

The Interface Is the Message: How a Technological Platform Shapes Communication in an Online Chinese & American Community

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Introduction

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Within every cultural group there exist distinct and identifiable rules and values pertaining to speech—how and when and by whom it is done and what it signifies. These systems of rules and values, symbols and meanings are speech codes (Philipsen, 1992, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005). In other words, speaking involves complex rules and meanings connected to the larger cultural context(s) of its interlocutors, and every cultural group has speech codes, or historically established and stable rules pertaining to how speech may be engaged in (who speaks when and how, what is said and what it signifies, etc.). These speech codes are not set in stone, but can be negotiated and even broken by interlocutors, who themselves have agential force. Speaking simultaneously influences, is indexed by, reifies, and is reified by the ways in which that communication occurs, and in this way is thoroughly culturally informed (Philipsen, 2002).

My study examines the conversational rules and norms at play in the interactions that occurred between students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China and their U.S. American trainers during their regular English conversation lessons with one another on the VoIP + Web-based user interface platform of a private start up company (pseudonym Eloqi). Using the Ethnography of Communication and speech codes theory, I explore the

speech codes used by participants in this environment. I show how scripts, which were encoded into the technological platform in various ways, were vital to the deployment of the speech code. I also demonstrate how the technological platform functioned as a cue for communicative conduct in this community.

Scripts

To say that a code is “deployed” means that it is implemented and utilized strategically and even systematically. In analyzing my data, I found that scripts played a critical role in the deployment of the local speech code, the Code of Logic(Hart, 2012). I also found that scripts were programmed into the user interface(UI) of the technological platform on and through which the trainer-student interactions occurred, and they guided the trainers’ communicative behavior throughout the lessons. That is, the members of the community drew heavily on scripts to regulate their behavior while engaged in the trainer-student interactions, and these scripts were tightly coupled with the technological platform on and through which this virtual community exists.

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I use the term “script” here to mean two things. First, I use “script” in the theatrical sense, i. e. written words or lines to be read out and performed. In some customer service scenarios, scripts are provided to workers for them to read out loud word for word(Cameron, 2000, 2002, 2008). In other cases, a script might be less of a dictate on what workers have to say, and more of a guideline for what actions must be taken at what time. In this case, the script might be a series of prompts “telling the workers what moves to make in what order ... usually reflect[ing] the way the computer software is set up to accept and/or retrieve the information that is the focus of the transaction”(Cameron, 2000, p.96).

The second meaning of “script” that I refer to is adapted from Goffman’s (1959) seminal work on interaction order. Goffman uses the term to express the idea that in any given setting, on any occasion for speech, people play out situation-specific roles associated with situation-specific settings and interactions. A script in this sense is “a schema held in memory that describes

events or behaviors (or sequences of events or behaviors) appropriate for a particular context” (Gioia & Poole, 1984, p. 450). “Scripts represent procedural knowledge—the knowledge of how events are supposed to occur” as well as how they are supposed to be done (Shoemaker, 1996, p. 43). Goffman’s concept of “script” implies that people follow (or flout) generally agreed upon, pre-negotiated terms and guidelines that apply to situations of social interaction, so that “to the extent that these conversations follow a predictable form, they are scripted, even though the particulars of the discussion will change from one customer to the next” (Kivisto & Pittman, 1998, p. 277).

348 Gioia and Poole observe that “typical examples [of scripts] include going to a restaurant, attending lectures, and visiting doctors” (1984, p. 450). Such scripts, like other scripts for common situations (buying a car, taking a class at a university, attending a dinner party) lay out a predictable pattern of interaction, oftentimes deeply learned and thus automatic. “In a sense, these distinct stages of the transaction look like different scenes in a play; each has its own rules, each follows from the developments of the preceding scenes, and the action . . . rises to a cathartic agreement and ultimate resolution in the final act.” (Kivisto & Pittman, 1998, p. 278)

We are thoroughly socialized into drawing on scripts for a wide variety of settings and roles. Because these scripts are so much a part of our interaction order, we might not notice them much until they are violated. Consider how unusual, even startling, it would be if a server sat down at the table with the diner while taking the order, or if the diner offered to clean up after him/herself. While a person might not necessarily be able to articulate a restaurant script, they would immediately identify such actions as not right.

