THE PRAGMATICS OF TROLLING IN CMC: AGGRESSION, DECEPTION, MANIPULATION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), or communication between humans via computers (December, 1997: 5, Ferris, 1997, Herring, 2003: 612) is a rich area for the study of linguistic aggression, particularly since it is predisposed towards greater misunderstanding than face-to-face communication due to the reduction of cues such as facial expression, tone, and gaze. A number of factors have a major influence on CMC, namely: the level of anonymity, the psychological disconnect encouraged by physical distance, and the resulting sense of being beyond the reach of the consequences of inappropriate behaviour. Building on previous research into the issue of trolling (Grabosky & Smith, 1998, Hardaker, 2010, Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barab, 2002, Schmidt, 2006), or the act of provoking individuals online for amusement’s sake, this paper explores two key aspects: (1) what is trolling? How can this behaviour be defined? And (2) how is trolling carried out? What are the key strategies that emerge from the data? This talk presents some findings from two Usenet corpora (RE: 63m words, SF: 17m words), and begins to formulate an outline of trolling strategies according to the users within those groups. This paper also argues that ‘trolling’ cannot be viewed as interchangeable with offline ‘impoliteness’ (Bousfield, 2008, Brown & Levinson, 1987, Culpeper, 2008, Terkourafi, 2008), ‘incivility’ (Lakoff, 2005), or ‘rudeness’ (Beebe, 1995, Kienpointner, 1997, 2008), but that it should instead be seen as a feature unique to, and enabled by, the online environment. Finally, this talk suggests potential ways forward for understanding aggressive, deceptive, and manipulative behaviours found in CMC.
REFERENCES


