

## IT'S JUST A GAME, RIGHT? TYPES OF PLAY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CMC

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the various playful uses of language that occurred during a semester-long study of two German language courses using one type of synchronous network-based medium, the MOO. Research and use of synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) have flourished in the study of second-language acquisition (SLA) since the late 1990s; however, the primary focus has been on the potential benefits of using CMC to increase the amount of communication (Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997), motivate students (Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997) and foster the exchange of ideas (Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1995; von der Emde, Schneider, & Kötter, 2001; Warschauer, 1997). Only more recently has research within SLA begun to investigate the types of communication that occur online.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the transcripts from a second-semester German course and an upper-level German communication course reveal that a large portion of the language use online cannot be described using standard referential definitions of communication, but rather is playful in nature. Using research from SLA and theories on social interaction, this article investigates the different types of play that occurred within the online discussions and the possible implications of the presence of play in online discourse.

### INTRODUCTION

The drive to research potential classroom benefits of new technology has until recently focused on the computer's ability to act as a medium for communicative interaction, and has therefore been closely related to communicative approaches to foreign language teaching. Much of the research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has emphasized its perceived ability to increase the amount of communication. This focus on the amount of language production is inspired by theories of second language acquisition (SLA), which privilege communication in terms of the quantity of input and output (Krashen, 1987; Swain, 1995). *Communication* here is understood as a referential exchange of information, a sharing of meanings (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Canale & Swain, 1980; Krashen, 1987). Based on these definitions of communication, many researchers have cited a great number of possible benefits that CMC may have over face-to-face communication. These include an equality of participation arising from the many-to-many turn-taking structure allowed by the medium (Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997), the social construction of knowledge (Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1995; von der Emde, Schneider, & Kötter, 2001; Warschauer, 1997) and increased motivation, which has sometimes been connected to the reduction of social context clues (Beauvois, 1997; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997).

This study of CMC examines some uses of language that do not fit within a limited definition of communication. The decision to focus on more playful uses of language did not arise out of intention, but rather necessity. The data gathered in this study is the result of a semester-long project that had the purpose of piloting activities in the MOO as a supplement to communicative language teaching. The decision to use the MOO was based on the medium's alleged potential to encourage communicative exchange. After the first sessions using CMC, it became clear that a significant portion of language production in the MOO was not primarily aimed toward rational exchanges of information and, according to such a definition of communication, even appeared degenerate.<sup>2</sup> Closer analysis revealed that alternate

definitions of communication, such as those offered by models of ludic (playful) language, were necessary to describe the uses of language that thrived in CMC.<sup>3</sup> The results led me to pose the following questions, which guide this study:

- 1) What types of play do students use in the MOO?
- 2) When and how do these types of play appear?
- 3) What can the study of ludic language contribute to the study of foreign language acquisition and pedagogy?

In this article, I first discuss previous theories of language play in order to develop some working definitions for types of play, which will aid in the analysis of the data. I then outline the overall format of the study and backgrounds of the participants. Through the instances of play that occurred during this study, I illustrate the ways in which the various types of play surfaced in the students' CMC.

## **PLAYING WITH LANGUAGE**

Language play has recently received increased attention within the field of SLA. All of the research that I discuss in this paper has been conducted using different perspectives on SLA, with the exceptions of Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman, whose work I offer as an addendum to the standard definitions of play cited in discussions of language acquisition.

### **Sociocultural Theory and Language Play -- James Lantolf's Reading of Lev Vygotsky**

Lantolf's (1997) interest in play is primarily focused on its connections to private speech and his discussion of play relies heavily on Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) work on the role of play in development and the intrapersonal functions of speech. Vygotsky's theories are used by Lantolf in order to argue that the purpose of play is not fun; rather, it serves a fundamental role in the cognitive development of the learner by allowing her to handle parts of model utterances that are slightly beyond her current level of competence. Although Vygotsky's interest is in the development of children, Lantolf proposes that this rehearsal function of play is also used by adult learners of Spanish as a foreign language. In a survey that was administered to students as part of the study, play is illustrated in the following way:

...talking loud to yourself in Spanish; repeating phrases to yourself silently; making up sentences or words in Spanish; imitating to yourself sounds in Spanish; having random snatches of Spanish pop into your head (Lantolf, 1997, p. 11)

According to Lantolf, play as rehearsal may allow learners to compare their existing interlanguage with newly acquired linguistic information in a low-pressure situation. This is somewhat similar to what Swain (1995) has suggested concerning the "noticing" function of output production, whereby the activity of producing makes learners aware of gaps in their linguistic knowledge and aids in the consolidation of existing knowledge.

### **A Discourse Stylistics Look at Language Play -- The Work of Guy Cook**

In his book *Language Play, Language Learning* (2000), Guy Cook takes an extensive look at the role of language play in language learning. Whereas traditional models portray language production as the linguistic realization of pre-existing thought (i.e., a pragmatic intention or a piece of information), the language play model shows that form (e.g., the sound, the look, associations with other words) can also generate meaning. Cook has divided the features of language play into three main categories: linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic. Linguistic play includes play with rhythm and sound, repetition, and rhyming. Linguistic play is often the primary focus of certain types of language use such as certain poetry, rap, and puns. Semantic play, according to Cook, often includes references to an alternate reality found in role-playing and inversions of the language/reality relation, which aid in the creation of imaginary words.

Pragmatic play is characterized by a focus on the performance and the speaker/writer and often works toward or against the established social order.

The major contribution of language play toward language acquisition for Cook seems to lie in its ability to emphasize the interdependency of form and function (i.e., meaning) in complex systems such as language. This model of language production -- in which function not only determines, but is also determined by form -- differs from traditional, referential definitions of communication. Cook criticizes such models, which view meaningful interaction as the primary and only goal of language learning, and argues that the acknowledgement and encouragement of play in the language classroom would help remedy the supposed dilemma between focus on structure and focus on use.

