

Condolences on Online Social Networks: A Pragmatic Study Based on the Speech Act Theory

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Abstract

When language users communicate, whatever the message may be, they make use of a given *speech act* (Austin, 1962). That is to say, they do not communicate by the mere production of isolated sentences but by means of three basic speech acts: Locutive, illocutive, and perlocutive, both in direct and indirect ways (Austin, *ibid.*). Based on these studies, Searle (1979) expanded on illocutive acts and divided it into five basic categories. This project focuses on *expressive* illocutive acts, specifically on *condolences*, which may in turn be classified into eight categories according to the intentionality or function (Kuang, 2015). Secondly, given the advances in technology, communication has acquired new features, and many of these are practically exclusive to online social media language (Berlanga & Martínez, 2010). This article aims at describing the way in which native speakers of English tend to express condolences when they are informed about the real news of a close person's passing, in an online social network (*Facebook*). The analysis was carried out taking into account the semantic functions of the illocutive speech act of condolence, following Kuang (2015) and the specific features described by Berlanga & Martinez (2010).

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Introduction

People make use of the language to satisfy their communicational needs. For each purpose, language provides different tools which enable them to communicate a specific message and to fulfil other kinds of interactions. The study of language from a communicative perspective started in the 60s with Austin. This author focused on describing statements in terms of *speech acts* – that is, on the action which is performed in each statement, or what is intended with said statement (Austin, 1962.) In the following decade, Searle (1979) continued those studies with a specific interest in the linguistic resources used in each speech act, thus expanding on the concept of *illocution* developed by Austin.

The study of speech acts takes into consideration actual language in use, which entails that in some cases the results of research can be culturally bound (Wierzbicka, 1985; Rosaldo, 1982; Ochs, 1984, as cited in Kalisz, 1993.) Besides, as forms of interaction vary across time, the ways in which speech acts are expressed may also vary (Arnovick, 1999.) In recent decades, with the advent of new technologies in the field of interpersonal communication, and most specifically with the peaking use of the Internet, new forms of interaction have surfaced and even replaced traditional ones, in response to new social paradigms (Coll, 2005.) Social networks are a clear illustration of the impact this phenomenon has had on language use. According to experts, communication on online social networks is dominated by an emerging language – *cyberlanguage* – characterised by simple, useful graphology which is quite easy to interpret, and by a peculiar disregard for spelling and syntactic rules (Berlanga and Marínez, 2010.)

Within the classification of illocutionary acts, one of the most explored is the *expressive* speech act. Condolences, seen as an expression of empathy towards someone who has suffered the loss of a close person, falls under this categorisation (Searle, 1979.) As posed by Moghaddam (2012) condolences are part of a speech act which is strongly bound to language users' cultural background and which varies according to their degree of affective closeness. This is why, as it is a matter of emotional and affective importance, it is essential to be knowledgeable of pragmatic appropriateness at the time of expressing one's condolences.

This study aims at shedding light on the different ways in which native speakers of English express their condolences on *Facebook*. The comments under analysis are replies to an online announcement of someone's passing, and they will be addressed from a pragmatic perspective. Thus, we will analyse the various ways in which this speech act is carried out and the extent to which features pertaining to cyberlanguage permeate the sampled texts.

Speech Acts

The Speech Act Theory was proposed by Austin (1962.) In his theory, the main premise was the idea that the minimal unit of communication is not the clause itself but rather the linguistic act which is performed. Along the lines of this theory, every act can be analysed on the basis of three basic acts: the *locutionary* act, which correlates with the physical production of the message; the *illocutionary* act, which is related to the communicative aim (what is intended beyond any literal meaning); and the *perlocutionary* act, which encompasses all the actual resulting effects. In addition, the author proposes a second classification of speech acts, in which there is a two-fold division into *direct* acts –in which the meaning of a message is directly related to the actual uttered words– and *indirect* acts –in which the uttered words do not express the ultimate aim of the message straightforwardly.

