



ISSN 1850-2512 (impreso)  
ISSN 1850-2547 (en línea)

UNIVERSIDAD DE BELGRANO

# Documentos de Trabajo

Facultad de Lenguas y Estudios Extranjeros  
Grupo LENCOTEC (Lenguaje, Comunicación y  
Nuevas Tecnologías)

Context and participation in virtual world *Habbo Hotel*

N° 292

Director: Alejandro Parini

Participantes en este trabajo: Verónica Vera,  
Edgardo Galende, Luis Ganga, Renata Abuchaem,  
Solange Cifre y Alejandro Parini

Departamento de Investigaciones  
Diciembre 2013

Universidad de Belgrano  
Zabala 1837 (C1426DQ6)  
Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires - Argentina  
Tel.: 011-4788-5400 int. 2533  
e-mail: [invest@ub.edu.ar](mailto:invest@ub.edu.ar)  
url: <http://www.ub.edu.ar/investigaciones>



**Grupo LENCOTEC (Lenguaje, Comunicación y Nuevas Tecnologías)****Director: Alejandro Parini****Participantes en este trabajo:**

Verónica Vera, Edgardo Galende, Luis Ganga, Renata Abuchaem, Solange Cifre y Alejandro Parini

**Abstract**

This paper presents the results of a small case study that is part of a major research project on language, identity and social media. In this work we focus our attention on context and participation in Habbo Hotel, a virtual world for socialising aimed at teenagers. Through the analysis of a corpus of text-based interactions we explore some of the contextual features that condition the way participants enact social action through participation in prefabricated role-playing situations that simulate real-life scenarios. The observation and interpretation of the ways the participants actively engage in a variety of playful textual avatar-mediated exchanges lead us to suggest that the forms of participation in Habbo are dependent on the participants' social agendas that generate different levels of commitment to the communicative situation which in turn can trigger different types of social behaviour, including linguistic behaviour. This, coupled with contextual features like anonymity and spatial distance, we argue, seems give rise to a less constrained relation between language and situation.



## Context and participation in virtual world *Habbo Hotel*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The focus of attention in the study of the relation between language and social technologies has shifted from being technology-oriented, i.e. centred on the inherent properties of new technologies, to being user-oriented, i.e. centred on how individuals make use of these technologies and on the social spaces they help create in order to communicate with others, socialise by building and maintaining social networks, and construct and project both individual and group identities. (Herring 1996)

These social spaces are very varied indeed and may include a wide range of contextual features as, for example, perceived social distance, ambient awareness, visual/non-visual copresence, demographic anonymity (in terms of age, gender, socio-economic level), blurred boundaries between public and private, multitasking, etc, which makes the conceptualisation of context in these environments a complex and challenging undertaking.

More specifically, the study of online interaction (Hutchby, 2001; Kappas 2011) is a fairly new field of linguistic inquiry that seeks to account for how individuals accommodate and exploit language and co-construct meaning when performing in these virtual social spaces or contexts.

In this paper we centre our attention on participation in virtual worlds by looking at different contextual features, including the register variable of tenor as a component of the situational context within the Systemic Functional Linguistics paradigm, and also the linguistic choices made by the participants or performers interacting in the multiplayer online role-playing game *Habbo Hotel*.

We argue that in this prefabricated (in the Goffmanian sense, Goffman 1959) interactional environment, participation may be affected by constitutive features of virtual worlds, and in particular, of *Habbo Hotel* as an online space for socialising. These features include aspects of the spatial distance between the interactants, the use of avatars as virtual interactional artefacts, and the different types of social roles and role relationships that participants enact in the virtual and playful world of *Habbo Hotel*. The combination of these contextual features seems to give rise to a less constrained relation between language and situation.

Although *Habbo Hotel* is a text-based virtual world, in this work we use the terms conversation, interaction, encounter, exchange and transaction interchangeably to refer to the communicative activities that participants carry out in this type of online social environment.

### 2. PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEXT

Granato and Parini (2011) provide a useful summary of the different theoretical perspectives from which context has been studied. The authors make reference to a number of scholars who have approached the analysis of context on the basis of different conceptual frameworks.

Hanks (1994), for example, looks at the interpretation of a communicative event as being dependent on two elements: focal event and context, and the relation between them as being one of figure and ground. The complex phenomenon of focal event, which includes verbal and non-verbal behaviour, can provide enough ground for the creation of context, and context offers resources that are crucial for the interpretation of the focal event (Duranti and Goodwin 1994). The production of talk as a focal event is regarded as doubly contextual since an utterance is based on the context of the previous utterance and at the same time it provides context for the next utterance (Heritage 1984).

Fetzer (2007) refers to the complexity of the notion of context and to some of the different perspectives from which it has been analysed. First, within a psychological and psycholinguistic perspective and in cognitive pragmatics as well, context is thought of as a frame that delimits content and is itself constrained by major frames. The author mentions studies from the fields of ethnomethodology, interactional sociolinguistics

and sociopragmatics which consider context as dynamic and not static, and goes on to suggest that “context is seen as a dynamic construct that is interactionally organised in and through the process of communication” (Fetzer 2007: 4). In this view, context is regarded as both process and product, and as “a relational construct” which establishes complex relations between communicative actions, individual participants and individual surroundings.

Finally, from a presuppositional approach, Fetzer draws on Stalnaker’s work (Stalnaker 1999) in which context is equated to common ground or background information, and as such, is given or taken for granted in interaction. Fetzer describes context as external to the utterance - a static conception – and as internal to the utterance – interactive conception – in which it is “invoked and reconstructed” (Fetzer 2007: 5).

Within the research paradigm of sociopragmatics, Fetzer (2007) conceptualises context in terms of a parts-whole relation and, therefore, acknowledges the existence, within context, of linguistic context – immediate and remote – (linguistic material or co-text), social context (the parts that constitute a speech event), sociocultural context (culture-specific interpretations of the social context) and cognitive context (mental representations or assumptions stored in the minds of speakers). These sub-categorisations of context are considered at both a micro/ local level and a macro/global level, and are also regarded as being of either the generalised type or the particularised type.

