

Deixis and gloss practices : when the web speaks of itself

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Studies in Communication Sciences : journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research**

Band (Jahr): **6 (2006)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **28.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-791099>

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DEIXIS AND GLOSS PRACTICES. WHEN THE WEB SPEAKS OF ITSELF

Gloss practices and formulations are meta-communications whose objects are the context in which a conversation takes place and the ongoing conversation itself, respectively. In everyday life we use gloss practices and formulations to introduce relevant context's features into the discourse and to steer the interaction. Gloss practices have a deictic nature, i.e. they depend on the context of use (time, place, interlocutors, objects, the conversation itself). Building on the hypothesis that we can interpret the interaction between a human being and a machine in terms of a dialogue, the paper inquires whether there are gloss practices and formulations in "web-dialogues" and (being the answer to the first question a positive one) what are their peculiar characteristics. Conclusions and lines for future research are eventually presented.

Keywords: web-dialogue, deixis, gloss practices, formulations.

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Introduction

The present paper aims at spotting in the virtual world created by the new information technologies, with specific attention to the internet, those phenomena that are the equivalent, *mutatis mutandis*, of gloss practices and formulations, that is, the linguistic devices by means of which speakers account for the orderly features of every day's interactions (i.e. the protagonists of the interaction, the place, the time, the objects, etc.). It builds on the hypothesis that the interaction between a human being and an application can be interpreted in terms of a "dialogue" (although of course a very peculiar one; see Bolchini & Paolini 2006). This interpretation implies taking the term "dialogue" in a broad sense, including actions and reactions (by the application and the user): it is actually a joint activity, in which verbal language, but also moves and choices, play a crucial role¹.

The paper first introduces what gloss practices and formulations are (1), what is meant by deixis and in what sense gloss practices have a deictic component (2). The second part of the paper examines some examples of gloss practices and formulations taken from real websites (3) and draws some conclusions about this preliminary analysis, sketching the future steps of this still on-going research (4).

1. About gloss practices and formulations

Although it may not seem so, given the fancifulness or the plain "chaos" in which they usually wind their selves, a sort of "rationality" governs all everyday conversational interactions that, like a Karstic river, sometimes gives traces of its existence or appears openly on the surface. In other words: every conversation involves – at least – two streams of consciousness, the main one regarding the topic people are discussing about, the other regarding the interaction itself, its organization and the context in which it takes place.

¹ About the co-presence of non-verbal elements together with verbal messages into "joint activities", see for example Clark (1996): "The argument is that joint activities are the basic category, and what are called discourses are simply joint activities in which conventional language plays a prominent role. If we take language use to include such communicative acts as eye gaze, iconic gestures, pointing, smiles, and head nods - and we must - then all joint activities rely on language use."

So it may happen that scholars discussing “vis-à-vis” some linguistic issue may suddenly observe that “we’re at a dinner, not at a thesis defence” or that “this argument is completely off the point”; a mother might scold her child reminding him that “this is a house, not a stable”; we might tell someone who’s loosing his temper “come on, you’re a gentleman”, etc.

The linguistic devices introduced to comment on the environment’s features in which the conversation takes place are called gloss practices, in that the text is used as a gloss over a lively context. Gloss practices are methods “for producing observable-reportable understanding with, in, and of natural language” (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970: 343-344). More specifically, those that comment on the conversation itself are called formulations; formulations can be thus considered a specific case of gloss practices²:

“A member may treat some part of the conversation as an occasion to describe that conversation, to explain it, or explicate, or translate, or summarize, or furnish the gist of it, or take note of its accordance with rules, or remark on its departure from rules. That is to say, a member may use some part of the conversation as an occasion to *formulate* the conversation. [...] what they are doing is saying-in-so-many-words what-we-are-doing” (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970: 350).

The fact that conversations are not unambiguous is a common experience: the introduction of a formulation might help co-participants in settling on one of the many possible interpretations of what they’re saying. “Formulations are shown to be important methods used by members for demonstrating that, among other things, the conversation has been and is ongoingly self-explicating” (Heritage & Watson 1979: 123). A good example of formulation is the following, in which B says explicitly what A implicitly “entailed” in its sentence:

A: “I do not think you will be ever able to do it”

B: “This is really offensive”

Without gloss practices and formulations the work of direction (sometimes compared to that of a film director), necessary to govern the inter-

² Although many scholars seem to use both terms as synonyms. For a precise definition of formulations see Orletti 2000: 75.

action's course and rationality, would be very difficult; though we can make use of non-verbal messages or rely upon implications, many times we do make use of formulations, for example for stopping an interaction or changing topic ("So far we've spoken about deixis; let's now move to the next subject..."), especially in formal situations and when we do not want to risk misunderstandings.