In the Eloqi community, scripts in both of the two senses described above were utilized in the trainer-student interactions. First, there were written scripts and prompt sheets that guided trainers’ speech and actions. Second, there was a larger interaction order established in the Eloqi community as the expected “way of doing” an Eloqi English lesson. I will give a brief description of these scripts below, providing details on typical lesson scenarios to illustrate my points.

Eloqi's pre-written scripts and prompt sheets

Each lesson at Eloqi was specially designed to teach students a key language structure, and within each lesson there were particular language steps that the students were expected to master. From Eloqi's standpoint, the entire lesson suite would thoroughly prepare its users to achieve target scores on the IELTS^① oral exam, and the decision to script the lessons was a deliberate one, motivated primarily by the need for quality control. As the manager of the Trainer Team explained in an interview:

We want to focus on IELTS, and the way that our lessons are now designed is that we do have a formula, it's very structured, we want the students to make sure that they have mastered these certain language steps, and answer orders for these IELTS questions . . .

As illustrated in the excerpt above, this Eloqi script, which served to regulate and standardize communication, ensured that the company's communication product (i. e. its lessons) was delivered correctly and consistently. This line of thinking is echoed in Cameron's analysis of scripts; she observes that a service script "maximizes efficiency [because] left to themselves, operators might design routines that take more time than necessary, or conversely they might aim for speed and neglect other important considerations (such as checking for accuracy and displaying politeness). These potential problems can be averted by telling operators in detail what to do and say" (Cameron, 2000, p. 97). Eloqi's administrators wanted to ensure that trainers would cover all the vocabulary, language steps, etc. for each lesson, and that they would do so in the precise way that the company had determined to be best. To do this easily and effectively in Eloqi's online teaching environment, Eloqi chose to provide pre-written scripts and prompts for the trainers to follow. In this way, the knowledge experts (the company administrators) were responsible for content, and the service providers (the trainers) were responsible for the person-to-person delivery.

To illustrate what the scripts and prompts for a lesson looked like, I

① International English Language Testing System, an international English language proficiency exam.

offer here some excerpts from a lesson on “customs, parties, festivals, and celebrations”. The lesson opened with a standard introduction (lines 1-3), and a brief greeting (line 3), at the conclusion of which the trainer segued into the first phase of the lesson (lines 4-5), which was a review of key vocabulary and expressions.

Introduction	
1	Hi. STUDENT_NAME. Welcome to Eloqi, my name is TRAINER_NAME, and I
2	will be your trainer for this Part 3 Formula Practice interaction.
3	How are you today? [vary as appropriate]
4	Let's start with a quick review of some key vocabulary and expressions
5	from the Self-Study.

As shown in the above excerpt, much of the lesson material was scripted, but there were also prompts that provided the trainers with general directions. In line 3 above, for example, the trainer could either recite “How are you today” or come up with their own greeting. Once the trainer clicked the last hyperlinked prompt in this section, the interaction screen bumped her to the next section of the lesson, which, in this case, was Vocabulary and Expressions Review.

In Vocabulary and Expressions Review, the trainer read a scripted introductory statement explaining the task (lines 7-8). The trainer was then prompted to select 2-3 words for the students to make sentences with (line 9). As the trainer selected the words, she clicked on them, which caused the vocabulary words to pop up on the student's screen. As the student engaged in the task of making sentences, the trainer was expected to provide written and oral feedback. In providing feedback trainers drew on their in-house training and their own judgment to decide what errors to address and how.

6	Vocabulary and Expressions Review(3 minutes)
7	I am going to give you a word or expression and I'd like you to make a short
8	sentence using it. OK?
9	[Choose 2/3 of the below words in turn.]
10	controversial
11	[CLICK to display word in CHATBOX]
12	appliance
13	[CLICK to display word in CHATBOX]

续表

14	venue
15	[CLICK to display word in CHATBOX]
16	turning point
17	[CLICK to display word in CHATBOX]
18	reunite
19	[CLICK to display word in CHATBOX]
20	Now let's move on to practice some mini discussions, just like those you'll
21	get in Part 3 of your speaking test. OK?