Another contribution to the study of context comes from the field of ethnographic inquiry in close relation to performance-oriented analysis. In this domain, the notions of contextualisation, decontextualisation and entextualisation become crucial tenets of the theoretical approaches to the work on context and social interaction. In their work on Poetics and Performance as Perspectives on Language and Social Life, Bauman and Briggs (1990) look at the shift in focus from context to contextualisation, that is, from the analysis of text to the analysis of texts as they emerge in context. They argue that text and context and the distinction between them are being drastically redefined showing a change of focus from product to process and from conventional structure to agency. This move bears relation to the processes of entextualisation and contextualisation. In this perspective context is not predetermined and independent of performance but is rather shaped in the constant negotiation between participants in situated interactions. It is in these negotiations that the relevant features of context emerge.

As Bauman and Briggs posit

this shift... represents a major step towards achieving an agent-centred view of performance. Contextualisation involves an active process of negotiation in which participants reflexibly examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessment of its structure and significance in speech itself. Performers extend such assessment to include predictions about how the communicative competence, personal histories and social identities of their interlocutors will shape the reception of what is said. (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 69)

This perspective centres the attention not only on the performer but also on the active role of the hearer. Following this line of reasoning, Fetzer (2007) brings into the discussion on context the notion of contextualisation cues (Gumperz 2003) as expressions without lexical meaning and whose interpretations depend on the context and emerge in the negotiation of meaning in interaction. We regard this notion of contextualisation as a tool that helps realise the significance of interactive discourse.

Bearing in mind the distinction between discourse and context, Bauman and Briggs (1990) discuss entextualisation as a process through which discourse can be decontextualised from the interactional setting in which it is produced and transformed into a text.

Further work on context has been carried out taking into account a sociocognitive theoretical framework (van Dijk 2009). Before developing his theory of context, van Dijk delimits the idea of context by considering it in terms of those social properties of the communicative situation that are relevant to discourse production and comprehension. He states that these properties do not exert direct influence on discourse because they “are not directly involved in the cognitive processes of discourse production and understanding” (van Dijk 2009: 4). For van Dijk social influence of the context is always filtered through personal or individual cognitive features of participants in interaction. Hence, in his view, contexts are subjective, that is that individuals subjectively define a situation. His contention is that “a context is what is defined to be relevant in the social situation by the participants themselves” (van Dijk 2009: 4)

In this model, situations are defined as mental representations that constitute the link between the social situation and the production and comprehension of discourse. Contexts can thus be conceptualised as mental models in the sense that they subjectively represent personal experience and embody sociocultural knowledge about the participants and their social world. So for Van Dijk contexts are mental models since they represent the experience of communicative episodes and also embody sociocultural knowledge. These mental models are referred to as context models or contexts and include schemas which are flexible and simple enough so as to respond to the needs of every communicative situation in our daily life. These representations of communicative experiences are dynamic since they are sensitive to the previous linguistic environment as well as to the changes experienced in all social situations. In sum, context models are the channels through which the situation influences talk and text, and talk and text influence the situation.

Contrary to this view of context, which puts a premium on cognition and the mental representations of context, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approaches this notion from a social perspective. Based on the Hallidayan ideas on language in relation to the social world, this model establishes a relationship of realisation between the three strata of context of culture, context of situation and text in context. Here, the context of culture is treated as being separate from the context of situation. Genres represent the context of culture which bears on the language used by means of the structures that the culture institutionalises as a way to fulfil social aims. Register, on the other hand, refers to the context of situation and constitutes a theory with its three variables of field, tenor and mode, as shown in Figure 1.

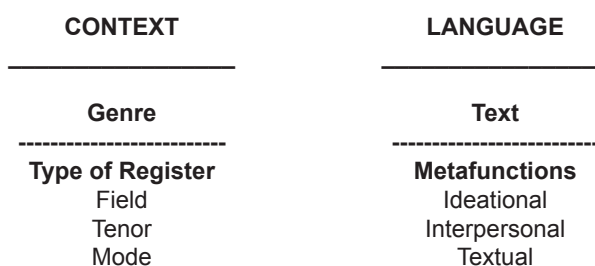


Figure 1. Context in the SFL model

In Halliday's terms these variables are defined as follows:

*Field* refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place, what it is that participants are engaged in, in which language figures as some essential component. (Halliday and Hassan 1985: 12, in Martin and Rose 2003: 297)

According to Martin and Rose, field encompasses sequences of activities that pursue a social or institutional goal and that include "people, things, processes, places and qualities" (Martin and Rose 2008: 14), giving rise to different and varying patterns of texts.

*Tenor* refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles: what kinds of role relationships they obtain, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech roles they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved. (Halliday and Hassan 1985: 12, in Martin and Rose 2003: 297)

And these role relationships can be seen as a complex of the four simultaneous dimensions of power, contact, affective involvement and orientation to affiliation (Eggins and Slade, 1997).

*Mode* refers to what part language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting language to do for them in the situation: the symbolic organisation of the text, the status that it has and its function in the context. (Halliday and Hassan 1985: 12 in Martin and Rose 2003: 297).

These dimensions of register are closely linked to the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions of language, which are in turn realised through the lexico-grammatical system of the language and which construe experience, enact relationships and organise discourse respectively (67-89).

Although this model has attracted substantial criticism (Widdowson (2004); van Dijk (2009)), we find the Systemic Functional theoretical construct a useful organising principle to be used as a first approach to the study of context since it treats interactional behaviour –mode– and the roles taken and the identities projected by the interactants –tenor– as two separate theoretical dimensions. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the cognitive and sociopragmatic approaches and so believe that for a complete account of the complexities of context, elements from these two theoretical domains should be taken into account to complement the analysis. For reasons of space, however, and given the fact that the focus of our study is on participation and participants in virtual worlds, this work is limited to the analysis of the dimension of tenor in conjunction with some of the prototypical contextual features of virtual environments in general and of virtual worlds in particular as described in the section that follows.

### 3. PARTICIPATION IN VIRTUAL CONTEXTS

The notion of context in computer-mediated communication (CMC) needs to be problematised in the light of the different elements or resources available to individuals when interacting online. These resources are not only those provided by the technology or medium employed in the communicative situation but also those of a sociocognitive and psychosocial nature which may be exploited by interactants in technologically-mediated encounters.

Jones (2004) provides an insightful review of the complexities of dealing with context in CMC and argues for a more polyfocal perspective to capture the dynamic nature of the process of meaning negotiation in online interaction.