### **Language Play in Psychological Approaches to SLA -- Tarone and Broner's Use of Lantolf, Cook, and Bakhtin**

In their 2001 article "Is it Fun? Language Play in a Fifth-Grade Spanish Immersion Classroom," Broner and Tarone (2001) distinguish between Cook's model of ludic language play and Lantolf's view of language play as a rehearsal in private speech. Lantolf's (Vygotskian) play is represented as serious exercise working toward proficiency. Their reading of Cook's work emphasizes the amusement aspects of play. Based on these two seemingly opposing views of language play, Broner and Tarone pose the question "Is language play fun or is it not?" (p. 364). In the article, the authors seek to reconcile these two disparate views of play, which have little in common other than the lack of obvious communicative intent. Based on their data from a fifth-grade Spanish class, they argue that both types of play do in fact exist, are separate and distinct, and most likely satisfy completely different purposes (p. 367). "It is important for us to maintain a clear distinction between the two types of language play in learner language to study their distinct roles in the process of language acquisition" (p. 376). While an utterance is potentially both goal-oriented and fun, language play is -- for Broner and Tarone -- either one or the other.

Broner and Tarone also include a discussion of Cook's writing on Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of parody. Bakhtin (1981) considers what he dubs *double-voicing*, the use of another's discourse for the purposes of the speaker. For Bakhtin, parody is one type of double-voicing, in which the voice of the other is used for comic effect. Through Bakhtin's notion of parody, Broner and Tarone show that certain types of what they classify as semantic play can also produce pragmatic effects. Because, as Bakhtin states, parody can only ridicule one discourse from the perspective of another; what one person perceives as playful teasing can be construed by another as an insult. Despite these social effects, Broner and Tarone understand the primary purpose of such utterances to be "the having of fun" and view any influence on social relationships to be secondary.

### **Social Interactionist Models of Play in the Works of Guy Cook, Gregory Bateson, Erving Goffman**

In addition to the three categories of language play already mentioned, Cook describes a competitive form of language play dubbed verbal dueling, in which participants engage in a verbal battle of wits. Unlike many of the other examples that Cook discusses, the main function of verbal dueling is not necessarily amusement; in fact such linguistic sparring often precedes physical violence. Cook cites Wolfson's bulge-theory view of social relations in order to explain how these exchanges can either encourage solidarity or competition.<sup>4</sup> Whereas normal interactions in modern urban societies are unemotional transactional encounters and occur within what she terms the bulge, the area of equal, neutral social relation, some interactions occur at the extreme opposite ends below and above the bulge, between participants with highly intimate or competitive relationships. Therefore, while an insult to an enemy may be seen as an act of aggression, to a friend the ability to take such playful liberties may emphasize the closeness of the relationship.

Gregory Bateson (1972) uses a similar definition for play in his article on the playful fights of sea otters. While Cook's definition focuses on these exchanges of witty insults, according to Bateson's definitions,

play belongs with other types of behavior such as threats and deceit. Bateson is interested in those interactions that make use of premises not overtly connected to the language itself in order to render the primary meaning of an action or set of actions non-literal. Thus the meta-communicative premise acts like a frame, which enables an utterance such as an insult to denote an insult, but not the denotation of the insult.

Drawing from Bateson's work, Erving Goffman has developed a theory on the types of frameworks that allow animals to interpret the behavior of others (1974). Those pieces of behavior that can be understood without returning to some prior interpretation he dubs *primary frames*. In addition to behaving within these primary frameworks, many animals (including humans) also operate within frames of behavior that require a return to the meaning of the behavior in the primary frame and a transcription of this meaning.

Goffman calls this process, by which an already meaningful event is transformed into something modeled after it, but to be understood quite differently, a *keying*. About the key Goffman (1974) states, "I refer here to the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity, but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (pp. 43-44).

Goffman divides what he views to be the basic keys employed by our society into five categories: make-believe, contests, ceremonials, regroupings and technical redosings. Playfulness is viewed by Goffman as a form of make-believe, along with daydreaming. He defines playfulness as "the relatively brief intrusion of unserious mimicry during interaction between one individual and others or surrogates of others" (1974, p. 48).

### **Summary of Theoretical Approaches**

Following the various definitions for play that I have discussed in the first section of this paper, it seems that the word "play" is often employed to describe any sort of creative tinkering with normal set-ups (plays on words, play with ideas, identity play, play with genre expectations, etc.) for nearly any reason (fun, rehearsal, social relations). Despite the disparity of these approaches, the researchers seem to focus on three main aspects of play: what is played with (Cook's division into linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic play; Bateson's notion of rekeying); how (Lantolf, Broner and Tarone, and to a lesser degree Cook's focus on fun versus serious play); and to what end (Lantolf and, consequently, Broner and Tarone's discussions of rehearsal; Cook and Bateson's discussions of verbal dueling and play-fighting). Since none of these definitions fully describes the various ways in which students were engaging in language play, it proved helpful in my analysis of the online discourse in this study to create new categories of play that incorporate aspects from all of these works.