At the conclusion of the Vocabulary and Expressions Review section, the trainer segued into the next activity (lines 20-21)—a discussion. Clicking on the prompt caused the old screen to close down, and the next screen (with the discussion prompts) to open.

In the discussion sections, two samples of which I include below, trainers introduced the topic (line 23) and were prompted to ask the discussion questions, being sensitive to the unique “flow of discussion” (lines 24-25) with that particular student. The trainers were expected to read the discussion questions verbatim (lines 26, 28, 30). During the discussion they could ask follow up questions and “challenge [the student's responses] as appropriate” (lines 27, 29).

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22	Discussion 1 (4 minutes)
23	Let's talk about parties and social gatherings.
24	[Ask the below question then the follow-up questions as appropriate to flow
25	of discussion]
26	Why do some people really enjoy parties?
27	[challenge as appropriate]
28	Why do some people dislike big parties and crowded places?
29	[challenge as appropriate]
30	What special things do people prepare for a party in your country? [Why?]

In the next discussion section of this lesson (Discussion 2) the trainers received fewer scripted lines and more prompts. While the overarching structure of the discussion remained the same (the trainer asked a question, solicited an answer from the student, challenged and followed up as appropriate, offered feedback, corrected errors) the trainer now had a freer rein to shape

the discussion.

31	Discussion 2(4 minutes)
32	Let's talk about differences and similarities in the way countries celebrate special occasions. [Ask the opening question then develop a discussion using the points below it as inspiration to form questions OF YOUR OWN.]
33	
34	
35	
36	[similarities and differences between western weddings and Chinese weddings.]
37	
38	[challenge and develop as appropriate]
39	[whether it is acceptable and good for countries to celebrate other countries' festivals and celebrations: e. g. Chinese celebrating Christmas.]
40	
41	[challenge and develop as appropriate]
42	[30 second feedback and summary]

352 Notice, for example, that after a scripted line introducing the topic (lines 32-33) the trainer was prompted to “develop a discussion” of his/her own (lines 34-35) using the general topics provided (lines 36-37; 39-40). At appropriate moments during or after the student's answer, the trainer was prompted to “challenge and develop” the discussion as appropriate (lines 38, 41). In the Eloqi community, this meant that the trainer should push the student to support his/her answers with evidence, and back up their viewpoints with additional information. At the conclusion of the section the trainer was prompted to offer feedback and a summary (line 42). Finally, a click closed down these prompts and moved the trainer on to the third discussion section, which was structured in precisely the same way.

At the end of the third discussion section, the trainer closed the lesson by reciting this concluding passage from the script:

43	Closing
44	Thank you, this brings us to the end of our interaction. It's been great to teach you today, STUDENT_NAME. Remember to check the study center for the feedback I'll be giving you, and then practice the things that you are the weakest at. Goodbye!
45	
46	
47	

As with the introduction, the lesson closed with standard lines. In the sample above the trainer thanked the student (line 44) and instructed him/her to

review the feedback received (lines 45-46) and keep practicing (46-47). After the closing, the trainer clicked on another button and was moved to the final feedback screen, where she wrote up qualitative feedback for the student. Once this was done, another button sent the information to the company portal, and the interaction screen closed down.

I have provided the excerpts above to illustrate the ways in which the trainer-student interactions were scripted. While each Eloqi lesson addressed different topics and language structures, all of them included scripts like these, with words and lines for the trainers to read out, and prompts instructing the trainers what to say and do. These scripts were intentionally designed, deployed, and utilized to direct trainers' communicative behavior. Specifically, the scripts told trainers what to say ("Let's talk about . . ." "I'd like you to make a short sentence . . .") what to do ("ask the below question" "challenge as appropriate" "click to display word") and what topics to speak of. Going "off script" in this community was discouraged, even disallowed^①. I turn now to the second sense of scripts—that of Goffman's interaction order.