Along the same lines, Huchtby (2003) proposes a shift from issues pertaining to the understanding of the relation between “the social” and “the technical” to issues that have to do with “the use in situated-social interaction of technological devices: specifically those used in the mediation of human interpersonal communication.”

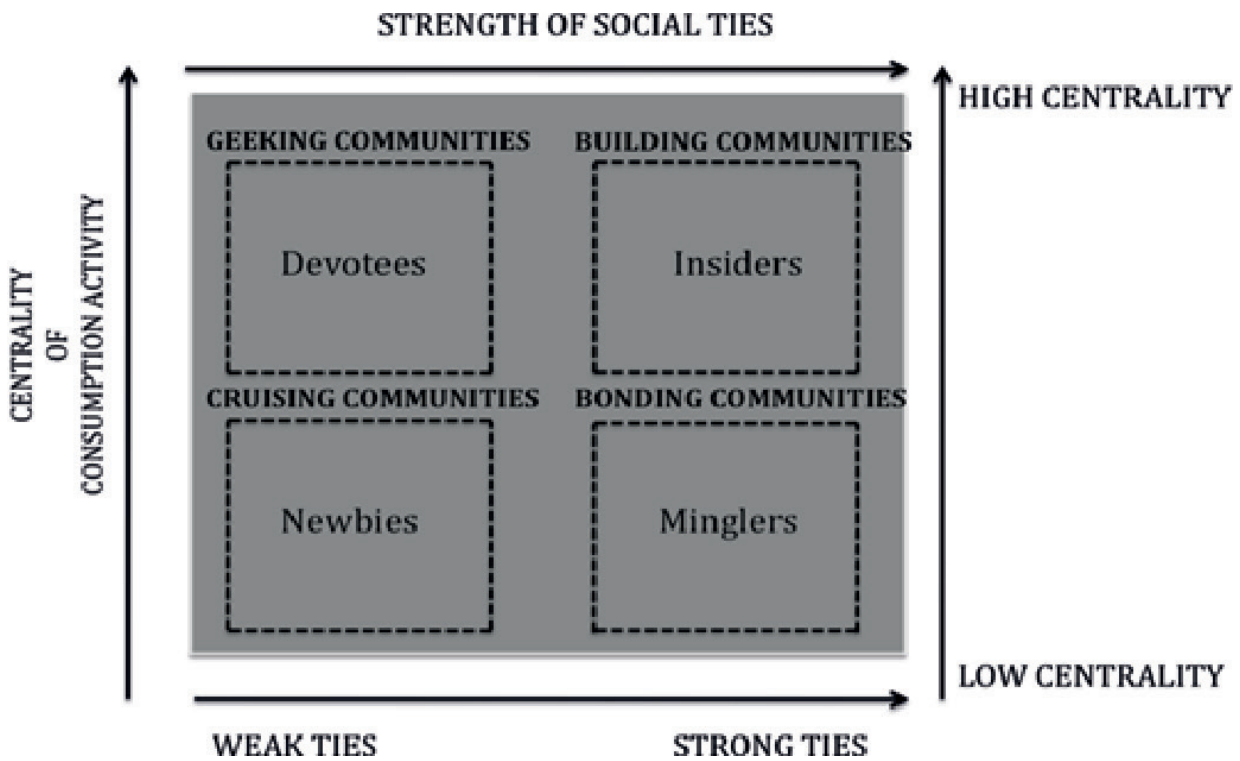
Herring (2011) looks at how discourse phenomena adapt and arise anew in an environment which is sensitive to technological factors such as multimodality and media convergence associated with the emergence of Web 2.0, and social factors at both the situational and cultural levels. Computer-mediated discourse is thus adapted to and reconfigured by Web 2.0 environments which provide a stage for participants to perform different forms of social actions.

Equally important in the study of online context is the framework of participation in terms of the different possible characterisations of the interactants involved in the virtual encounter. In his study of online communities, Kozinets (2010) proposes a taxonomy for online participation, which can vary ‘from intensely personal and deeply meaningful to those that are quite superficial, short-lasting and relatively insignificant’ (Kozinets 2010). Based on this meaningful-superficial distinction, Kozinets proposes four distinct types of online membership that bear a close correlation with four different types of online communities. He also argues that this variation in online participation and interaction depends on two main factors: the strength of social ties and the centrality of the consumption activity, as shown in Figure 2 below. According to Kozinets, the term *consumption*, is intended to be interpreted with considerable flexibility. In virtual worlds, for example, “the central activity might be ‘consuming’ new friends in a general sense or having interesting and exciting new online experiences” (2010:31). In his view, the first type of participation is that of the *Newbies*. These are prototypical members of what Kozinets calls *cruising communities* given that they lack strong social relationships with the group and only maintain a passing interest in the consumption activity of the online community. *Minglers*, the second type of online membership, usually take part in *bonding communities* given that they tend to build strong social ties with its members but they do not seem to focus particularly on a shared or unifying consumption activity. Unlike these, *Devotees*, who tend to participate in *geeking communities*, reverse this emphasis, showing a focal interest in the main consumption activity but being only superficially related to the members of the community. In this type of community, members mainly seek to meet their informational needs rather than their relational ones. Finally, *Insiders* not only exploit interpersonal relationships in an attempt to build strong social ties but also demonstrate a deep interest and thorough understanding of the core consumption activity. Due to their strong relational and informational needs, these participants typically participate in what Kozinets has termed *building communities*. Nevertheless, we could argue that the four types of participants may engage in any of the four mentioned communities depending on their emotional involvement, social motivations and communicative interests.



Figure 2. Types of online community interaction and participation  
(Adapted from Kozinets 2010:33, 35)

Defining virtual worlds in terms of communities may pose certain problems as these worlds, as Schroeder



(2011:151) explains, consist of a mass of undifferentiated users who usually interact with strangers with whom they may simply share a common interest. Therefore, these computer-based simulated environments can be better understood on the basis of the participants' conceptualisation of the groups with whom they interact, rather than on the basis of pre-established analytical labels and constructs that may not capture the dynamics of the activities performed by the different aggregates in these virtual settings. Thus, participants in virtual worlds may seek to engage in a variety of consumption activities, ranging from gaming and building friendship to flirting and flaming, which may be performed in either fleeting encounters or in more frequent, long-lasting ones.

