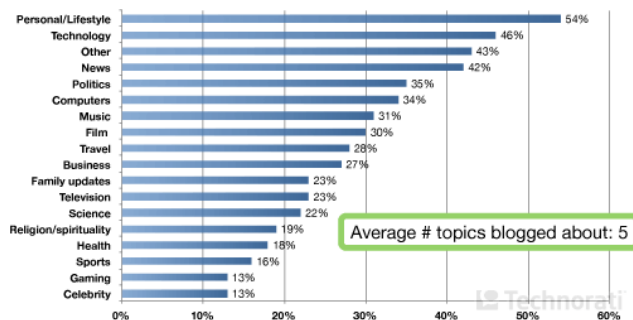


Illustration 1: Technorati 2008 State of the Blogosphere report: popular topics

Ego blogging vs. topic blogging

While blogs concerned with entertainment, business or religion are sure to differ from one another in many regards, they all share a common centrality of something external to the blogger: a topic, issue or news item he may report, discuss, criticize or praise, but that is not identical with his life, experience and reflections.

The use of a blog as a personal diary, a recording device for personal thoughts and experiences, can be contrasted with blogging as publishing – writing for a non-familiar

group brought together by a shared interest in a certain topic.

	Ego blogging	Topic blogging
Text/Content	Focus on the internal world, i.e. the blogger's: experiences daily life thoughts emotions	Focus on the external world, e.g.: politics entertainment business religion work and on the blogger's evaluation and commentary on these issues
Conceptualized audience	Close, familiar and specific (self, family, friends)	Distant, unfamiliar and generic (liberals, republicans, lawyers, movie buffs, students)
Audience scope	Narrow	Wide
Functions	-Record and reflect one's life -Stabilize self -Control and record own thought process -Maintain and reinforce existing relationships -Establish structure, causality, order and safety	-Inform others -Indicate a stance to others -Influence others Gain recognition -Acquire expert status
Anonymity	May be anonymous or pseudonymous	Generally attributable
Perspective	Internal	External
Metaphor	Diary	Megaphone
Approach	Recording	Broadcasting
Mode	Narration/stream of consciousness	Exposition/argumentation
Linguistic Encoding/decoding	Easy to encode, hard to decode	Hard to encode, easy to decode
Hyperlinks, quotes, comments and tagging	Few or no hyperlinks, quotes, comments and use of tagging	Some or frequent hyperlinks, quotes, comments and use of tagging

Table 1 summarizes the contrasting aspects of the two pragmatic modes on multiple levels.

Audience design

Who does a blogger have in mind as her readers when she chooses to write about herself vs. something external? Or, reversing the argument, whom does a blogger envision as her readers from the onset and do assumptions about her readership impose restrictions in terms of style and topic? In the process of audience design, two factors are combined: narrowness/broadness of audience scope and social intimacy/distance between the blogger and her projected readers. Taken together the two factors define the *conceptualized audience* (CA). The CA is a construct of the blogger that may represent a small subset or a vast overfitting in relation to the *actual audience* (AA) – the real readers of the blog, but for the process of composition and therefore for the structure of the text, only the CA is relevant. In turn, the CA is composed of those whom the blogger seeks to affect (the *targeted audience*, or TA), vs. those whom he acknowledges as potential readers but does not target¹.

The distinction between CA and TA is often fuzzy, unclear and may shift multiple times in a single blog entry. Also, to the blogger CA and TA may be identical if she assumes that there are no overhearers in the audience and that her blog is only read by a closed and clearly defined group of people (e.g. family, friends, colleagues). Finally, a blog may be written without any TA. The conceptual difference between CA and TA and the presence of the former in conjunction with the absence of the latter is what makes highly emotive and confessional blog writing explicable. The fact that some bloggers publish very intimate thoughts and feelings on the Internet can be seen as an indicator of the need on the part of the blogger for these feelings to be recorded and witnessed by other people. But the witnesses are not targets in the sense that the blogger seeks to consciously influence them. Instead, the 'presence' of other human beings alone is sufficient in such a context.

Even where a TA is fairly clearly defined, blogs tend to be writer-centric in that they exist in a communicative setting where there is no perfect certainty regarding the knowledge shared by blogger and reader. Blogs with a clearly defined TA reflect this by striving for cooperation whereas those without it are generally marked by lack thereof. The blogger's audience design and the resulting CA and TA have significant influence on both a post's topic and tone, particularly regarding what is deemed relevant and stylistically appropriate and what is not².