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Eloqi's Interaction Order Scripts

As I will discuss in this section, there was a cognitive script, or interaction order, at work in the Eloqi community. This script was experienced and promoted as the proper way of doing an Eloqi English lesson. To reiterate, when I use script in this sense I mean

a knowledge structure that fits predictable, conventional, or frequently encountered situations. In short, scripts are schemas for behavior, or for understanding events and behaviors. People in organizations know how to act appropriately because they have a working

① As a side note, the scripts were not seen in a negative light by the trainers who I interviewed. On the contrary, they viewed the scripts positively for three reasons. First, having a script removed the work of lesson preparation. Second, scripts helped the trainers to manage the time for each interaction. Third, the trainers saw the lessons purely as an opportunity for the clients to learn and develop their fluency, and the expertise in achieving those outcomes was invested in the company content designers. There was thus a sense that the scripts had been designed to do a particular job, and that they did that successfully.

knowledge of their organizational world In this framework, ‘knowing the ropes’ often is a matter of knowing the right scripts for given situations(Gioia & Poole, 1984, p.450).

Here I will briefly review this interaction order, outlining step-by-step what it entailed, how it was drawn on, and how it was referenced and enacted as the “right way” of engaging in an Eloqi lesson.

Before the Lesson

Before connecting with the trainers, the Eloqi students were expected to prepare for their lessons by completing self-directed modules. These modules introduced key vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures, and discussion topics. Engaging in this preparation was expected to facilitate the trainer-student interactions, since being familiar with the material was seen as a necessary prequel to practicing and using it.

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Eloqi systematized various strategies for ensuring that the students did complete the preparation materials. First, the trainers played a role in enforcing the students’ compliance. For example, trainers reported students to the company supervisors when the students did not seem to be prepared, or when students did not utilize the corrections(written or oral) that they had received. The supervisors then contacted the customer service team, who checked up on students and directed them to be better prepared. Second, with the implementation of a money-back guarantee, Eloqi put monitoring functionalities in place that tracked how long students spent on the preparatory materials. If students skipped them or went through them too quickly, the customer service team contacted the students to tell them about the correct and expected way to prepare.

During the lesson

During the interactions with the students, the trainers had to follow the written scripts and prompts for each lesson; doing so was not a choice, but an obligation. Each lesson was structured in a consistent and linear fashion. It opened with a brief greeting, then quickly moved on to practicing small

components of the language (pronunciation, vocabulary), after which larger components were introduced (sentence components, sentence structures). Finally, the lesson moved into a discussion section, for which the student had to “put it all together” to answer opinion and experience questions at greater length. At the end of the lesson, the trainer closed the conversation and bade the student goodbye, encouraging them to review their feedback and keep on improving.

In these interactions, it was the trainers’ duty to manage the flow of activity. Each section of the lesson had a recommended allotment of time, and the whole lesson was limited to 15 minutes, so the trainers had to keep an eye on the clock and continue on, but without seeming hurried. All the while they were guided by the scripts, which prompted them on what to say when, in what order. As the trainers used each prompt, they clicked on it to show that it had been used^①.

Simultaneous to reading the scripts, speaking out their lines, clicking on the prompts, and monitoring the time, the trainers had to pay close attention to the student’s speech and give appropriate oral and written feedback. A large portion of the written feedback was linked to the student’s speech in real time using the company’s proprietary “mark spot” technology^②. To use the “mark spot” tool, trainers clicked the appropriate buttons as the student was speaking. (If the student made a grammatical error, the trainer selected the “grammar” button; if the error was one of pronunciation, the “pronunciation” button was used, and so on.) In addition to clicking these buttons, the trainer explained in writing what the error was. If the trainer had the time and the inclination, she could include extra written notes. In this way, the Eloqi trainers focused on their students simultaneous to managing other elements of the lesson and the user interface(UI).

During the lessons the students had to follow the trainers’ directives, and

① Clicking on prompts left a visual marker for subsequent trainers who repeated that lesson with that student. The next trainer could see at a glance which discussion questions the student had already answered, and could select new ones as appropriate.