These virtual encounters are affected by embodiment, or the use of an artefact in the form of an avatar, which forms a constitutive feature of virtual worlds, especially of the so-called massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). In his study of embodiment, Frank Biocca (1997) sheds more light on the idea of presence, disentangling the 'mix of bodies we find online and offline by breaking them down into three categories – the physical body, the virtual body and the phenomenal body (Taylor 2002:57).' The physical body represents the physical and measurable body of the user, i.e. the participant behind the computer screen. The virtual body is the representation of the user's body inside the virtual environment. This virtual presence is accomplished by means of embodiment in the form of avatars – 'those pictorial constructs used to actually inhabit the world (Taylor 2002:40).' These avatars are virtual artefacts that help users both embody social presence in the virtual world and perform social practice. Finally, the phenomenal body refers to the body schemata, i.e. the user's mental and internal representation of his or her body. Biocca argues that through this embodied presence in virtual contexts, participants manage to adopt different social roles and to engage in social practices. These social practices are enacted by prefabricated encounters (Goffman 1959) that simulate real-life scenarios and that enable participants to project and construct different selves in more or less anonymous environments. As a consequence, this division of the body into three personas might lead to a reconceptualisation of the relationship between participants in any given encounter, which may have a bearing on the exploitation of linguistic resources in the creation of social meaning, i.e. the reconfiguration of the contextual variables of tenor and the mode in the virtual environment.

#### 4. THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF HABBO

Habbo Hotel is a two-dimensional online virtual world aimed at teenagers. It seeks to mirror face-to-face interactions by engaging its users in prefabricated role-playing encounters that resemble real-life scenarios through the use of customised avatars that embody real-life participants. Unlike online role-playing interactive games, this virtual world does not seek to pursue a specific goal; it lacks a designed conflict and end objective, and its content is mostly created and rebuilt by its users, making it both dynamic and transient. It is a type of online networking site where the primary consumption activity revolves around the participants' need to socialise and engage in open-ended experiences through the construction of strong and/or weak ties that may or may not lead to the formation of different types of communities. Community building, if and when it occurs, will depend on a whole array of motivational factors, on the participants' level of engagement and participation, and on their sense of not just being there together but of accomplishing something together as a meaningful group of like-minded individuals.

In order to experience this virtual world, users embody a customised avatar and perform different social actions within a prefabricated setting with other individuals who have also assumed their own prefabricated roles. These social actions may be performed in public or private guest rooms that depict simulated ordinary real-life scenes such as restaurants, cinemas and dance clubs. Public rooms have been designed by the creators of the virtual world and cannot be customised by its users. These rooms are available to all players. Private rooms, larger in number, are freely customised by its users with Habbo Furni –furniture–, wallpaper and floor patterns, which can be purchased with credits. Both these types of rooms are often monitored by moderators and room owners, who are in charge of assessing any ongoing interaction and have the right to expel any player whose behaviour is considered inappropriate. Figure 3 illustrates a room in Habbo Hotel where players are interacting with one another through their avatars.



Figure 3. Screenshot from a Habbo Hotel scene

Habbo Hotel can then be described best as a text-based virtual world for socialising where users seek to interact with other players and embark on open-ended experiences by freely constructing their own identities through simulated role-playing activities performed by a customised avatar. Participation in Habbo Hotel seems to occur at two different levels. On the one hand, the interaction between the different participants at the keyboard – the physical body and, on the other, the interaction between the avatars – the virtual body. Moreover, there is also the tension generated by the choices made by players when trying to project their bodies into the virtual environment. Metaphorically speaking, we can describe this tension

as a dispute between the physical body and the virtual body over the phenomenal body in terms of how the avatar should look like, behave or act.

In this respect, the physical body and the virtual body could be described as two social actors with two different types of social agendas and roles. On the one hand, the physical body, may be said to have a broad social agenda which has to do with seeking entertainment, socialising with other players, or simply carrying out online social grooming, and a kind of master role which is more static, that is, the role of a player. The virtual body, on the other hand, is the projected self in the form of an avatar with a more specific social agenda and a prefabricated, self-assigned and dynamic role, both dependent on the virtual communicative situation.

Habbo Hotel is structured around a number of social spaces or rooms that are organisationally similar but thematically different and that allow for two broad types of participation in which roles are shaped by the setting. Although most of the rooms are user-created spaces where participants play user-defined roles, some rooms simulating real-life places like McDonalds, or an airport seem to encourage participants, through their avatars, to have a clearly role-defined character (a customer, an airline clerk, etc.) while others, like those depicting a beach or dance club, seem to give participants the opportunity to interact more as “themselves”. Moreover, some of these rooms can then be said to encourage transactional talk while others seem to foster interactional talk – although, just like most offline interactions, these online social encounters may sometimes include both types of speaking (or should we say writing in this case?).

Therefore, a micro-level analysis of the roles played by the participants in Habbo Hotel calls for the conceptualisation of frames (Goffman 1974) in virtual environments as being entirely technologically mediated and at the same time compounded of real-world frames that participants bring into their virtual-world encounters in the form of knowledge and experience about the typical organisation of offline events or activities that may then be recreated online. This composite whole, so to speak, may be said to affect the participants’ interpretation of their online activities as well as the forms of behaviour, including language behaviour, they might be expected to engage in.

The following snippets of conversations occurring in different simulated interactional scenarios come from a corpus of 70 screenshots from Habbo Hotel taken in July 2011 as part of a major and more varied language corpus collected for the study of discourse and online interaction. Excerpt 1 shows a conversation at a virtual airport where the avatars play two different prefabricated roles – that of a passenger and that of an airline clerk – which are clearly defined within a type of interaction that typically has an expected beginning and an expected end. This is a transaction between a passenger and a member of the airline staff at the airport check-in desk where STA (the passenger) is checking in for a flight home. STA gives JUS (the airline member of the staff) his ticket, JUS then asks for passport, STA hands it in, JUS checks details and confirms the transaction, and finally STA thanks JUS and says goodbye, thus bringing the conversation to an end.