Furthermore, Searle (1979) divides illocutionary acts into five basic categories according to their intentionality: *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *declaratives* and *expressives*. Essentially, assertive acts put forward information in terms of *truth*; directive acts aim at triggering a specific response from the hearer; commissive acts entail a promise on the part of the speaker; declarative acts aim at changing reality; and expressive acts have the purpose of externalising the speaker's psychological

state. According to Caleb et al (2009), the most widely used speech acts on online social networks are expressives, followed by assertives.

Condolences

Condolence, from the Latin *condolere*, means “suffering together” (Zunin and Zunin, 2007, as cited in Moghaddam, 2012.) In daily communication, when they express their condolences, humans show their emotions and their sympathy towards the person who has sustained the personal loss. As stated above, the expressions used for this speech act vary from culture to culture, which entails that pragmatic studies may be of importance at the time of gaining a deeper understanding of the way in which sympathy is expressed.

Pragmatic research on condolences currently available is rather scarce. Some of the studies focus solely on the identification and description of certain strategies to express condolence. Moghaddam (2012) carried out a comparative analysis of English and Persian films, and he arrived at the conclusion that there are vast differences in the use of intensifiers and interjections in condolences in these two languages.

Moreover, most studies focus on answers obtained through simulated situations –the most commonly used method is a completion questionnaire (*Discourse Completion Test*.) Authors such as Elwood (2004, as cited in Tareq, 2013,) Loftollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011,) Samavarchi and Allami (2012) have used this instrument for their research to later provide different categorisations for offering condolence, according to semantic functions. Most of the offered taxonomies are based on semantic classifications which correspond themselves to those proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) in his study of apologies, although in some cases they found expressions which could not be categorised with much accuracy.

On the other hand, research on condolences based on oral registers is even more difficult to find. Yahya (2010, as cited in Kuang, 2015) recorded condolences in an Iraqi community manually, and went on to provide five most common and five minor categories in the patterns of responses among the attendees at a funeral, also based on the semantic categories proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983.)

Other works that are worth mentioning are those which focus on real or authentic replies related to the passing of a beloved one. The majority of the present research focuses on written replies rather than virtual comments on social networks. One of the first authors to work on virtual replies was Tareq (2013) who focused on online condolences shared via e-mails related to the passing of a university professor who was a native Hebrew speaker. The findings demonstrated that the linguistic strategies used by the professor’s peers are similar to the ones found in previous studies. Along the same line, Kuang (2015) investigated the functions of Malaysian condolences written in 36 samples of SMS (Short Message Service). Based on previous studies, the author classifies the replies in the following categories: Expressing concern via directives, Expressing sympathy, Expressing wishful thinking, Offering assistance, Eulogy for the deceased, Explanation before expressing sympathy, Expressing sympathy and eulogy at the same time and Expressing uncertainty.

For the purposes of this research, the semantic functions proposed by Kuang (2015) will be used to classify the comments. Each of these functions can be described as follows:

Expressing concern via directives: these expressions are transmitted by means of using the imperative mood to show solace and lift the spirit of the recipient. For example, “be strong my dear”.

Expressing sympathy: these expressions can be words or phrases which are highly semantically loaded with sympathy, sometimes accompanied by intensifiers such as “very sad”, “so sorry” or adjectival phrases such as “deepest condolence”.

Expressing wishful thinking: Some condolences can be written in order to express the writer's personal hopes. In general, according to Kuang (2015), these expressions can be preceded by the modal verb, "may" and "wish" and can usually be followed by the verb "hope". For instance, "May you stay strong".

Offering Assistance: these are offers for the recipient to be helped or assisted in whatever way possible or necessary. For example, "Let me know if I can be of any assistance."

Eulogy for the deceased: these comments consist of a short description of the deceased. Nonetheless, in general, it was noted that the words used were semantically positively loaded. For example, "Your husband is one of the most genuine, sincere and honest persons that I have met in my life".