② When a student reviewed the feedback from any lesson, s/he could also click to hear each section of the audio recording that the feedback applied to.

go along with the pre-determined, pre-designed flow of activity. While students could ask questions, these were usually for clarification purposes only. Furthermore, going off script was considered to be “wrong” or problematic. That is, if students attempt to veer off the lesson plan as outlined in the scripts, they had to be checked.

In terms of the manner associated with their role, trainers were generally expected to be analytical only of the linguistic elements of the students' speech, and not of the opinions, facts, and/or experiences that students shared. As the trainers were told (and as they themselves reported to me) their job entailed focusing on *how* the students spoke (their grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, etc.) and on getting them to speak more like native speakers. What the students said, insofar as their opinions about the world at large, was not something that trainers should challenge. The position of the administrators and the trainers was that the students were entitled to their own opinions, thoughts, and attitudes, and that the role of the trainers was not to interfere. As one of the trainers told me:

As far as saying, “well you know, actually that’s wrong”, no, no, I would never say that [to a student]. If it’s a total misconception I might have a different attitude, but I have never had a situation where I felt compelled to flat-out say, “that’s just not right.” There’s a [discussion] question, “Do you believe all Americans are overweight?” and it’s not asking the student’s opinion. The content is completely immaterial, it’s the form [of the answer]. Don’t get bogged down in content . . . you’re concerned with form. The student isn’t connecting to hear my opinion, or to engage in a philosophical discussion. If I want to have a philosophical discussion I’m not going to do it with somebody who’s paying me to teach them something.

In this sense, the interaction order at Eloqi English is similar to that in other (customer) service scenarios, where the focus is on the professional transfer of a service or a communication product.

Like the trainers, the students had to be completely focused on the lesson; they should not multitask or chat with others, they should not be

located in a noisy or distracting environment, and they should not allow anything external to disrupt the talk. Anything unrelated to the smooth execution of the lesson was considered an intrusion.

Again, as with the written script described in the previous section, the cognitive script or interaction order encouraged participants to organize their talk in a particular way, to pursue some lines of talk and ignore others, and to be consistent with their role (trainer or student). Going off script was disallowed, and could ultimately result in discontinued membership from the community or revocation of status.

This Eloqi script served as a model for appropriate communicative conduct; it was drawn on, referenced, and utilized to justify the “right” kind of speech in this setting. This script was evidenced in part by special trainer/learn role obligations that individuals in this community were expected to fulfill. The script was further evidenced by general understandings shared by the Eloqi community members about how to do an Eloqi English lesson correctly. These understandings were articulated through the company’s own rules, policies and regulations, enforced by the written scripts and prompts, and monitored through the quality control systems in place, emphasized through admin-trainer and trainer-trainer discussion, and reinforced through compliance. In this way, the community’s script for English lessons came from situated experience—particular activities (learning to speak “like a native”), particular spaces (Eloqi’s proprietary platform and UIs), in a particular community (the Eloqi community). It emerged through a shared history of activities. Finally, as community members played out the script, they deployed their local code of communicative conduct, the Code of Logic (Hart, 2012).

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Summary and Discussion

In this paper I addressed the linkages between speech and the technological platform on and through which it occurred. I showed how vital scripts were in the Eloqi trainer-student interactions, and I discussed how these scripts were encoded into the technological platform. I now turn to a discussion of how the technological platform functioned as a cue for communicative

conduct in this community.

There are various ways to understand the linkages between the Eloqi community's speech, scripts, and technological platform. In fact, to fully understand how the technological platform affords and constrains the interaction order and the deployment of speech codes, and how it is implicated in their ongoing development, I propose that a combination of standpoints is necessary. Specifically, technology in this setting can be viewed as (1) a material requirement for membership and participation; (2) a setting for social interaction; (3) a cue for communicative conduct; and (4) a tool for monitoring communicative behavior.

Technology as a Material Requirement for Membership and Participation

358 First, and perhaps most fundamentally, technology and technological know-how were material requirements for trainer and student membership in the Eloqi community. Trainers had to obtain and maintain equipment as stipulated by the company, including a PC, soundcard, headset, Windows operating system, an Internet browser, PDF viewing software, and high-speed Internet. Students had to have a similar set of equipment. Without this assemblage of technological equipment and the knowledge of how to operate it, trainers and students would not be eligible to join or participate in the Eloqi community.