## **LANGUAGE PLAY IN THE COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION OF GERMAN LANGUAGE STUDENTS**

### **Participants and Procedures**

The study focused on two university-level German courses: a second-semester beginning-level course and a conversation course attended by advanced students. With the exception of two students from the second-semester course, all participants were between the ages of 18 and 25. Over the course of the semester, four online sessions were conducted with each course. During these class periods the regular instructor and I both led the administration of the activities. Students used pseudonyms while in the MOO, and their actual identities were generally unknown to other classmates.<sup>5</sup>

The decision to use the MOO in the second-semester course stemmed from the original aim of the project: the development and integration of a set of activities that would supplement the communicative curriculum already in place. The syllabus is driven by the final five chapters of the textbook *Kontakte: A Communicative Approach* (Terrell, Tschirner, & Nikolai, 2000). *Kontakte* largely follows the natural

approach to language teaching, which is inspired by the ideas of Stephen Krashen. The online activities in the MOO were designed to take advantage of the many potential benefits of CMC, which are discussed in the research I have cited in the [introduction](#). The class consisted of 19 students who met 5 days a week for 50 minutes per class. The four sessions in the MOO were distributed across the 15-week semester -- one session each for four of the six chapters covered in the course -- with between 2 1/2 and 3 weeks between meetings (see [Appendix A1](#)). In addition to these meetings, the instructor and I conducted debriefing sessions following each set of MOO activities. During this time students were asked to analyze their own transcripts, to discover and attempt to explain their own language production, and to discuss their experiences using the medium.

In addition to the second-semester class, I worked with and observed a conversation course, which was generally taken in the fifth or sixth semester of language study. The class met twice a week for an hour and a half each session. There were 16 students in this class, and many of them had previously taken German courses together. The conversation class met in the MOO three times over the course of the semester and the sessions were approximately 2 weeks apart. Although the MOO was already a standard component of the curriculum for this course, this was the instructor's first time working with the medium. The activities for this course were developed by the instructor with my consultation (see [Appendix A2](#)).

At the beginning of the semester I wrote and administered a questionnaire to the students in order to ascertain basic demographic information and gauge the students' previous experiences with and preconceptions of classroom-implemented network technology (see [Appendix B](#)). In order to highlight the computer savviness of current university students, it is noteworthy that every single student in both classes reported having a computer at home, and not a single student felt that their computer skills rated less than "good." The students reported spending anywhere from 1.5 to 12 hours a day on the computer, and the majority of this time was spent online, e-mailing and Web surfing. Most of the students had never used online chat and only a pair had ever used a MUD or a MOO. However, a larger portion of the students had engaged in instant messaging, which entails a similar type of communication, although it generally only involves two speakers.

Based on the data gained from this study and the previously discussed theories on language play, I propose the following three categories of analysis:

- 1) Play with the form
- 2) Play with the content/concept
- 3) Play with the frame

The choice of the three categories is inspired by Cook's division into linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic play; however, by incorporating the work of the other theorists, I have expanded the definitions beyond what Cook accounts for in his trichotomy of play types.<sup>6</sup>

***Play with the Form.*** In this first category are those types of play that focus primarily on the form, rather than the meaning, of the language. Included are those many aspects of play that Cook dubbed linguistic, such as rhyming and punning. Lantolf's description of play for rehearsal also has much in common with this type of play. Poetic devices such as alliteration, grammatical parallelism, and repetition also fall under this category. The concreteness of concrete poetry would also be considered play with form.

***Play with the Content/Concept.*** Play with content/concept overlaps in many ways with Cook's notion of semantic play, in which the language enables new potential for conceptualization and brings about an inversion in the relation between language and reality. Play with content or concept also includes those processes similar to what is called *bricolage* by anthropologists and *conceptual blending* by cognitive scientists. Of the three categories of play, it is perhaps most difficult to provide evidence of, since it is largely cognitive, although researchers at the intersections of cognitive science and linguistics, such as

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), have argued that certain uses of metaphor and other types of semantic play are evidence of processes of what could be considered play with content. Broner and Tarone (2001) describe this type of play in their discussion of fictional worlds of reference produced by some students during language play (pp. 373-374). Cook's examples show that language does not only represent, but may sometimes facilitate play with the concepts or content.

***Play with the Frame.*** The final type of play, play with frame, is inspired by Cook's descriptions of pragmatic play, and the theories of Goffmann and Bateson. While play with the form involves the more material aspects of the language and play with content/concept involves the primary meaning of the language, play with the frame is largely meta-linguistic and occurs on the level of understanding. Like the play-fighting of Gregory Bateson's otters, it mimics another piece of behavior, however means something entirely different. I would like to suggest that play not be relegated to types of mimicry, but that all types of rekeying might be viewed as a type of play. Play with the frame includes aspects of Cook's pragmatic play in that the role of the speaker and the performance are of importance; however, rather than being defined by a social impact, it is defined through play with pieces of discourse. In this way it is similar to Bakhtin's concept of parody, which involves the use of previous utterances. Unlike both Goffman's notion of rekeying and Cook's idea of verbal dueling, however, I would like to suggest that play with the frame may also include pieces of behavior that are not meant to be "understood" by all participants.

## **PLAY IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE ONLINE DISCOURSE**

My analysis of the online transcripts is predicated on the definitions of play I have provided, but it was not without difficulties. Because these definitions look primarily at what is being played with, it is possible to describe the data relatively objectively, without the need for clues of a playful feeling among the students. In spite of the descriptive nature of the analysis, a fair amount of interpretation was required on my part in order to determine what counts as play and it is important to consider these definitions as analytical guidelines rather than absolutes. Furthermore, attempts to quantify the data in order to determine what percentage of the transcripts was play have proven unsuccessful due to questions of boundary. Where does the play begin and end -- with the word, sentence, turn of talk? A greater quantity of one sort of play would also not necessarily mean that it played a greater role in the online discourse, since the three types differ in standard size. In both classes, a smaller portion of the transcripts includes play with the form of language. Since these occurrences usually focus on a single word or phrase, it is logical that an individual instance of play with form would generally be smaller than the average play with the frame, which utilizes larger pieces of discourse. It is striking that the second-semester students seemed to spend a greater deal of time on play with the frame, while the conversation students seemed to engage in more play with content. Although it is difficult to determine exactly which factors led to this discrepancy, it seems likely that it may be in some ways connected to the nature of the activities. Out of the seven different activities which the beginning level students were assigned over the course of the sessions, two involved role-play and two required reaching a consensus regarding a hypothetical situation (e.g., places to visit in a foreign city, guidelines for raising children), which may in part account for the large percentage of play with frame. Most of the activities assigned to the German conversation course involved collaborative authoring in some form, which may explain the large percentage of play with content. However, all three categories of play did surface during the full range of activities, thus the nature of the activity cannot be considered the sole explanation for the presence of a type of play.