Explanation before expressing sympathy: When communicating condolences, there can be found a pattern in which the interlocutors provide explanations before the real act of expression of condolence. For example, by means of phrases such as "I was informed by Dr. B that your beloved husband has passed away".

Expressing sympathy and eulogy at the same time: In these cases, to a small extent, Kuang (2015) identified a pattern of expression which combines both: sympathy for the recipient and eulogy for the deceased. An instance of this pattern can be "Heartfelt condolences to you and your sons on the demise of your beloved husband and their beloved father".

Expressing uncertainty: There are times in which the writer does not know exactly what to say, or maybe does not find proper words when confronted with the sad news. These instances can be characterized by mere silence or by different phrases such as "I dunno what to say" or "I have no words".

The Language of Online Social Networking Sites

Online social media have altered the way in which users of the language communicate drastically, this evolution can be perceived as an inherent characteristic of all spheres of digital communication (Berlanga y Martinez, 2010). Along the same line, Coll (2005) explains that we are witnessing a profound transformation of the reading processes and reading practices as well as the concepts of 'author', 'text' and 'reader' since the possibilities of transmitting a message have become enlarged by the arrival of the digital technologies and the ways in which digital communication has evolved.

Kessler (2013) broadens the above conception of communication by stating that some of virtual platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* not only affect the ways in which language is used, but also transform the ways in which it is represented. This paves the way for new hybrid communication, in which there are instances of text and embedded images, for example the well-known smilies or emoticons or even one of the newest innovations in virtual communication the so-called "memes", which expand the classic ways of written communication adding an extra stimulus, the visual channel. [Office1]

Berlanga and Martinez (2010) explain that among the general characteristics of online social networking language, there can be found instances non-conventional types of abbreviations, which reflect the on-the-spot nature of nowadays styles of communication, the use of informal expressions and the use of emoticons, which help making emotional states explicit.

Methodology

The present work will concentrate on the analysis of comments related to the passing of a person. The comments analyzed are part of the personal blog of one of the relatives of the deceased, who kindly gave permission to the researchers to use them as part of this study. This publication dates back to March, 30th, 2015 and was shared on the well-known social networking site *Facebook* by one

of the relatives of the deceased, who was born and lived in England. The condolence messages taken into account for the analysis were the ones directed to the father and daughter of the person who passed via the *Facebook* wall.

From a total of 61 messages, the final sample selected consisted of 56 replies since the comments left aside were not written in English or because they did not present a significant amount of features associated to the language used in social networking sites, also called *cyberlanguage*.

As regards the analysis, all the *Facebook* comments were categorized according to the taxonomy proposed by Kuang (2015), and were later quantified to corroborate which semantic categories were the most frequent ones. After that, the researchers identified the typical cyberlanguage expressions present according to the characteristics mentioned by Berlanga and Martínez (2010) and were further quantified to check to what extent this type of cyberlanguage permeates the expression of condolences shared by the users who communicated with relatives of the deceased via the *Facebook* wall. It is worth mentioning that some of the comments did not consist of words at all. At times, what was interesting to see was that some of the replies consisted only emoticons or stickers (see appendix). As regards these types of comments, it was considered that the semantic load present in these comments was satisfactory for the researchers to classify them within the taxonomies hereby proposed.

Results and Discussion

Concerning the semantic categories (view table 1), the most frequent type of expression was 'Expressing sympathy', with a total of 41 replies classified under this heading. Other categories which were the most frequent ones were 'Eulogy' and 'Expressing sympathy and eulogy at the same time'. Moreover, few cases of 'Expressing wishful thinking' were identified, and only one instance of 'Explanation before expressing sympathy' and 'Expressing Uncertainty' were classified. Surprisingly, there were no messages on the *Facebook* wall which could be labelled within the categories Expressing concern via directives and Offering Assistance.