**Excerpt 1:**

(01) JUS: *nextt*

(02) STA: *im here to go back home*

(03) STA: *gives tickit*

(04) JUS: *passportt pleasee?*

(05) STA: *give tickit*

(06) JUS: *go on'*

(07) STA: *ok*

(08) STA: *ty*

(09) JUS: *byee*

However, the roles played by the users and those played by the avatars are not always clearly defined within an interaction, as the avatars can be used as artefacts that help fulfil the users’ needs as regards their involvement in the structure of the virtual world. Excerpt 2, for instance, shows a shift in roles, on the part of one of the interactants, from the avatar’s prefabricated role of airline clerk to the user’s master role of player or user. The role of clerk is enacted by the formulaic expression *hi can I help you?* typical of service encounters. However, on being asked how to get a job at the airport, the avatar comes out of his role of clerk and shifts into the master role of player by producing the speech act *go to habbo.com/*

*groups/airport and can find all your info there*, which refers to procedures to be followed by users to have access to active participation in the specific room.

**Excerpt 2:**

(01) DAM: *hi can i help you?*

(02) JAM: *hi can i get a job*

(03) DAM: *go to habbo.com/groups/airport and can find all your info there*

This shift in roles, only performed by DAM as JAM interacts as player or user throughout this short encounter, is accompanied by a shift in bodies, from the virtual body who acts as a clerk to its corresponding physical body who provides the other user with information relevant to the actual person at the keyboard and not to the avatar. Linguistically, this shift in roles can be observed in the use of the expression *go to habbo.com/groups/airport and can find all your info there*. Moreover, JAM's question and DAM's subsequent answer seem to signal a change in footing as the relation between the participants moves from one being framed by the roles played in a simulated service encounter to one being framed by the participants' need to exchange information in their capacities as players or users of the virtual world.

In these virtual encounters, interactants can be seen to be more or less committed to the communicative situation. The level of commitment can be said to be dependent on the interactants' social agendas, i.e. on how they conceptualise gaming in this particular environment, that is, as an activity that is intended to seek entertainment either by strictly simulating real-life scenarios or by simply experimenting with pushing the limits of non-canonical social behaviour.

Excerpts 3 and 4 below show two transactions between customers and clerks at Mc Donald's, where the customers place the orders and the clerks give them the food, the customers pay and the clerks close the conversation with a salutation. The different moves in these transactions are represented by formulaic expressions like *how can I help you, may I take your order, can I have 2 large fries, one cheeseburger no onions or pickles please, that will be 2.99, thanks, have a nice day*, which interactants seem to reproduce on an analogy with what is usually said in real-life interactions of this type. These reproductions of patterns of interaction show a high level of commitment on the part of the interactants to the prefabricated communicative situation in a fast food restaurant as they behave within the boundaries of what is expected from them in this type of transaction.

**Excerpt 3:**

(01) LIS: *Next*

(02) LIS: *May I take ur order*

(03) MIS: *Can I have 2 Large Fries*

(04) LIS: *and is that all*

(05) MIS: *yes*

(06) LIS: *ok that will be 2.99*

(07) MIS: *ok*

(08) MIS: *\*pays*

(09) LIS: *\*gives food*

(10) MIS: *thanks*

(11) LIS: *thank have a nice day*

**Excerpt 4:**

(01) BEL: *hi can i help you*

(02) SYD: *One cheeseburger no onions or pickles please :)*

(03) BEL: *sure 2.50 please*

(04) SYD: *-gives money-*

(05) SYD: *-Gives 5,00*

(06) BEL: *thank you*

Unlike Excerpts 3 and 4, where both interactants show full commitment to the situation as a whole, in Excerpt 5 below, SPY (the customer) does not seem to be fully committed as he behaves in an unexpectedly provocative manner at Mc Donald's. This provocation is instantiated by ordering, insistently over a sequence of turns, Mexican food at Mc Donald's, a restaurant where typically burgers and French fries are sold. This provocative behaviour on the part of the customer turns the transaction into a confrontational encounter from the very beginning. This is further fuelled by the use of flaming in the form of either an expletive *wtf!!!!!!!!!!* in line 18 or insults like *mother\*\*\*\*\*er* in line 15 and *\*\*\*\*\*u!!!!!!* in line 27 which are directed at his interlocutor. The clerk, on the other hand, responds to this provocation by constantly repeating the phrase *dont sell em* as an answer to the customer's request. This repetition can be said to have the pragmatic function of showing rejection, boredom, and irritation on the part of the clerk. This irritation is orthographically represented by the use of capital letters and bold type, as can be seen in the last occurrence of the repeated phrase. At this stage in the interaction, LIS (another clerk) butts in insisting that tacos are not sold at Mc Donald's, suggesting a place where this food can be bought, and threatening to call the manager and report the customer. The level of confrontation or provocation in this interaction can be observed in the use by both participants of orthographic features, such as the repetition of letters, the repetition of exclamation marks, and the use of emoticons, capital letters and bold type, which are typical resources for conveying emphasis and involvement in online discourse. This provocation on the part of one of the interactants, therefore, shows his low level of commitment to the communicative situation as he seems to behave outside the boundaries of what may be considered respectable conduct in this type of transaction.

**Excerpt 5:**

- (01) SPY: hi  
 (02) HOT: hello wat would u like  
 (03) SPY: i want a burrito!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
 (04) HOT: dont sell em  
 (05) SPY:  
 noo  
 (06) SPY:  
 ooo  
 (07) SPY: ok how about a taco  
 (08) HOT: dont sell em either  
 (09) SPY: but i want a taco  
 (10) HOT: we dont sell them  
 (11) SPY: nooo  
 (12) HOT: y dont u try taco time  
 (13) SPY: nacho cheese  
 (14) HOT: dont sell em  
 (15) SPY: mother \*\*\*\*\*er  
 (16) SPY: how about cashu beans  
 (17) HOT: **DONT SELL EM**  
 (18) SPY: **wtf!!**  
 (19) SPY: ok my ass  
 (20) HOT: its back there  
 (21) SPY: how do u know  
 (22) SPY: **dey have no tacos or burritos tday!!**  
 (23) SPY: **hurry uppppppppppppppppppppp!!**  
 (24) SPY: **i want a frigga taco!!**  
 (25) LIS: **WE DONT HAVE A TACO LEAVE OR ILL GET THE MAnger go to taco bells!!!**  
 (26) SPY: nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo  
 (27) SPY: \*\*\*\*\* u!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
 (28) LIS: ILL REPORT YOU  
 (29) SPY: srryyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy  
 (30) SPY: ;(