### **Evidence of Play with the Form**

In the following example ([Example 1](#)), students in the conversation course were asked to generate advertising ideas for a product of their own creation.<sup>7</sup> This particular group chose to market a jacket with a walkman installed in the hood. The students decided to compose a rap, a genre characterized by rhythm and sound, which this student attempts to compensate for in the written medium with rhyme.

Example 1<sup>8</sup>

JJ sagt, "ich kann rappen"	JJ sagt, "I can rap"
JJ sagt, "So du willst eine <b>jacke</b> "	JJ sagt, "So you want a jacket"
JJ sagt, "aber keine <b>Sacke</b> "	JJ sagt, "But not a sack"
JJ sagt, "hier ist was du <b>machst</b> "	JJ sagt, "Here is what you do"
JJ sagt, "so das keiner mehr <b>lacht</b> "	JJ sagt, "So that no one laughs"

JJ's use of rhyme seems to originate from the choice of genre, rather than being specific to the online medium in any obvious way. In addition to the information the students wish to convey, the necessities of the rhyming contribute to the choice of words.

The students from the second-semester class participated in a similar activity in which they were to choose a product which they considered representative of America and then figure out how to market it to German consumers. This was part of a larger discussion of cultural stereotypes and cultural representations. One group chose to sell "whoopee cushions" and in their discovery of possible translations they stumbled into play and punning based on the German words for "cushion," "Puffer" and "Kissen" (Example 2).

## Example 2

<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "cushion=die Puffer"</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "cushion=die Puffer"
<i>Bob2 says, "whoooooopiE"</i>	Bob2 says, "whoooooopiE"
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "haha, <b>Whoopipuffer</b>"</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "haha, Whoopipuffer"
<i>Margaret says, "whoopiepuffer ist besser"</i>	Margaret says, "whoopiepuffer is better"
<i>Schmidt_der_Dunkel says, "hahahahaha...das ist sehr lustig"</i>	Schmidt_der_Dunkel says, "hahahahaha...that is really funny"
<i>Hermann_Voss says, "Sehr gut"</i>	Hermann_Voss says, "very good"
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "ja..."</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "yeah..."
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "oh! chair cushion = sitzkissen"</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "oh! chair cushion = sitzkissen"
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "hahahahaha"</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "hahahahaha"
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "kissen..."</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "kissen..."
<i>Bob2 says, "kissen?"</i>	Bob2 says, "kissen?"
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "<b>asskissen</b>"</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "asskissen"
<i>Hermann_Voss says, "Laut-kissen? Noise-cushion"</i>	Hermann_Voss says, "Laut-kissen? Noise-cushion"
<i>Schmidt_der_Dunkel says, "Gut! so wir haben jetzt ein Marke. Welche Tagline sollen wir haben?"</i>	Schmidt_der_Dunkel says, "Good! so we have a brand. Which tagline should we use?"
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "<b>whoopiasskissen</b>"</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "whoopiasskissen"
<i>Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "hahahaha!"</i>	Grosse_Gruenhilde says, "hahahaha!"
<i>Hermann_Voss says, "Whoopie wie die Amerikaner"</i>	Hermann_Voss says, "Whoopie like the Americans"

*Schmidt\_der\_Dunkel says, "ja!"*

Schmidt\_der\_Dunkel says, "yeah!"

*Schmidt\_der\_Dunkel says, "Jetzt kann man Whoopie wie die Amerikaner!"*

Schmidt\_der\_Dunkel says, "Now you can Whoopie like the Americans!"

*Hermann\_Voss says, "Perfekt"*

Hermann\_Voss says, "Perfect"

*Grosse\_Gruenhilde says, "hahah. Kissen wie die Amerikaner...mit Whoopie!"*

Grosse\_Gruenhilde says, "hahah. Kissen like the Americans...with Whoopie!"

This play with form differs from the first example, in that it is clearly the product of a foreign language classroom, where the words still sound funny. Such exploration of the sound of the language may serve a mnemonic function by promoting awareness. However, as observed by Bakhtin (1981) and noted by Broner and Tarone (2001), it is only possible to make fun of a verbal form from the perspective of another. There is no attempt to embrace a foreign viewpoint in the previous example and the language is certainly not treated as a neutral means of exchanging information. The emphasis here is on the foreignness of the words.

A student from the second-semester class with the screen name Hermann\_Voss logged on to the MOO before his classmates had arrived. This attempt to translate the Oscar Meyer Bologna song is only an excerpt from the private speech that this student produced:

#### Example 3

*Hermann\_Voss says, "Meine Bologna hat ein erste Nammen, ist O-S-C-A-R"*

Hermann\_Voss says, "My bologna has a first name [misspelled], is O-S-C-A-R"

*Hermann\_Voss says, "Mein Bologna hat ein sveiste Nammen, ist M-E-Y-E-R..S!"*

Hermann\_Voss says, "My bologna has a second [misspelled] name [misspelled], is M-E-Y-E-R..S!"