Frequency Ranking	Type of expression	Examples
1	E~ sympathy	40
2	E~ sympathy and eulogy	6
3	E~ eulogy	4
4	E~ wishful thinking	3
5	E~ uncertainty	2
5	Explanation before expressing sympathy	1
6	Expressing concern via directives	-
6	Offering assistance	-
	Total	61

Table 1

The outcome may indicate that condolences in social networks mainly display Expressing Sympathy statements. However, both directives and offers for help seem to be absent in this communicative platform. This may be given due to the need of shortness or the casual features described by Berlanga and Martínez (2010). It is worth noticing that four messages contained purely graphic content –emoticons in three cases and a sticker in the other one– which have been categorised under the Expressing Sympathy category.

Some of the most representative semantic categories found include:

- Expressing Sympathy: “thinking of you,” “so very sad,” “my thoughts are with you,” “condolences.”
- Expressing Sympathy and Eulogy: “such sad news we will always remember her for her amazing hair and her fabulous Smile.”
- Expressing Eulogy “a true inspiration,” “Our Beautiful, Gorgeous, Fun Loving, Caring and Amazing Niece.”
- Expressing wishful thinking: “RIP,” “rest in peace.”
- Expressing Uncertainty: “I can’t think of anything to say,” “no words.”
- Explanation before expressing sympathy: “I cannot begin to tell you.”

Regarding specific features related to cyberlanguage present in the samples, the results show that abbreviations are the most commonly used language forms (see table 2). Besides, several examples of informal expressions were found; however, only seven examples included emoticons and stickers. Whereas not all the comments posed these types of features, many examples contained more than one type of cyberlanguage.

Frequency Rank	Cyberlanguage features	Examples
1	Contractions	46
2	Casual expressions	26
3	Emoticons	7

Table 2

These data show that abbreviations, despite the fact they are not conventional, are frequently present on condolence offerings on *Facebook*. The most common kind of abbreviation is x (together with xx, and xxx) which is, by onomatopoeic relationship, used to represent “kiss.” This may be understood in terms of the universality of the cyber language (Berlanga & Martínez, 2010), which is an abbreviated form used by native speakers of English (and which they do not need to explain.) Other abbreviates used are: the letter **n** as a short form for “and” and the acronym “RIP” –a more conventional form of “rest in peace.” Besides, it can be easily be seen that messages tend to be short –just one or two lines in general, which reinforces the notion of shortness described by Berlanga & Martínez (2010).

On the other hand, the absence of an excessive use of emoticons may be taken as an act of respect due to the seriousness of the communicative situation. When used, however, most of graphic symbols are hearts. Among all the informal expressions which were used, the gerund forms prevail (as in “thinking of you” and “breaking my heart”), followed by repetition of intensifiers (“so so sorry”), and subject omission, which is not very frequent in English language.

Concluding remarks

This study has described how offering condolences in English is carried out in a non-conventional setting such as online social networks. Among its findings, it could be noticed that the preferred semantic category is the Expressing Sympathy, followed by Expressing Sympathy and Eulogy, Expressing Eulogy, Expressing wishful thinking, Expressing uncertainty and Explanation before expressing sympathy. Furthermore, there seems to be a generalised use of abbreviates, especially letters representing words, and some informal expressions related to infrequent grammatical structures. Besides, the invasion of informal cyberlanguage seems to stop at this point

as the use of graphic resources such as emoticons and stickers seem not to be widely acceptable for this speech act.

Apropos of the implications for second language teaching, this kind of study may be of help to teach expressions of condolence from a more pragmatically accurate standpoint. By analysing the way in which native speakers of English use this speech act in a platform which is common to speakers of different languages (online social networks), English language learners as a foreign or second language may also be able to establish a contrast between what is common in their first language and the target language in order to become familiar with appropriate forms of offering condolences.

It is necessary, however, to take into account the fact that the outcomes of this study cannot be generalised to different languages, nor can they be transferable to all the existing ways of expressing condolences, even within the same language (English). Thus, it would be highly beneficial to carry out other studies from a pragmatic standpoint, taking into account other aspects of this speech act, or even analysing other fields or the varied relationships among interlocutors.

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