2. About deixis and gloss practices' deicticity

Among the characteristics formulations and gloss practices possess we can mention their "deicticity", meaning their context dependence. Before inquiring further into the matter, it does better spend some words on the phenomenon of deixis.

What is deixis? To help the reader understand the point, we invite him/her to use his/her imagination for a while.

Let's imagine finding a bottle on seashore, with a message in it. The message reads: "let's meet again here tomorrow in this very same spot; please fetch with you a stick as long as this". We can understand the grammar and the syntax of the text, as well as the single words' meanings. But we miss the true sense of the text: who is speaking to whom? When was the message written? How long should the stick be? The reason why we cannot catch the true meaning of the message is that we do not know the context of its use. The words in the message referring explicitly to the context are called "deictic elements" ("tomorrow", "here", "you", "this").

The question "what is deixis?" has not yet received a unique and valid answer among scholars. Deixis appears to be a pervading phenomenon in natural languages (some say, their characteristic feature), involving many linguistic elements apart from the most obvious ones (like the personal pronouns "I, you" or the temporal and spatial adverbs like "now" and "here"). For the purposes of the present work, I will consider those aspects of the deictic phenomenon on which a general agreement has been reached, that is, those elements that directly and unmistakably refer to the ongoing discourse situation and the context in which it takes place³. In addition, I will consider definite descriptions, when used to make reference to context-related elements, as deictic⁴.

³ For a more in-depth discussion on the problem of defining deixis see Di Blas 2006.

⁴ On the deicticity of definite descriptions see Raynaud 2006.

According to Fillmore's taxonomy, we have five different kinds of deixis:

"Deixis is the name given to those formal properties of utterances which are determined by, and which are interpreted by knowing, certain aspects of the communication act in which the utterances in question can play a role. These include (1) the identity of the interlocutors in a communication situation, covered by the term *situation deixis*; (2) the place or places in which these individuals are located, for which we have the term *place deixis*; (3) the time at which the communication act takes place -for this we may need to distinguish as the *encoding time*, the time at which the message is sent, and as the *decoding time*, the time at which the message is received- these together coming under the heading of *time deixis*; (4) the matrix of linguistic material within which the utterance has a role, that is, the preceding and following parts of the discourse, which we can refer to as *discourse deixis*; and (5) the social relationship on the part of the participants in the conversation [...] which we can group together under the term *social deixis*." (Fillmore 1997: 61)

If to this taxonomy we add the use of deixis to make reference to objects present in the context (like for example "could you give me that book?"), then we have a complete picture of the deictic phenomena. We can call this kind of deixis "demonstrative" deixis⁵.

The discourse deixis (or textual deixis) has been further analysed by Maria Elisabeth Conte, who has correctly pointed out that it is not "coplanar" with the other kinds of deixis, but it has a meta-textual nature, it concerns the text itself. In the textual deixis the context is replaced by the co-text; further, the referent is in the text and not in the context (Conte 1981: 42-43; Di Blas 2002). Examples of textual deixis (in Conte's terms) are: "in the last chapter" or "next paragraph"; the immediate reference of these expressions is the text itself (in specific, some of its "fragments").

⁵ Fillmore (1997), and Levinson (1983) after him, include the "demonstrative" deixis into the space deixis, for in many languages the reference to objects in context imply a reference to their position in space – with respect to the speakers – too (ex. "pass me that book" – far from the speaker – and "pass me this book" – close to the speaker). But since this *does not* happen in all languages (for example, it does not happen in French, where "ce" is neutral with respect to the distance from the interlocutors), this inclusion does not seem appropriate: therefore I prefer to separate the space deixis from the "referential" deixis. I warmly thank Aldo Frigerio for the fruitful discussion about this point.

In that they live and refer to many aspects of on-going interactions, gloss practices have a strong deictic nature, of all the above kinds: they depend on the interlocutors (situation deixis), the place (place deixis), the time (time deixis), the text itself (discourse deixis), etc. In fact, they make use of deictic linguistic elements: for example, “Come on, you are a gentleman” comments on the addressee (situation deixis, a gloss practice) and makes use of the personal pronoun “you”, which is deictic; “This argument is completely off the point” comments on the text itself (discourse deixis, a formulation) and makes use of the adjective “this” (a very typical deictic element).

Since all the features of an interaction may change during the interaction itself, gloss practices and formulations are often introduced in the flowing of the discourse: therefore their efficacy depends on the precise moment in which they're used, like for any deictic element (Orletti 2000).