Lantolf and, somewhat less emphatically, Broner and Tarone have suggested that play in the form of rehearsal is primarily serious, as opposed to fun. Although the student is entertaining himself by translating a familiar song into the foreign language, this process may also promote the consolidation of linguistic knowledge that Lantolf discusses in his work. Unlike the previous examples, the student is not attempting to manipulate the language in any specialized way, but is experimenting with the foreign tongue. This instance seems to have much in common with what Broner and Tarone (2001) describe as language play for rehearsal, that is, the speaker is using forms that he has not yet mastered, and the utterance is apparently not intended to be heard by others (p. 367).<sup>9</sup> Yet, as Broner and Tarone acknowledge, this recognition does not rule out the use of language for fun, which is implied in the choice of a catchy commercial jingle. In the context of the MOO, it becomes necessary to recognize a third explanation for this utterance that does not exclude the others. Despite the fact that Hermann\_Voss is the only occupant in the MOO, his utterances enter into the transcripts and thus become more or less public. Because the MOO is a textual environment, to speak is in a sense to take up space. Whereas a person waiting alone in a room has bodily presence, the person in a MOO environment exists only verbally. By "singing" to himself, this student may not only be negotiating his role as a speaker of German, but establishing himself as an inhabitant of the MOO.

#### **Evidence of Play with the Content/Concept**

The following examples show how students used the language in various ways to initiate or facilitate play with the content. Many of the students in the German conversation class knew each other from other classes and had developed a level of comfort with one another that allowed for teasing and taunting. (This will be discussed further in the section on play with the frame.) In [Example 4](#) the student called Mir has been verbally dueling with another student, Steffigraf, who told Mir to "give up" asking other students to



stop changing their screen names. During the first two sessions, the students in this class were granted the ability to change their screen names at will and new names could not in any way be traced back to their owners. This resulted in the following exchange:

Example 4

Mir says, "ja. jetzt gehen wir Schlampe...ich werde dein Po kicken"	Mir says, "yeah. let's go then sleaze...I am going to kick your butt [idiomatically incorrect]."
Jieve says, "im Arsch treten"	Jieve says, "to kick butt [idiomatically correct]"
steffigraf says, "Das ist aber lacherlich"	steffigraf says, "That's just ridiculous"
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	UC_Regents says, "We need money
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	[repeated eight times consecutively]!"
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	
UC_Regents says, "Wir brauchen Geld!"	
Jieve says, "steffigraph, ich hae [probably misspelled word for hate] dich"	Jieve says, "steffigraph, I hae [probably misspelled word for hate] you"
arsch says, "nicht treten"	arsch [butt] says, "do not kick"

In response to Jieve's correction of Mir's language use, one of the students has quickly changed his/her name to "butt" (Arsch) and begs the interlocutors "not to kick him" (nicht treten). The word "Arsch" in Jieve's sentence is more of an illustration, than a statement, which then jumps out of the sentence and responds to the meaning as if the sentence were a threatening speech act. In the following sentence spoken by "Arsch," it almost seems as if the lexical item (the word "butt") from the meta-linguistic correction has suddenly started to talk. The student has taken a typical moment of peer correction and transformed it into an alternate reality where vocabulary items speak.

Another type of content play was employed by students in the second-semester class who were just learning how to master emotes. Chat-room discourse has developed ways of compensating for the lost physical cues, which distinguish sarcasm, teasing, threats, and so forth. Laughter, for example, can be signaled through an emote that allows the speaker to express an action, which appears in the form of a third-person narrated report of the act. For example, Freak would type, "emote laughs" and other users would see "Freak laughs." Since students were not instructed in how to use this function of the computer medium, those students who were experienced with similar types of environments first figured out how to use this option and other students had to ask the help of their peers or go without. Dragon, Bies, and Sprachmeister were the first three students to use this function.

Example 5

<i>Dragon springt und lacht.</i>	Dragon jumps and laughs.
<i>Bies springt und lacht auch.</i>	Bies jumps and laughs too.
<i>Sprachmeister springt und lacht besser als du.</i>	Sprachmeister jumps and laughs better than you.

The emote in the online environment is supposed to substitute for bodily presence. In face-to-face communication, body language does not comment on body language, but in the verbal environment of the network-based discussion forum, it becomes possible for the representation of action to evaluate itself. The concept "jumps and laughs" (*springt und lacht*) is only expressible in the form of a narrative or a sort of theatrical stage-direction. The commentaries from Bies and Sprachmeister expose the representational quality of the "action," thereby calling into question the meaning of the sentence. What does it mean to textually "jump and laugh"? What is the status of action in a textual medium? As Kötter (2003) and Marvin (1995) have already noted, the emote differs from face-to-face nonverbal cues in that it is deliberate and strategic. Sprachmeister and Bies's evaluations of their own "actions" reveals the virtuality of the environment within which they are acting.

### **Evidence of Play With the Frame**

One of the most common types of play with the frame that occurred in the online discourse can be classified as role play or identity play. The students of the German conversation class were asked to create descriptions for the rooms they were using. At the beginning of the online session they were asked to choose a room and discuss the description with the fellow occupants. Jany and Steffigraf found themselves in a room called the Café, which included the following description:

*Dieses Zimmer ist nicht sehr groß, vielleicht 7 meter mal 7 meter. An der westen Wand gibt es eine Tuer. Direkt gegenüber, vor der osten Wand steht eine Bar, wo man Kaffee und andere Getraenke kaufen kann.*

This room is not very large, perhaps 7 meters by 7 meters. On the west wall there is a door. Directly across, before the east wall is a bar, where you can buy coffee and other drinks.

In [Example 6](#) Jany responds to the description of the room as a cafe by seeming to take on the role of a server and offering steffigraf a coffee.

