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Identifying Identity: Using Second Life in the Teaching of Sociolinguistics for the raising of Gender Awareness

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Abstract

This paper presents further innovative use of virtual worlds under the pilot stages of ASSIS (A Second Step in Second Life), a project funded by Umeå University. One of the aims of the project is to make use of the affordances offered by Second Life in order to raise sociolinguistic language awareness among teacher trainees and other students studying courses in sociolinguistics. Several experiments were conducted where creative use of the avatar in combination with so-called “voice morphing” (a tool which allows the voice of the speaker to be distorted so that a male speaker can sound more feminine and vice versa) allowed students to enter the virtual world incognito in order to “experience” a different linguistic identity. Activities were conducted in cross-cultural settings involving students from Sweden and Chile. The paper presents the initial stages of development of a model for how language awareness issues can be internalised through first-hand experience in virtual worlds.

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1. Introduction

Language learning in virtual worlds is gradually coming of age and the body of research in the field is growing. Recent studies within the field include aspects such as: specific case descriptions of language courses in virtual worlds (Tan & Won 2011; Petersen 2010), more systematic descriptions of language course development using frameworks such as action research and activity theory (Deutschmann et al. 2011; Deutschmann et al 2009), models for task and environment design (Blasing 2010; Molka-Danielsen et al. 2009; Schiller 2009; Molka-Danielsen et al. 2010), explorations of communicative aspects specific to virtual worlds (Deutschmann & Panichi 2009; Wigham & Chanier 2011), teacher and student perceptions of the learning environment and technology readiness (Wang et al. 2011), comparative studies of language learning in virtual worlds with more traditional CMC tools (Jauregi et al. 2001), recommendations for language research in virtual worlds (Panichi & Deutschmann in press), as well as systematic mappings of the affordances of virtual worlds and best practice models for teaching languages in these environments (Lim 2009; Omale et al. 2009, Mayrath et al. 2009). In addition, several EU-funded projects such as AVALON¹, NIFLAR² and AVATAR³, and most recently *Euroversity*, have been dedicated to the development and exploration of language-learning scenarios in virtual worlds.

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¹ Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONline (www.avalonlearning.eu/)

² Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research (www.niflar.eu/)

³ Added Value of teAching in a virTuAl woRld (www.avatarproject.eu/)

This paper describes pilot trials of the project ASSIS (A Second Step in Second Life) funded by Umeå University, Sweden, where the aim is to use voice morphing in order to raise gender awareness among language teacher trainees. The activities were integrated in a course in sociolinguistics at Master's level, where social-constructivist views on gender were one of the main topics being explored. According to this view, gender is not a stable state, but rather constructed in the interplay between interlocutors (see West & Zimmerman 1987 and Crawford 1995). We wanted to raise awareness of the mechanisms of this construction through experiments using voice morphing and avatar construction. An additional aim was to allow students to discuss gender issues with participants from different cultural backgrounds.

2. Method

Two activities were carried out in Second Life during the course: a matched-guise test (see 2.1 below) and a telecollaborative discussion (see 2.2 below). Participants consisted of four female students from Umeå University who were joined by six participants (five females and one male) from Chile in the collaborative discussions.

2.1. Matched-Guise Tests

In this experiment we tried to adapt matched-guise technique using the possibilities that virtual worlds offer (see Lambert et al. 1960; Giles & Powesland 1975; and Cavarallo & Chin 2009). In the original studies, the researchers wanted to investigate how listeners' attitudes were affected by the accent of the speaker. In these studies, the person reading was evaluated differently depending on what accent was used. In our experiment, we first recorded our students reading a short text in Second Life using their real voices and female avatars. We then used female-to-male voice morphing and male avatars to record the same students reading the same texts as 'males'. The recordings were sent out to approximately 50 outside judges who were asked to evaluate the avatars on the following characteristics using a scale of 1-7: 'hardworking', 'intelligent', 'ambitious', 'confident', 'trustworthy', 'considerate', 'kind', 'honest', 'caring', 'likeable' and 'funny'. Our hypothesis was that male avatars would be evaluated higher on characteristics such as 'intelligence', 'confidence', 'hardworking' etc, while female avatars would be evaluated higher on 'softer' values such as 'likeability', 'considerate', 'caring' etc. Our hypothesis did not hold. Overall, the female avatars were evaluated higher on all characteristics although these differences were only significant (t-test $p=0.05$) for one avatar and for a few characteristics ('confident', 'intelligent' and 'kind'). The most feasible explanation for these results was that poor and artificial quality of the female-to-male voice morphs influenced the 'judges'.