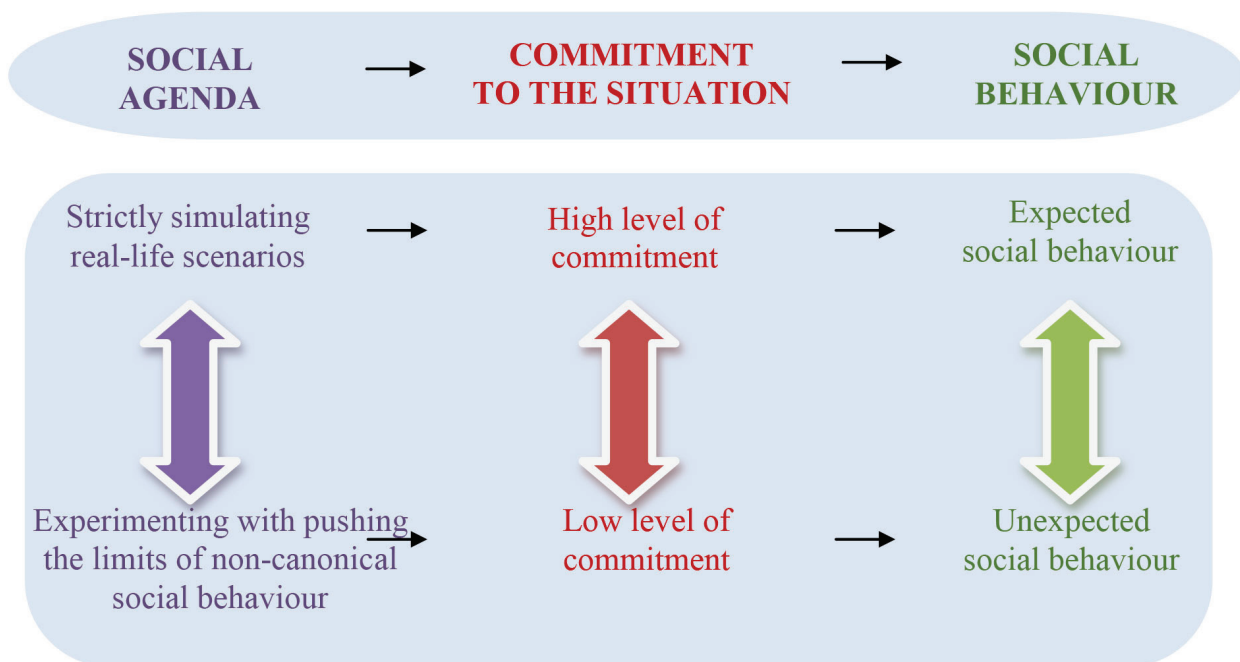
Excerpt 6 below depicts a similar case where both interactants' behaviour deviates from what is expected in service encounters, thus showing a low level of commitment to the communicative situation. In this transaction, this deviation is manifested primarily through the use of trolling and flaming by LOR, the participant performing the role of customer, and through the use of swearing in BEL's (the clerk) response to LOR's confrontational and provocative question *whats good ni\*ga?*. LOR addresses BEL by using the pejorative vocative *ni\*ga*, as a form of challenge and confrontation. BEL defiantly responds by using the phrase *shut up fat ni ga*, thus echoing LOR's use of nigger which is further reinforced by the inclusion of the negative emphasiser *fat*. LOR then provides an ironical and contestive answer (*ni\*ga do I look fat?*) and closes the turn by adding *Dumb bit\*hes these days and fck u*. Finally, BEL decides to ignore LOR by serving ALE and SYD, other customers, despite LOR's insistence on his further contributing to the confrontation. The low level of commitment in this transaction is evidenced by the unexpected behaviour on the part of both participants and the isotopes or lexical chains (Nord 1991:81) formed by the use of the negative words mentioned above.

**Excerpt 6:**

- (01) BEL: *anyone else*  
 (02) LOR: *whats good ni\*ga?*  
 (03) BEL: *shut up fat ni ga*  
 (04) LOR: *ni\*ga do i look fat? Dumb bit\*hes these days*  
 (05) LOR: *i was about to donate \$5 but fck u*  
 (06) BEL: *next*  
 (07) BEL: *please*  
 (08) ALE: *i want ice cream*  
 (09) ALE: *excuse i want ice cream*  
 (10) BEL: *sure that is \$1.50*  
 (11) LOR: *whats good ni\*ga? i just wanna donate \$5*  
 (12) LOR: *dont give it to ur boss, put it in ur pocket*  
 (13) BEL: *sup bro*  
 (14) LOR: *u sure u dont want \$5 in your pocket?*  
 (15) BEL: *hi can i help you?*  
 (16) LOR: *fine i guess im keeping the \$5*  
 (17) SYD: *One cheeseburger No onions or pickles Please :)*  
 (18) BEL: *sure 2.50 please*  
 (19) SYD: *-Gives money-*  
 (20) SYD: *-Gives 5.00*  
 (21) BEL: *thank you*

In Excerpts 3, 4, 5, and 6, we can then see how differently committed the interactants are to the prefabricated communicative situations in which they are engaged. In Excerpts 3 and 4, the participants are fully committed, share the same social agenda (strictly simulating real-life scenarios), and show that they uphold the type of behaviour that is expected from them. In Excerpt 5, however, one of the participants (the customer) seems to have a different social agenda, that of disrupting the exchange by pushing the limits of non-canonical social behaviour through provocation and defiance. This unexpected behaviour from a Mc Donald's customer indicates a lower level of commitment to the situation as a whole. Finally, in Excerpt 6, both participants experiment with pushing the limits by insulting each other. This specific social agenda shows a low level of commitment to the prefabricated communicative situation as their behaviour goes beyond what would be considered proper conduct in a similar face-to-face interaction. From this we can tentatively conclude that the level of commitment to the different communicative situations in Habbo Hotel seems to be dependent on the participants' social agendas. The level of commitment in turn can give rise to different forms of social behaviour, including linguistic behaviour. These three elements can then be represented in the form of three clines as shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Clines of commitment to communicative situations, social agendas and social behaviour in Habbo Hotel



Variability in interactional behaviour may be fostered by certain constitutive features of the virtual context, such as anonymity and spatial distance, which may give participants the chance to disinhibit themselves and act freely as they do not necessarily know one another and will probably never meet face-to-face. This way the participants can experiment with the use of flaming, aggressive and confrontational language without losing face, as it would be the case in a face-to-face encounter.