#### **Example 6**

<i>Jany says, "Moechst du einen Kaffee?"</i>	Jany says, "Would you like a coffee?"
<i>steffigraf says, "ja, danke"</i>	steffigraf says, "yes, thank you"
<i>Jany says, "hol ihn fuer dich selbst"</i>	Jany says, "get it for yourself"
<i>steffigraf says, "du bist aber nett"</i>	steffigraf says, " <b>aren't you nice</b> "
<i>jany says, "ja, ich bin aber kein Kellner"</i>	jany says, "yes, but I am not a waiter"

When Jany offers Steffigraf a coffee, she assumes that he is taking on the role of server or polite hostess and plays along by accepting the offer. Jany then pulls the linguistic rug out from under her, by telling her to get one for herself. Jany catches the sarcasm in Steffigraf's retort "du bist aber nett" (Why, aren't you nice), but does not respond to the sarcastic force of the speech act, choosing instead to acknowledge her words as a statement of fact. By saying, "I am nice, but I am not a waiter," Jany reveals that mouthing (or typing) the words of a waiter, does not make one a waiter. Jany is playing with the textual simulation of reality, by exposing the role-play as merely text. While Steffigraf plays within the textual reality, Jany moves outside of the frame showing Steffigraf what the text hides.

In [Example 7](#) one of the students in the German conversation course, Weibschlagertraeger (whose name "wife-beater-wearer" could already be viewed as an antagonism) ridicules and demeans the fellow members of the room and their ideas. This is only a portion of the dialogue and a portion of the insults and incendiary comments originating from this particular student. The first of these comments followed the initial brainstorming session, in which students were throwing out various ideas very quickly. After his ideas were not picked up by other members of the group, Weibschlagertraeger stated, "God, it is

impossible to make you all satisfied" (*Gott, es ist unmöglich, ihr alle zufrieden zu machen*) and his contributions became more insulting.

#### Example 7

<i>Weibschlaegertraeger says, "SEID IHR NICHT KREATIVER ALS DAS"</i>	Weibschlaegertraeger says, "AREN'T YOU MORE CREATIVE THAN THAT"
<i>JJ sagt, "sonst werde ich dich schlagen"</i>	JJ sagt, "otherwise I will hit you"
<i>Weibschlaegertraeger says, "ich habe meine Antwort!"</i>	Weibschlaegertraeger says, "I have an answer!"
<i>steffigraf sagt, "so wir müssen ein werbespot haben"</i>	steffigraf sagt, "so we have to have a commercial"
<i>NeeChee sagt, "wir planen und du beschweren immer"</i>	NeeChee sagt, "we plan and you complain always"
<i>steffigraf sagt, "ich glaube, dass wir weibschlaegertraeger ignorieren sollen"</i>	steffigraf sagt, "I believe, that we should ignore Weibschlaegertraeger"
<i>Weibschlaegertraeger says, "ich rate, ihr seid alle Frauen"</i>	Weibschlaegertraeger says, "I am guessing, that you are all women"
<i>JJ sagt, "ok: wir sagen, habt ihr probleme mit euren walkman's weil die immer fallen? Nun ist das kein problem mehr"</i>	JJ sagt, "ok: we say, do you have problems with your walkmans because they always fall? Now that is not a problem anymore"
<i>steffigraf sagt, "dann geht er vielleicht weg"</i>	steffigraf sagt, "then maybe he will go away"
<i>NeeChee sagt, "wir koennen es marketiert fuer joggen"</i>	NeeChee sagt, "we can market it for jogging"
<i>JJ sagt, "mit der radiojacke kann man ueberall rennen und es faellt nicht"</i>	JJ sagt, "with the radio jacket you can run everywhere and it doesn't fall"
<i>JJ sagt, "plus es ist bequem"</i>	JJ sagt, "besides it is comfortable"
<i>NeeChee sagt, "das ist gut"</i>	NeeChee sagt, "that is good"
<i>steffigraf sagt, "das ist so schoen"</i>	steffigraf sagt, "that is so nice"
<i>Weibschlaegertraeger says, "okok"</i>	Weibschlaegertraeger says, "okok"
<i>Weibschlaegertraeger says, "frauen"</i>	Weibschlaegertraeger says, "women"

Weibschlagertaeger is toying with the anonymity of the medium and the protocols for behavior among classmates. Although the verbal dueling here is unsuccessful at creating a sense of solidarity (Weibschlagertaeger is ostracized by the others who choose to ignore him), the other students do respond to his comments.<sup>10</sup> It is only after the others do decide to completely ignore him that Weibschlagertaeger begins to cooperate more with his classmates and ceases to insult them. This behavior is classic of *flaming*, the name given to the tendency of some chat room users to deride and affront others users in order to gain attention and control of the discourse. This occurs in part because of the purely textual existence within the online community. In a face-to-face conversation, nonverbal responses and the intrusiveness of speaking make it more difficult for utterances to go completely unnoticed; in the chat room it is very easy to intentionally or unintentionally overlook what someone says. Flaming is employed not to achieve a feeling of solidarity in the standard sense, but to feel a part of the conversation, by coercing others to respond to incendiary remarks. Weibschlaegertraeger seems to move away from

purposefully aggravating his classmates and realizes that he is not getting the desired response of playful antagonism.

The quasi-anonymity of CMC coupled with the immediacy of the tools for online synchronous communication makes these virtual environments seem ideal for role-play activities. In such simulations, the role is purely a textual one, performed through words on the screen. The removal of social context clues, which were seen as impeding the students' ability to play the role, also removes the valuable hints that facial expressions, tone, and body language provide about the frame in use. This became clear in the online role-play of the second-semester German class, when students were asked to play the roles of servers and customers in a restaurant. In one such scenario ([Example 8](#)) the following conversation occurred.