2.2. Collaborative Discussions

In the collaborative discussions we connected our students with participants from Chile. The aims were to:

- initiate a cross-cultural discussion on gender and language issues
- allow students to observe and analyse natural conversations using the theoretical tools we had covered in the course,
- allow those who wanted to, to explore what it was like to enter a different gender identity and how this affected the way others approached them.

The activity consisted of two discussions, one teacher-led (the first) and one without teacher presence since we wanted the students to observe gendered linguistic behaviour without outside interference. In the second discussion, the students were divided into two groups, where one group acted observers while the others were active participants and vice versa.

The collaborative discussions were a partial success. On the one hand, the students had some very meaningful exchanges with their Chilean counter-parts and enjoyed the experience, especially during the initial teacher-led discussions. "There were some interesting discussions, and it was great that it was possible to include people from different parts of the world", as one student put it. On the other hand, the idea of letting students monitor their own discussion did not work. The conversations were 'painful' and full of embarrassing silence. The students were simply not ready to support each other in a conversational situation in this type of complex environment. The non-teacher led session was, however, necessary in order to provide students with observational data, but retrospectively this could have been done in a different way. Getting the students to observe gendered behaviour in the conversations was difficult. There were only one very silent male present and one unconvincing morphed female. Nevertheless, we

believe the students got an insight into how online conversations in this type of environment differ from real life conversations. The final aim, to allow students to enter conversations using a different gender identity, was a failure overall. Perhaps as a result of the poor quality of the female-to-male voice morphs, only one student of the ten participating in this session decided to gender morph, which leaves us with few general conclusions. However, the student in question experienced the activity as extremely socially liberating, but also very psychologically disturbing. This highlights a real ethical dilemma in this type of set-up.

3. Discussion

In theory, the affordances of Second Life should have the potential of illustrating the social-constructivist view of gender. Since participants both construct the shape of their avatars and can choose how to interact with other people in a pseudo-anonymous way, the construction part of form and identity is obvious. Few students trained in sociolinguistics could fail to notice that gender is performance in such settings.

However, our study shows that, at the present time, the technology of voice morphing is not sophisticated enough to support the kind of identity switch we wanted to expose our students to. While the male-to-female morphs sounded quite authentic, the female-to-male morphs did not. The poor quality of the artificial male voice thus very probably contaminated our match-guise experiment. The same shortcoming was the main factor for only one student choosing to explore a gender identity change during the collaborative activities, a fact which greatly reduced the value of the second task design.

Apart from voice morphing problems, the instability and unpredictability of SL as a teaching arena was most disturbing. Regions were shut down with very short notice and new updates which changed prerequisites were launched unannounced. For the sustainability of SL as an alternative setting for pedagogical activities such as those described here, the reliability of the system has to be improved.

That Second Life has a potential for intercultural activity has previously been noticed (see Deutschmann 2011, for example) and the collaborative seminars in this study were successful in this respect. Students found it very rewarding to talk about cultural differences in relation to gender and language. However, in terms of design for sociolinguistic observation, the collaborative assignment was not optimal. Possible reasons for this could be the relative lack of social initiation, an important factor in all collaborative learning (Salmon 2004) or the classic sociolinguistic factor of *the observer's paradox*. Knowing they were being observed, the students monitored their own linguistic behaviour more carefully and rigidly.

4. Conclusions

The pilot trials exposed a number of shortcomings in our design. The poor quality of the female-to-male voice morph was one such shortcoming. With this in mind, as well as considering the ethical aspects involved, we are exposing students to voice morphed male teachers (incognito) instead of letting them voice morph themselves in future experiments. Further, we will pay even more attention to technical and social initiation (time allowing) to give students more time to familiarise themselves with the tools as well as each other. As to the technical unreliability of Second Life we can do little apart from setting up of our own Open Sims environment.

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