These contextual features of virtual worlds in general also offer the opportunity for experimenting with flirting. Flirtation, canonically, implies an elaborate and intricate mesh of interconnected sequences of speech, which are intended to attract a potential love partner. Flirtation generally makes use of mitigating devices, indirect speech acts, etc. that are exploited to achieve that effect. However, the anonymous and playful nature of virtual worlds can lead to a reconfiguration of this ritual by allowing the participants to be more direct and less concerned with losing face.

Unlike the conversations analysed above, the following are exchanges where the interactants may be said to be acting more as “themselves”, that is, although the interactions are still mediated through their avatars, the participants are involved in interactional talk with no specific role to be played other than that of a stranger talking to another stranger.

For example, Excerpt 7 features a beach scene where XXX approaches BAM with a series of direct speech acts and blatantly asks if she is single, to which BAM replies *nope*. XXX then asks BAM *can i be ur gf* (we could assume XXX probably meant ‘bf’ for boyfriend and not ‘gf’ for girlfriend, as the participant chose a hairstyle that within the structure of Habbo Hotel is exclusive for male avatars), to which BAM answers *i said i have a bf*. In an attempt to avoid XXX’s flirtatious approach, BAM seems to focus on the meta-message (Bateson 1972), that is XXX’s intentions, rather than on the message itself. This may be the reason why she apparently overlooked XXX’s use of “gf” instead of “bf” and the fact that she never actually said she had a boyfriend, although that can be understood by the implicature conveyed by the use of *nope* as an answer to *ur single*. Finally XXX closes the exchange by using the multiple saying *okok*. Multiple sayings, according to Stivers (2004) can serve different pragmatic functions in conversation. In this particular case, *okok* can be interpreted to convey irritation, apology or even acknowledgement on the part of XXX that he understands that BAM is not interested in him.

**Excerpt 7:**

- (01) XXX: *hi sexy*  
 (02) XXX: *u r single*  
 (03) BAM: *hi*  
 (04) XXX: *u single*  
 (05) BAM: *nope*  
 (06) XXX: *can i be ur gf*  
 (07) BAM: *i said i have a bf*  
 (08) XXX: *okok*

Excerpt 8 also simulates a flirtatious encounter at a dance club. Unlike Excerpt 7, in this interaction we observe the use of mitigating resources to lessen the directness of the speech acts used. For example, participant XBA in this exchange counteracts the blatant and direct speech act *do you like me* produced by SAV by using *lol* (laughing out loud) in line 4, which may be interpreted not just as an instantiation of laughter, but as a way of encouraging the interlocutor to keep on with the conversation that revolves around a personal matter. In the same line, XBA resorts to the use of modalisation by uttering *maybe* immediately after *lol*, keeping the channel of communication open. However, XBA conditions her answer to SAV's question by adding *idk you yet* in line 5, suggesting that she has the intention of getting to know him. Despite the attempt at mitigation on the part of XBA, SAV keeps his straightforwardness as he does not seem to be interested in the process of getting to know XBA and so shows that he is intent on his proposition (*it don't matter just go out with me*, line 6). XBA agrees and asks SAV *so what do you wanna do?* in line 8, to which SAV answers with the probing question *what u mean* in line 9; that is, instead of suggesting something to do, he seems to be expecting XBA to come up with a concrete proposition. This seems to challenge XBA, who prefers to disregard SAV's question by answering *nothing* and then gets back to her initial intention of getting to know SAV better by asking about his age. In this sequence of questions, we can also observe that XBA continues making use of mitigating devices, which are realised through the previous indirect questions. In spite of XBA's efforts to avoid losing face and hedge SAV's directness through the use of these mitigating resources, SAV does not provide a concrete answer to these questions and blatantly makes a sexual proposition, to which XBA responds positively by describing her actions using the third person singular and an initial dash.

**Excerpt 8:**

- (01) SAV: *sup*  
 (02) XBA: *HEY*  
 (03) SAV: *do you like me*  
 (04) XBA: *lol maybe*  
 (05) XBA: *idk you yet*  
 (06) SAV: *it dont matter just go out with me*  
 (07) XBA: *ok*  
 (08) XBA: *so what do you wanna do?*  
 (09) SAV: *wat u mean*  
 (10) XBA: *nothing*  
 (11) XBA: *how old are you?*  
 (12) SAV: *\*\*\*\*\* me*  
 (13) XBA: *-takess off ur pan.ts*  
 (14) XBA: *-slides my underwear off*

In virtual worlds then, where anonymity and spatial distance between the participants are constitutive features, flirtatious encounters seem to easily become reconfigured. As observed above, they may range from being explicitly direct to being more indirect, ambiguous and playful.

Apart from this cline of straightforwardness, in our observations of these flirtatious encounters, we have also noticed that some participants may choose to stop interacting within the virtual world structure, which involves embodying an avatar or virtual body, and continue their transactions through other forms of mediated communication such as Skype, MSN, Yahoo, Oovoo, or phone. In these specific cases, it seems



that the interaction is not really taking place between the avatars, but instead between the participants at the keyboard, as illustrated by the following summons taken from different Habbo Hotel rooms: *GIRLS WITH MSN SKYPE YAHOO OOVVOO ADD ME, hrrnyy sluutty gurl to be my kinnky textt pal?, IF YOU WANT TO SKYPE, ADD ME, girls who wanna c..a...m 2 c..a....m on m...s..n add me asap!, h()rny girls with fone add me!*

These summons show a shift in bodies from the virtual body represented by the avatar to the physical body, that is to say, the participant at the keyboard. They may also signal a change in footing as, by migrating to a different communication medium, and possibly one that includes image and/or voice, and by disposing of the avatar, the participants may take up a different stance or position with respect to a new participation framework that may lead to a more personal or intimate kind of interaction in which they may have a more concrete social agenda in mind. In this follow-up encounter, then, some aspects of the participants' identity like gender or age may be revealed through the use of image and/or voice as resources or affordances that they might like to exploit in order to create intimacy and to take the relationship a step further.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As we have shown in this paper, in order to analyse social interaction in virtual worlds, it is necessary to pay special attention to: 1) the specific constitutive features of the medium, which allow participants to communicate following certain patterns or rules of interaction which differ from those found in other online interactional environments; and 2) the possibilities and limitations for communication, the so-called *affordances*, offered by new technologies and exploited by the participants in online encounters.