The described split markedly separates blog entries where CA and TA are complex, distant, unfamiliar to the blogger

- 1 The terms 'recipient' or 'addressee' are intentionally avoided here, as blogs exist in a communicative situation of open multiplicity and can normally be read by anyone with access to the Internet. It is therefore very rarely the case that a blog post explicitly addresses specific individuals (for example, with a greeting or salutation), as the blogger is aware of this situation and the potential for overhearer effects.
- 2 Obviously this is also dependent on the blogger's experience and stylistic ability. But genre knowledge, normally the decisive factor, is of quite limited use in blogs, as genrehood requires a unity of purpose and community that does not apply to blogs.

and virtually identical from those where the TA is simpler, closer, familiar and markedly smaller than the CA.

Cooperation

Cooperation between communicative partners is the fundament on which the success of a communicative exchange rests (Grice 1989). Only if the partners seek to make what they are expressing sufficiently clear to those they are engaged with, time it right, and adjust it to the requirements of the situation can communication succeed. Obviously not all expression is interactive or meant to provide information, engendering the need to be cooperative. Lack of interactivity and informativeness both decrease the need to be cooperative. Poems and song lyrics can be opaque in their meaning (and thus considered 'uncooperative') because they are not meant to inform, and discourse roles ("I" and "you") are generally not assigned in newspaper articles because the medium does not permit any immediate feedback.

In a blog, where interaction (via comments or trackbacks) is technically possible but not formally required and the possibility to inform is clearly given but not mandatory, the blogger is faced with a choice between cooperation and non-cooperation with his CA.

The two examples given below illustrate adherence and non-adherence to the cooperative principle, providing valuable clues about the blogger's audience design.

Example 2:

*time wont let anyone forget the past, nor the sorrows.
.. one could only hide it deep within. .. n hope the
pain will nv surface again. .. but it would never be
possible. .. cus even if one manage to forget,
someday somehow sometingy would just remind one
abt tat someone. ..was tinkng the other day, if the
person u love doesn't love in return. .. in future if u
were to see tis person with another guy, in a
relationship. .. how would u feel? happy for her? ...
maybe, but i know i would be lying to myself. .. most
probably i would just break down. .. just by tinkng
abt tis would already make me wanna cry. ..just
another day of tinkng too much. ..*

Example 3:

*When I teach trademark law classes, I always advise
that students select strong protectable marks, and the
class invariably balks because they want to select
marks that suggest or connote something about the
goods or services at issue. That, I tell them, is the
touchstone of a weak mark, and for examples I look
to the Internet space: Google, Yahoo!, Zillow, and so
on are perfect trademarks because they say nothing
about the goods or services with which they are
associated.*

*And now along comes cuil.com (pronounced "cool"),
the much-ballyhooed Google-killer. Great mark,
right? "Cuil" says nothing about "Internet search
engine," and is in fact apparently an old Irish or*

Gaelic word for "knowledge." But here's the rub: "Google" is becoming a verb in the lexicon very quickly, which is typically anathema to a trademark, but there's not much Google can do to stop everyone from saying, e.g., "Go Google that." But can you say, e.g., "I am going to 'cuil' it?" You could, but people would hear you say, "I am going to cool it," and the meaning is lost.

Moral--a great trademark has to be both non-descriptive AND sound cool (pun intended) and distinctive. Now let's just see if Google goes the way of "escalator" and becomes generic for Internet search services . . .

While starkly different in terms of topic and style, it is instructive to examine both posts side by side.

A striking quality of Example 2 is that its referentiality is not merely vague, but effectively opaque. Not even those close to the blogger may understand exactly to what sorrows are being referred to and who the person the blogger was in love with is. The self-extracting quality of the writing is striking in Example 2: the blogger refers to *anyone*, *one* and *you* (all of which can be argued to be third-person pronouns in this context, since *you* is synonymous with *one* in this usage), while in fact he himself is the only plausible referent of these predications. *Someday*, *somehow*, *sometingy*, *someone* all serve to enhance the referential opaqueness. No first or second person are visible at the beginning of the post and use of the future subjunctive (*were to see...*) makes the feelings described even more remote from the blogger, in what must be interpreted as an attempt to distance himself from his painful emotions. The punctuation of the post is in accordance with its reflective, self-focused nature that is not a sequence of events or arguments, but an outpouring of feelings.

While one could speculate that the author of Example 2 seeks empathy and compassion from a sympathetic listener, he is clearly not making an attempt to provide something 'usable' or 'valuable' to the reader with his post³ – his is articulating his emotions in what is essentially a monologue. The blog provides him with a way of getting his emotions 'out there'.

