Searching for Safe Text
Transfers on to the Infobahn

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This dissertation is presented for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Murdoch University
2003
I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution

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Abstract

“Searching for safe text” is the main title of the dissertation, and also refers to the process involved in writing (and reading) it.

“Transfers on to the Infobahn” is the subtitle, which applies the guiding metaphor of movement to the central concept of transfer, used to explain potentially unsafe text, and to its application in cyberspace, seen as a further step from off-line experiences.

The research is on difficulties in interaction associated with differences in background languages and cultures, with an increasingly narrow focus on trans-cultural computer-mediated communication using written text, mainly in English. The thesis investigates whether and how forms of linguistic interference, particularly negative transfers, lead to unsafe text and serious misunderstandings, which negatively affect interactions.

Aims of the project include increased awareness of the characteristics and problems of both media and messages, and promotion of basic skills and tools to recognise, resolve, reduce and prevent such misunderstandings, to supplement broadly applicable (trans-)linguistic and transcultural communication capabilities. For this research I have collected, analysed, evaluated and compared many relevant examples, which are mostly compatible with online settings, to illustrate problems and promote approaches to their resolution. The most serious outcomes are in areas which impact on basic human needs and values, such as life, liberty and self-esteem, and involving the notion of face, also in the context of linguistic conventions of politeness.

This work brings a lifelong interest in forms of transfer between different languages to the new and rapidly evolving arena of computer-mediated communication, with primary concern for interaction difficulties involving native and non-native users of a supposedly ‘common’ language. Attention to polyglots, though not exclusive, intends to highlight the often ignored issues of differences in background languages, particularly within the wide and varied English-speaking world. The challenges range from ethical concerns for equity, access and diversity in multicultural societies to economic needs for competitiveness and effectiveness in the international arena.
Preface

Searching for safe text is about recognising where words and thoughts come from, and linguacultural diversity in what is expected and accepted in communication. At the start of the dissertation, this preface offers a practical and possibly interactive demonstration of the central process, and could be titled ‘Read me first (please)’.\(^1\) Conventions for prefatory matter provide a valuable opportunity for exercising the above skills, for both the author of this text, who does not like using the first person singular, although told it is advisable (should I?) and those who read it, whom I wish I could address in the second person, as ‘dear reader’ seems a safe and pleasant option. The item chosen for practice is the dedication (something I do for the first time) of this work to my aunt, discussed below and inviting introspective reactions.

The custom of authors to include thanks to family in the acknowledgments, and to dedicate written work to someone who is nearest and dearest, seems widespread, possibly universal, and certainly acceptable in English-language contexts. Such a choice, made by someone with an Italian family name,\(^2\) could also be attributed to cultural, even more than linguistic, background and values, and thus what is expected by and about each side would lead to mutually acceptable outcomes and explanations of how and why I decided to follow the practice, or where that text is ‘coming from’.

However, there are more specific and substantive reasons, as the thesis considers the individual background as the source or place where words and thoughts come from, and the family of origin plays an important role in its development, particularly in terms of linguistic forms of expression. More precisely, language acquisition and learning start at home and school, and I wish to credit a family member as my first literacy teacher (although my appreciation at the time may have been limited).

The choice is also a tribute to mastery of communication skills that would serve in trans-cultural contexts as well as in the classroom, from the ‘elementary’ level up.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) This refers to a book on the effect of text conventions in computer-mediated communication (Read me first! a style guide for the computer industry, 1996).

\(^2\) The choice of language in the dedication confirms that my personal background corresponds to what the name suggests, whereas such links can be misleading when marriage changes a woman’s name. The rules, conventions, options and re/actions in this matter vary considerably in time and space.

\(^3\) Primary school is called in Italy ‘scuola elementare’, where teachers are ‘maestri’.
Other family members have also been teachers, including the few surviving ones of my parents’ generation, and this heritage is the only claim I have to pedagogic skills. Thus aunt M. deserves the first place among the many people who contributed to my lifelong search for safe text, with my parents and other relatives, friends, colleagues and countless people who could not be named, even if I had the memory and space.4

In the academic context of this dissertation, acknowledgments go to people who helped me in the research project, listed in the main categories of supervisors (the most important, from any point of view), experts, academic and other supporters, often in reverse chronological order (a recurrent feature in my work). I thank and praise Dr. Nado Aveling, my principal supervisor, within the school of Education; Professors Horst Ruthrof, co-supervisor ex-aequo, in Humanities and particularly Philosophy; Duane Varan, in Interactive Media, who accepted to supervise me in the first year and led me to a PhD question I could live with happily ever after; Alex Main, in Psychology, originally contacted in view of supervision, who has remained interested in my project and shared precious inputs; Michael O’Toole, my very first contact with Murdoch University, who provided help also in the final stages; David Andrich, who (aside from his administrative role) invited me to a course for research students. I also remember the late Dr Gentilli, among those who had assisted me in Perth, before I joined Murdoch University.

Many other experts have generously offered their time and attention for specific consultations, and while several are cited with their inputs, there have been more general types of collaboration, for example through seminars and groups, also involving fellow students, and I express here my thanks for the contributions of people who chose anonymity, and for inputs that permeate my work, as if by osmosis.

Support for academic work takes many forms, and staff of various Divisions and offices provided both encouragement and help. This is also linked to the two main sources of financial support, a Murdoch University Research Studentship from late 2000, and the IMAGO Multimedia scholarship it replaced, received from mid-1998. According to conventions, the last words of thanks return to a more personal level, addressed to somebody who made available, inter alia, a home computer. Dank je!

4 People’s names, along with forms of address, are important items for safe text, but linguacultural and personal preferences and skills in their use differ considerably.
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