By having a look at several interactions among users in prefabricated, role-playing encounters in Habbo Hotel, we have seen how communicative situations in virtual words are shaped by the complexities imposed by the intrinsic characteristics of the medium, which certainly calls for a more comprehensive approach to be adopted in order to achieve a better understanding of the ways in which users interact in virtual worlds.

Even though virtual worlds can vary largely in terms of the different kinds of role-playing experiences, interfaces and interactive options available to users, they share two basic constitutive features, namely the use of avatars as a form of embodiment and the general context of interaction governed by the simulation of everyday life activities and situations. These constitutive features are key elements that necessarily condition the way users interact and define what they can or cannot do within the virtual environment. For this reason, they cannot be disregarded if we intend to gain an insight into the dynamics of social interaction in virtual worlds.

From the point of view of tenor, it is therefore important, for example, to redefine the notion of online presence in virtual worlds, taking into account the use of avatars and acknowledging the fact that interactions develop at different levels of participation and through different "bodies". The subdivision of the self into a physical, virtual and phenomenal body can provide a better understanding of the participants' varied personal motivations and goals in interaction, as well as the different roles and social agendas performed by both participants and avatars.

Equally important for the study of interaction in virtual worlds specifically, and in CMC more generally, is an analysis of how real-life frames can be articulated with virtual frames in a simulation environment where different social practices and different types of behaviour are enacted. Thus, when bringing real-life frames into virtual worlds, participants may try to reconfigure them to include the specificities of their virtual world frames. Depending on the participants' social agendas, however, this reconfiguration may only be partially achieved, with some participants wanting to behave more like in real-world scenarios, and therefore showing a high level of commitment to the communicative activity, and others wanting to act more playfully in order to accommodate to the simulation environment, thus showing a lower level of commitment. This, in turn, can trigger different kinds of online social behaviour which could help explain why, for example, some participants in Habbo Hotel stick to their roles as McDonald's clerks, or passengers, or airline staff while others prefer to resort to antisocial behaviour like the use of flaming or trolling.

Against this background, the participants' social and linguistic behaviour in virtual worlds can be explained in terms of the kinds of role relationships they have, how anonymously they choose to interact, the types

of identities they want to construct and project, how socially distant they can be from other participants, and how committed they are to the social communicative situations they find themselves in.

Further research should address other aspects of interaction in virtual worlds such as turn-taking, power relations, affective involvement, politeness, coherence and cohesion, among others. It should also include multi-modal analysis that would complement the linguistic analysis by foregrounding pictorial aspects, voice and gestures that would contribute to the process of meaning making. Finally, any analysis that seeks to shed more light on the complexities surrounding the way participants behave and perform online should benefit from contributions coming from areas such as social psychology, sociology and media studies that could offer fruitful insights into the study of computer-mediated communication in general and virtual worlds more specifically.

## REFERENCES

- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Jason Aronson Inc.: New Jersey.
- Bauman, R. and C. Briggs 1990. "Poetics and performances as critical perspectives on language and social life". *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19:59:88.
- Biocca, F. 1997. "The Cyborg's Dilemma: Progressive Embodiment in Virtual Environments" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Vol. 3, Issue 2. Retrieved from Wiley Online Library 15th June, 2013.
- Duranti, A. and C. Goodwin, [1992] 1994. *Rethinking context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Egins, S. and D. Slade. 1997. *Analysing Casual Conversation*. Cambridge: Equinox Publishing Ltd.
- Fetzer, A. ed. 2007. *Context and Appropriateness*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Fetzer, A. 2007. "Context, contexts and appropriateness". In *Context and Appropriateness*, Fetzer, A. (ed.), 3-27. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *Presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. 1974. *Frame Analysis*. Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press.
- Granato, L. and A. Parini (2011). "Context and talk in confrontational discourses", in Anita Fetzer and Etzuko Oishi (eds.) *Context and Contexts*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gumperz, J.J. 2003. "Response essay". In *Language and Interaction. Discussions with John Gumperz*, S. Eerdmans, C. Prevignano and P. Thibault. (eds.), 105-126. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1985. *An Introduction to functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. and R. Hassan. 1985. *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-semiotic Perspective*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Hanks, W. 1994. "The indexical ground of deictic reference". In *Rethinking Context*, Duranti, A. and C. Goodwin, eds. 43-76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heritage, J. 1984. *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Herring, S. (1996) *Computer-mediated communication*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Herring, S. (2011) "Discourse in Web 2.0: Familiar, reconfigured, and emergent". *Proceedings of the Georgetown University Conference on Language and New Media*. Georgetown, Washington, D.C., March 10-13, 2011.

- Hutchby, I. (2001) *Conversation and Technology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hutchby, I. (2003) "Affordances and the Analysis of Technologically Mediated Interaction". *Sociology*, Vol 37 (3): 581-589.
- Jones, R. (2004) "The problem of Context in Computer-mediated Communication", in Philip Levine and Ron Scollon (eds.) *Discourse and Technology: multimodal discourse analysis*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Kappas, A. (2011) *Face-to-Face Communication Over the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2010) *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. London: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Martin, J. R. and D. Rose. [2003] 2008. *Working with Discourse*. London: Continuum.
- Martin, J. R. and D. Rose. 2008. *Genre Relations. Mapping Culture*. Milton Keynes, UK: Equinox Publishing Ltd.
- Nord, C. 1991. *Text Analysis in Translation: theory, methodology and didactic application of a model for translated-oriented text analysis*. Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi.
- Schroeder, R. 2011. *Being There Together. Social Interaction in Virtual Environments*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stalnaker, R. 1999. *Context and Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stiver, T. 2004. "'No no no' and other types of multiples sayings in social interaction". *Human Communication Research*, vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 260-293.
- Taylor, T. L. 2002. "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds". In: Schroeder, R. (2002) (Ed.) *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. London: Springer-Verlag.
- Van Dijk, T. A. 2009. *Society and Discourse. How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Widdowson, H. G. 2004. *Text, Context, Pretext*. Oxford: Blackwell.