3. When the Web speaks of itself

In this paragraph, we move to the world of the internet. Orletti observes that we find a greater number of gloss practices and formulations in all those situations in which the interlocutors are somehow “far” from each other, either physically or socially, whilst we find fewer of them in those situations in which an informal conversation takes place, in which a strong control of its rationality is not needed. Examples of the former are interviews, professional meetings; examples of the latter are “train-chatting” (“the weather’s good today, isn’t it?”), loose talk, etc. (Orletti 2000: 54). Being the interaction with a web site a typical situation in which we find a significant distance between the user and the sender(s)⁶, we might well suspect of finding a lot of gloss practices and formulations in it. The expectation’s correct: we do find them in many different kinds of interactions with a web site.

⁶ The overall scenario of the dialogue between a user and a Web application therefore displays at least four “actors”: *the designer*, a human being who conceives the Web application, “shaping” it to answer to a certain amount of possible questions; *the Web application*, a repository of pieces of information and “paths” to access them; *the Web interface*, a set of interactive possibilities presented to the user (that enacts the role of conversation partner in a concrete session of use); *the user*, the second conversation partner, who holds the power both to start and to stop the dialogic interaction (Di Blas & Paolini 2003).

Let's see some examples. If we download some software from a web site, when the download is completed we are told that "The program's been installed successfully" (an example of gloss practice); if we visit fans' web sites of a film-star or of a band, we are told that "this is an unofficial web site" (an example of formulation); if we trade on line, the bank's site will assure us that "the transaction has been completed successfully" (a gloss practice), etc.

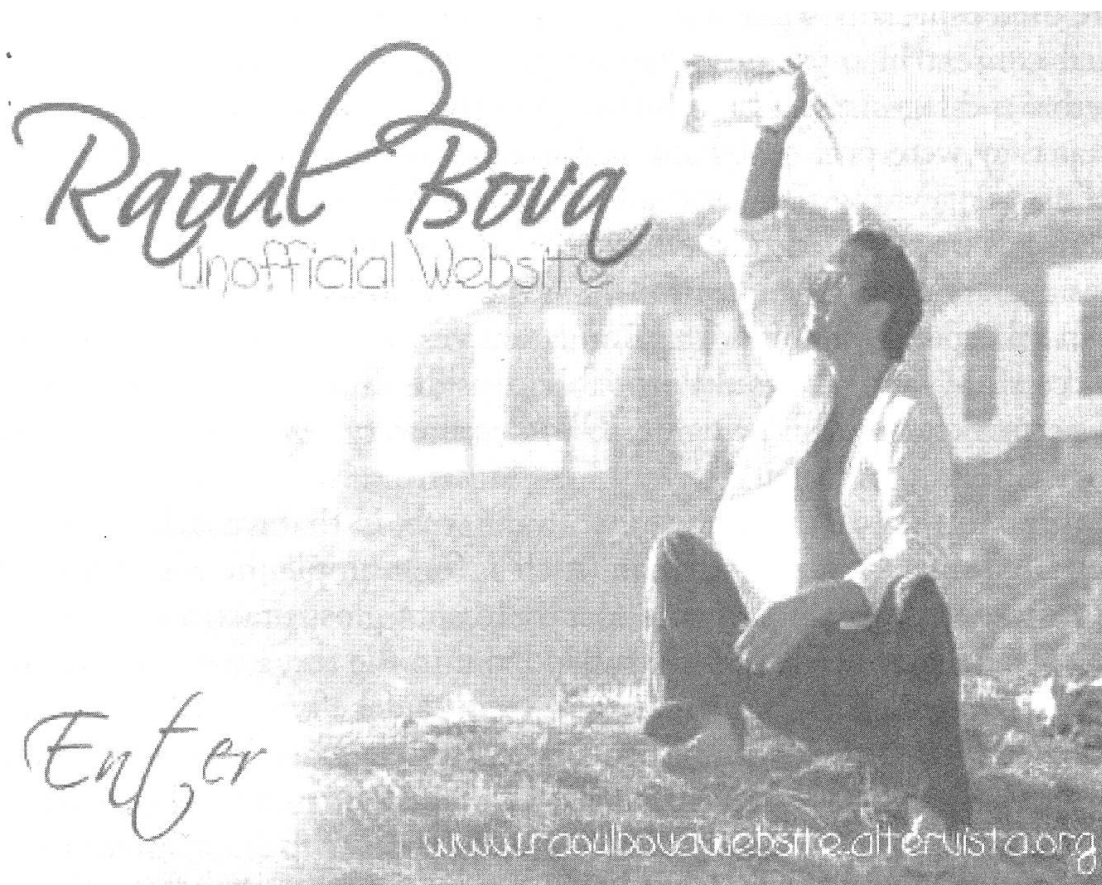


Figure 1: Picture from an unofficial website about Raoul Bova (www.raoulbovawebsite.altervista.org).⁷