#### Example 8

<i>Freak says, "Ich moechte ein Rotwien"</i>	Freak says, "I would like red wine"
<i>Freak says, "ja"</i>	Freak says, "yes"
<i>Schmu says, "ok"</i>	Schmu says, "ok"
<i>Freak says, "Schnell"</i>	Freak says, "fast"
<i>Schmu says, "moechten sie 'smooth' oder 'dry'?"</i>	Schmu says, "would you like 'smooth' or 'dry'?"
<i>Freak says, "Gut!"</i>	Freak says, "Good!"
<i>Freak says, "es ist mir egal"</i>	Freak says, "It doesn't matter"
<i>Schmu says, "okay dann bringe ich ihn schnell"</i>	Schmu says, "okay than I will bring it quickly"
<i>Freak says, "Wo bist du, Kellner"</i>	Freak says, "Where are you, waiter"
<i>Freak says, "Schnelllllllll"</i>	Freak says, " <b>Fastttttt</b> "
<i>Schmu says, "hier ist deinen Rotwein!"</i>	Schmu says, "here is your red wine!"
<i>Schmu says, "guten appetit"</i>	Schmu says, "bon appetit"
<i>Freak says, "oh, danke"</i>	Freak says, "oh, thank you"
<i>Schmu says, "Bestellen Sie jetzt etwas zu essen?"</i>	Schmu says, "Would you like to order something to eat?"
<i>Freak says, "ja?"</i>	Freak says, "yes?"
<i>Schmu says, "oder, moechten Sie eine Speisekarte?"</i>	Schmu says, "or, would you like a menu?"
<i>Freak says, "Ich habe ein Speisekarte"</i>	Freak says, "I have a menu"
<i>Schmu says, "na gut. was moechten Sie zu essen?"</i>	Schmu says, "well good. what would you like to eat?"
<i>Schmu says, "SCHNELL!"</i>	Schmu says, " <b>FAST!</b> "
<i>Freak says, "I'm not really trying to be an ass. It's a game, right?"</i>	Freak says, "I'm not really trying to be an ass. It's a game, right?"

Freak is playing the role of the impatient customer. However, when Schmu responds mockingly by becoming an impatient server, Freak feels it is necessary to step out of the role-play and signals this through the switch to English. This uncertainty stems largely from the lack of other communicative clues,

which are lost in computer-mediated communication and would have signaled the playfulness of Freak's continual prodding. Freak does not clarify his comments through the means of the medium within the role, by signaling laughter, a smile, or a wink. Instead, he steps out of the entire simulation, which shows not only that he is playing at being impatient, but also that he is just playing at being a customer in a restaurant and at speaking German. The foreign language becomes part of the "game" for the speakers, rather than a legitimate means of expression.<sup>11</sup>

While these passages from the MOO portray diverse examples of language play, many of them share common features. Perhaps the most striking commonality is the way in which many of the instances somehow indicate the speaker's understanding of the situation at hand. While some of the examples point directly to the foreignness of the situation (such as the wordplay in [Example 2](#)), others focus on the students' negotiation of their identities and roles within the new language and new medium (as seen in Jany's attempt to position himself as a character in a role play and as a language student in [Example 6](#) or in Weibschlaegertraeger's use of flaming in [Example 7](#)). At other times the students' play seems to comment from a position outside of context at hand. This occurs when Jieve's attempt to correct a false idiom spawns a talking vocabulary item and also in Freak's decision to code-switch in [Example 8](#).

## CONCLUSION

Although this study provides no conclusive evidence regarding the effect of these types of play on second-language acquisition, it does highlight aspects of communication that have been underemphasized in SLA research and foreign language pedagogy. By focusing on referential communication, research in the teaching and acquisition of languages has been restricted to only a limited portion of the whole of communication. Play can no longer be regarded as an anomaly or exceptional form of communication, but must be acknowledged as a legitimate and conventional use of language. In particular, greater attention must be paid to playful elements in language use that are not limited to the linguistic form. Students in the German classes were not simply playing with the language, but playing *within* the language. In such instances, it is not primarily meaning that is being negotiated, but also the relations between speakers, their interlocutors, the medium, and the context. What's more, they are negotiating their relation to a foreign language, which to them feels in some ways inauthentic and, as one student noted, like "just a game."

As Broner and Tarone (2001), Cook (2000) and Lantolf (1997) have already stated, the entire phenomenon of playful and creative uses of language deserves more attention within SLA. While it is also important to acknowledge the differences between CMC and face-to-face communication, the computer screen may serve as a magnifying glass, accentuating aspects of communication that need to be readdressed. By focusing on the ways in which students are using online media, it may become clearer that certain features of communication, which have been more easily overlooked due to SLA's emphasis of face-to-face communication, dominate online discourse.

Theories of communication and communicative competence need to be expanded in order to better account for aspects of communication that are not directly involved with the exchange of information, and should include types of communication other than face-to-face. Only by reworking these definitions can we begin to further investigate the way the different types of play may contribute to language acquisition and second language acquisition in particular.

**APPENDIX A1****Activities for Second-Semester Course**

Session 1	<p>Topic: <i>Essen und Einkaufen</i> (Eating and Shopping)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to MOO</li> <li>• Restaurant dialogue: Students were asked to perform a role-play between a server and a customer in a restaurant. They were provided with a menu inside the MOO, which could be read by both participants.</li> </ul>
Session 2	<p>Topic: <i>Kindheit und Jugend</i> (Childhood and Youth)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising children: The students were asked to play the role of members on a committee, which would provide advice and guidelines to future parents. In small groups they decided on 5-6 basic rules for children. Afterwards each group was paired up with another group to discuss their choices.</li> <li>• Fairy-tales: Students returned to their small groups and were given the roles of fairy-tale characters at a ball. They were instructed not to reveal their character's name, while trying to guess the roles of their fellow students.</li> </ul>
Session 4	<p>Topic: <i>Auf Reisen</i> (On Vacation)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trip through Munich: As homework, students were given a tourist map of Munich and asked to research the places listed using the internet and choose their six favorite locations. In the MOO students worked in small groups to agree on three destinations for a sightseeing tour.</li> <li>• Choosing a place to stay: Each student received information about one possible lodging in Munich. They were instructed to share their information and pose questions to their fellow students about the other options. Finally, they were to choose as a group one place to stay.</li> </ul>
Session 5	<p>Topic: <i>Partner</i> (Partners)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is culture?: Students were asked to discuss the following questions in small groups: What does "Culture" mean? Which words and concepts do you associate with the term "Culture"? Is it possible to speak of an American or a German culture? To what extent? In your group write a definition for culture, a short description of American culture, and a short description of German culture. Try to make these as clear as possible.</li> <li>• Advertisements: In the same groups, the students chose American products and developed advertising strategies for a German audience.</li> </ul>