Nardi et al cite a somewhat similar example, though with greater reach:

Don, a technology consultant, called blogs "be-logs" because he believed blogging was used to "log your being." This "log of being" took a serious turn for Don when his wife became gravely ill and nearly died. During her illness, Don posted blogs to document her health condition through text and photos. He found blogging to be an important way to communicate with others:

[Blogging is helpful] when people's lives are compromised in some way...when [my wife] was

sick, [I] was going through [the] hospital with the lens of how can I share this with others?

(2004: 226)

Don's need to share his experience with others points to a use similar to that of Example 1, though it does not become clear whether he is 'communicating', 'sharing' or 'releasing emotional tension' (ibid).

By contrast, the focal point of the blog in Example 3 is trademark law and the blogger has accordingly chosen a topic for this post that is relevant to that broader theme. Topic and conceptualized audience are interdependent: those who are assumed to read the blog are 'all those individuals interested in trademarks law', whether they personally know the blogger or not. The blogger is keenly aware of this and unlikely to drastically move his focal point into other directions (i.e his personal feelings, his last vacation) without a good reason, as this would alienate his topical audience. The 'planting' of personal thoughts and experiences in a topic blog is largely a rhetorical strategy that realizes a positive politeness function – it creates solidarity and shared space between blogger and reader. By contrast, personal thoughts and experiences and their articulation in language are at the center of ego blogging.

The markedly different audience design in topic blogging has consequences, as can be seen in the example. All entities introduced into the discourse are retrievable, i.e. it is clear in Example 3 what the text is concerned with and about whom statements are being made. A conscious effort is made to establish a clear argumentation structure, reflected in the segmentation of the text into paragraphs and the use of metalanguage ("When I teach...", "And now comes...", "Morale"). The text is structured to be both concise and accessible, and to be of maximum usefulness for its intended audience. Note that structuring and explicitness as such are not automatically synonymous with topic blogging, they are merely a prerequisite for presenting a complex topic to an unfamiliar reader, anticipating a minimum of shared knowledge. A familiar reader is both more able and willing to make an effort to understand the speaker's intentions and he brings his prior knowledge about the blogger into the exchange, while an unfamiliar topical reader is less likely to make such an effort.

Non-cooperation and lack of a TA abounds in ego blogging (Example 2) while a TA is always present in topic blogging (Example 3) and cooperation is essential to achieve a specific communicative goal.

Relevance

Following Relevance Theory, inferential communication is characterized by the recipient's awareness of the sender's intent (at least to some degree) when receiving a message (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 23).

Any utterance addressed to someone automatically conveys the presumption of its own relevance to the listener in a face-to-face interaction. In a situation of open multiplicity, however, this mechanism is changed. Because sender intent is tied inextricably to the identity of

3 This is furthered by the fact that the blog is published under a pseudonym.

the recipient it is difficult to impossible to aim for a specific effect unless there is some knowledge of who will be affected. Conative and informative communication is based on the premise that the communicative partners are aware of each other's presence and can rely on shared knowledge, or at least *believe* that some degree of shared knowledge exists.

In blogs, the potential for mismatch between AA and CA decrease not only the need of the blogger to be cooperative, but also the pressure to be relevant and the ability to influence. She cannot know who exactly the reader is and the reader is quite aware of this. Therefore presenting a topic that the blogger is knowledgeable about in a way that is clear and comprehensive is the 'best shot' at being relevant a blogger can conceivably take and conversely she must not be worried with violating certain conversational (Gricean) maxims, particularly the maxim of quantity and the maxim of relevance.

Discussion

This paper has discussed the specific technologically constrained situation in which blog posts exist and their use of contextual information that is encoded automatically by the blogging software, allowing the use of deictic expression and thus evoking (to an extent) a conversational frame. The situation of open multiplicity forces bloggers to engage in an audience design process and make decisions regarding cooperation and relevance that ultimately determine the pragmatic mode of a blog post.

Whether bloggers 'record themselves' in order to be acknowledged by others and to reinforce existing social relationships (*ego blogging*), or seek to influence how others perceive them and amass social capital (*topic blogging*) is a strategic and personal choice that may change from one entry to the next (although most bloggers relatively consistently favor one mode over the other).

Web logs (via feeds) 'offer' content in a way that is neither push nor pull and creates a new communicative dynamic that is also characteristic for newer emerging modes of CMC, such as microblogging (Java et al 2007). The blogger does not know who his audience is and can therefore communicate more freely, but at the same time he cannot be sure what the effect of his contribution will be. This takes away pressure from the blogger and transfers power to the reader, who can but must not react. Blogs are thus a 'depressurized' form of communication in illocutionary terms, which may be the reason for their dual conceptualization as a medium for diary-writing (despite being public) and broadcasting (despite being personal).

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