There are some sites in which users can play games, choosing a character (they can either be male or female, administrators or players, etc.). When the choice is made, the machine illustrates the games' rules concerning that specific character, again glossing the conversation: "since you're a

⁷ The impossibility of "freezing" web sites, in practice, makes it difficult to develop examples that could maintain their validity over a long span of time! This screenshot (like the following in the paper) was taken on June 9, 2006.

guest, these are your limitations: you can't invite anyone to your house to chat privately, ..." ([http:// http://superfighetto.giovani.it](http://http://superfighetto.giovani.it)⁸).

There's a clear difference between messages about a completed action and those that refer to an on-going action, like "you're now downloading...", whose true meaning is: "is this really what you want to do?" They are in fact examples of indirect speech acts (Searle 1975): though apparently descriptive sentences, they implicitly ask for confirmation.

Exploring the web we discover that gloss practices and formulations are used especially when actions are performed. The point is that the virtual context in most cases cannot give "signals" of reaction other than verbal messages: therefore it often glosses user's actions to assure him/her that they were performed successfully or, on the other hand, that something went wrong. For example, if we buy a book, we are told that "the item has been added to the basket" and eventually that "the transaction has been completed successfully"; in the real world, we would never hear a shopkeeper telling us with a smile that yes, we've just bought our pants successfully, and we would probably consider it a nuisance if a clerk in a supermarket kept following us, telling us at every new item "you've added a new item to your basket!".

One further observation is that in the web, in that we lack a set of non verbal means of communication (such as for example the voice's tone, the gestures, etc.), it is not always so easy to spot gloss practices and formulations, in that they are often embedded into the text itself as if they were *co-planar* with it (whilst they are, as we said before, meta-comments). This happens for example in the case of disclaimers or copyright rules, that are apparently pages like all the others. In many cases, designers actually use different strategies to underline this peculiar, "meta" nature, such as pop-up windows, the hints of the mouse, different graphic/colours, etc.

4. Conclusions and Future Work

As the examples show, we do find gloss practices in "web dialogues"; we can now draw the following conclusions:

Gloss practices are more frequently used when it comes to important "moves" of the interaction (buying, booking, giving personal information like name, address, credit card's number, etc.).

⁸ The translation from the original Italian text into English is mine.

When it comes to actions, gloss practices are even more frequent in the web than they are in natural dialogues.

Their frequency clearly depends on the fact that in the virtual world we lack empirical evidence of the results of our actions: therefore users have to be made sure via a verbal message of what has happened or of what they're doing.

Icons or other graphical means, due to the technical limitations of the tool, cannot substitute these verbal messages; the appearance of a small image of a book in my basket doesn't assure me that I've actually bought *the* book that I wanted. We see that the peculiar nature of the "context" requires a different use of the same tools: whilst in the real world concrete features of the environment are often self-explicating, explicit verbal messages are necessary to "gloss" the most important user's steps in the world of the internet.

Future steps of this research are the following: a massive analysis of data, taken from real websites, could shed light on the peculiar characteristics of gloss practices (and formulations) in web-dialogues. The analysis should distinguish among different kinds of applications, so as to check whether the presence – and nature – of gloss practices vary accordingly (it is foreseeable that more operative websites – like eCommerce websites – will be richer in gloss practices than informative websites, where the user does not perform actions) a desirable outcome of the above analysis could be a taxonomy of gloss practices in web-dialogues from a practical point of view, the taxonomy of gloss practices in web-dialogues would be a powerful tool for applications' designers (and for content-writers). First of all, the glossing turn takings should be clearly distinguished from the core content; then, different presentation strategies could be devised in order to avoid ambiguities (some of them are already in use, like pop-up windows for example).

The research could thus provide valuable results, both from theoretical and practical point of view.

Acknowledgements

The present paper finds its place in the general frame of an ongoing research carried on by Politecnico of Milan (Italy) and University of Italian Switzerland, Lugano (Switzerland); the project WED (WEb as Dialogue) aims at providing a comprehensive conceptual framework for interpreting in dialogic terms the design, the usage and the

evaluation of modern Web applications. Therefore I would like to thank all the people of the team, in particular prof. Paolo Paolini.

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