**APPENDIX A2****Activities for Conversation Course**

Session 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the MOO</li> <li>• Story-telling: Students were giving a choice of three topics and asked to collaborate on a story in small groups.</li> <li>• Students discussed current events as a class. The events were provided by one of the students as part of the regular homework assignments.</li> </ul>
Session 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As homework, students created descriptions for the rooms they were using. At the beginning of the online session they were asked to choose a room and discuss the description with the fellow occupants.</li> <li>• Students were given a choice of two genres and asked to compose stories in small groups.</li> </ul>
Session 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students discussed current events as a class.</li> <li>• In small groups, the students chose American products and developed advertising strategies for a German audience.</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX B

### Student Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_ (will not be used in any reproduction of data)

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Country of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Native Language \_\_\_\_\_ Year in School \_\_\_\_\_

What name would you like to use in MOOano? (not your real name please). \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate your typing ability: poor \_\_\_ good \_\_\_ fairly good \_\_\_ very good \_\_\_ excellent \_\_\_

Please explain your answer in the space provided:

Please rate your knowledge of computers: poor \_\_\_ good \_\_\_ fairly good \_\_\_ very good \_\_\_ excellent \_\_\_

Please explain your answer in the space provided:

Do you have a computer at home? \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you access the internet? (Check all that apply).

Y/N	Locations	Hours per week
	At campus computer labs	
	In dorm room	
	In dorm computer facility	
	At the place where you live (if not a dorm)	
	From a friends computer	
	Other (please specify)	

On average, how many hours a day do you spend on a computer? \_\_\_\_\_

How many of these hours are spent online? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you used computers to do the following things?

	often	sometimes	rarely	never
Word processing				
E-mail				
World Wide Web				
Internet Relay Chat or other chat rooms				
MUDs or MOOs				
Discussion lists/Newsgroups				
Instant Messaging				
Gaming				

Do any of your classes use internet communication tools, discussion lists or newsgroups? \_\_\_\_\_

In a few sentences, please explain briefly what type of experience (if any) you have had using these tools in the classroom. (Positive? Negative? Why?) (Feel free to use the reverse side of this sheet.)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you communicate with your family and friends online?

often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ rarely \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever been a member in a digitally mediated community (MOOs, chat, irc, listservs)? \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe your experiences in this community.

Did you use a pseudonym? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate each of the following questions.

	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
Learning how to use computers is important for my career.					
I enjoy using the computer to communicate with people around the world.					
Using the Internet is a good way to learn about different people and cultures.					
Computers help people overcome weakness and powerlessness.					
I am less afraid to contact people by e-mail than in person.					
Using e-mail and the Internet makes me feel part of a community.					
Computers are not usually frustrating to work with.					
Using a computer gives me more control over my learning.					
I can write better when I use the computer.					
Writing by computer makes me more creative.					
I enjoy the anonymity of the Internet.					

Please elaborate on any of the above questions in on the back side of this page. Any information you feel is relevant would be **greatly** appreciated.

## NOTES

1. This current trend is especially clear in the articles which appeared in *Language Learning and Technology Special Issue on Telecollaboration*, May 2003, Volume 7, Number 2, and in the work of David Crystal (2001) and Steven Thorne (2000).
2. For further information on the MOO as a medium for CMC see Kötter (2003) and Kern (2000).
3. The emphasis within SLA research on the communicative potential of computer-media has been previously discussed in Chappelle (1997) and Kramsch and Thorne (2002).
4. The work that Cook cites is Wolfson, N. (1988). The bulge theory of speech behaviour and social distance. In J. Fine (Ed.), *Second language discourse: A textbook of current research* (pp. 21-38). Norwood, NJ: Ablex. The metaphor is based on the fact that social relationships of clear intimacy, authority and antagonism are the exception in modern societies, represented as tapering ends of an onion. Most interactions, therefore, fall into the bulge area of the onion.



5. For both classes, the first session began with a short introduction to the MOO. Students were provided with a set of basic instructions and period of approximately 15 minutes to experiment with the MOO functions.
6. In actuality Cook's discussions of language play extend beyond what he attempts to classify in the three categories. I hope to incorporate Bateson and Goffman's notions of frame and rekeying and to integrate more of Cook's own observations concerning language play in order to account for phenomena such as verbal dueling, which he does not attempt to categorize.
7. All passages from the MOO transcripts have been left unedited.
8. Students were originally instructed to use the command "says" when entering speech. After the first session in the MOO this was changed to "sagt"; however, many students continued to use "says", which accounts for the discrepancies in the transcripts.
9. Although the students were aware that their online conversations were being recorded, students were not informed that these recorders were functioning at all times. Thus, it seems unlikely that any language usage before or in between the class period was produced for the benefit of the researcher or the instructor.
10. This can be contrasted with the sort of verbal dueling that occurs in Example 4 between Mir and steffigraf. Although their language is both offensive and insulting, it only highlights the intimacy between the two friends, who had already revealed their actual identities to each other.
11. The use of code-switching in language play as an expression of multicompetence has been discussed in detail by Julie Belz (2002). Similarly, Freak's switch to the common mother tongue may be seen as an act of strategic bilingualism, rather than a sign of linguistic deficiency.

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