In many key studies on technology and communication researchers have analyzed technologies that play a central role in organizations and their members' social interactions. Barley (1986) shows how a CT scanner is a catalyst for organizational change. Similarly, Bechky (2003) demonstrates that technologies and tools can be used as "boundary objects" through which organizational members with different roles, expertise, and interests can unite. Similarly, my study illustrates how, without the needed constellation of tools and technologies (computers, Internet connections, and listening/speaking devices through which the virtual spaces associated with the Eloqi community are accessed), membership in this community is precluded.

Technological Spaces as Settings for Social Interaction

In the case of the Eloqi community, another useful way to make sense of the technological platform is to see it as a setting or a scene for social activity, one replete with roles, rules, premises, and norms. By setting I refer to Goffman(1959) and Hymes(1962, 1972), who use that term to denote the “place of a speech act and, in general [its] physical circumstances”(Hymes, 1972, p. 60). In characterizing the technological platform as a setting I follow a line of reasoning that has been developed by a number of Internet researchers. For example, Kendall’s(2002) seminal ethnography of an early online forum touches upon the feeling of “place” that members experienced in their virtual surroundings:

“Synchronous” forums—those that allow for near-instantaneous response ... can provide a particularly vivid sense of “place” and of gathering together with other people. Rather than merely viewing a space through the electronic window of television, many people feel that when they connect to an online forum, they in some sense enter a social, if not a physical, space. Conversation in such chat forums takes place at a pace similar to face-to-face conversation, the room description and most of the objects remain stable from visit to visit, and people’s entrances and exits generate text messages that allow them to “see” each other come and go. (p.6)

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Similarly, Boellstorff (2008) provides a detailed ethnographic account that explores the aspects of place, space, being and culture which characterize Second Life, a popular virtual world.

The theoretical move of characterizing a virtual space as a setting is, however, contrary to some foundational Internet ethnographies exploring the connections between communication, culture and technology. Most notably, it goes against the work of Miller and Slater(2001; see also Postill, 2010), who argue persuasively in their study of Internet use in Trinidad that breaking identity and lived experience apart into separate, unconnected online and offline spheres does not present a realistic picture of the Internet’s function in everyday lives(cf. Sterne, 1999). Specifically, Miller and Slater

reject the idea of cyberspace or the Internet as a place apart from people's other "real" lives. They show that "communicative technology is encountered from, and rooted in, a particular place" and that people's internet use is tied very closely to their "local and embodied social relations" (Miller & Slater, 2001, p. 7). Because people use the Internet and all its resources in the service of such local and embodied social relations, one cannot separate between online and offline, particularly when one is studying identity and/or lived experience. By exploring the Internet as part of the fabric of social actors' quotidian lives, Miller and Slater show the virtual/actual cultural worlds dichotomy to be false.

360 I agree with the logic of Miller and Slater's arguments, and have no wish to separate the identities or lived experiences of the Eloqi community members into offline/online components. On the contrary, my attempt in this project has been to contextualize the speech of the Eloqi community members as much as possible, showing how communication on the Eloqi platform is grounded in different layers of context and in lived, situated experience. At the same time, as an ethnographer of communication I find value in approaching Eloqi's technological platform as a "setting" because doing so foregrounds the fact that this space has its own particular interaction order, as well as rules, norms and premises pertaining to communicative conduct. To clarify, I draw on Hymes' concept of a setting (also called "scene" or "situation") as a "psychological" space linked with "cultural definition[s] of an occasion." (Hymes, 1972, p. 60) In this sense I take settings to be cognitive as well as spatial(or physical) places, and so see them as intricately linked with scripts and rules of communicative conduct. Settings are mental constructs, which we associate with guidelines for communicative behavior. Though these guidelines may be largely unwritten, they are widely experienced and generally ratified by us through our day-to-day activities.

Most ethnographies of communication focus on non-virtual(i. e. situated in the physical world) settings relevant to the experience of engaging in social activity. My work on the Eloqi community follows in the tradition of these studies, but focuses on a virtual setting rather than a physical one. Just as one does in physical settings, the Eloqi community members hold cognitive scripts

in their minds, which are associated with their workspace and their roles there. These cognitive scripts shape their experience of how to behave correctly in their roles (as trainers or students) while engaging in Eloqi's English lessons. The Eloqi English lesson script and its concomitant rules, premises, and norms are tied to the virtual, technological spaces of Eloqi's online community of practice. (Hart, 2012)

As a theoretical move to foreground the emergence, development, and maintenance of a speech code pertaining to communicative conduct in a virtual space/place, I find it useful to see the technological platform as a setting—a virtual communication setting, but a setting nevertheless, one which is experienced by the community members very much as a “place” where their work happens, their communication occurs, and the rules for their community's communicative conduct apply. My explication of this community's speech and interaction order is, of course, particularized; it is specific to a unique site—Eloqi's virtual workspace. Although this site is a virtual one, that does not diminish the force of the interaction order or the norms, rules, and premises pertaining to communicative conduct there.

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The Interface as Cue for Communicative Conduct

A third way in which Eloqi's technological platform is implicated in the development and deployment of the community's speech code is through its user interface and the interactive, hyperlinked scripts/prompts that cue trainers' communicative behavior. An interface is defined as a “place at which independent and often unrelated systems meet and act on or communicate with each other” (“Interface entry”). In other words, interfaces are boundaries or meeting points that “enable the formation of networks across or between different beings, objects, or media” (Gane & Beer, 2008, p.55). Interfaces are considered to be one of the key elements of new media “that enable us to study digital technologies as media, alongside the complex social and cultural transformations they either drive, are tied to or result from, depending on your viewpoint” (Gane & Beer, 2008, p. 2). They are a means not only of presenting information, options, and activities to the user, but also of organizing information, options, and activities. In

this way they are implicated in users' interpretational, sense-making, and decision-making processes. (Beer, 2008; Gane & Beer, 2008; Manovich, 2001, 2003)

In Eloqi's case, the UI and its hyperlinked scripts and prompts lay out a particular procedure—conceived of, designed, and implemented by Eloqi's administrators—for engaging in the Eloqi English lessons. The UI is intended to guide the trainers and students through the lessons in the manner determined to be correct and legitimate for this setting. In this way, the GUI is used to cue or prompt communicative behavior.

To understand how the UI, replete with its scripts and functionalities, guides the trainers and students throughout their lessons, we must keep in mind that the trainers' experience while interfacing with and utilizing Eloqi's technological platform is different to the experience of reading a static document as you, reading this article, are now doing. As the trainers (and the students, to a certain extent) interacted with the UI, the UI responded by providing them with additional instructions, directives and prompts for going through and completing the lesson.

To elaborate, when the Eloqi trainers made use of the UI and its encoded scripts, they were online and on Eloqi's proprietary platform. Whenever a trainer connected with a student, specialized screens opened up on their desktops. The UI connected trainers and students in real time through voice (using VoIP) and interactive, hyperlinked text. From the moment that the UI was opened, a timer began to count down, informing the trainer how much time they had left to complete the lesson. As trainers clicked on each prompt, the UI responded. First, it changed the color of the prompt to indicate that it had been used. Next, it "pushed" the next prompt to the fore by giving it a brighter color. At some points during the lessons, extra task cards were pulled up on the trainers' and students' screens, providing them with additional information for completing the task. At the end each section, the UI pushed the trainers on to the next activity. Throughout the interaction the trainer was expected to use various fields and buttons to provide the student with feedback. At fifteen minutes the timer began to flash red to show that the time limit had been exceeded. Finally,

when the trainer ended the call, the interaction screen shut down and the trainer landed on the final feedback screen. Here the trainer had to write, edit, and complete her written feedback. This screen was programmed to remain “live” until the trainer had entered the minimum amount of feedback. Only then could the trainer close the screen and complete the interaction.

There was thus a communication flow designed into the UI, which encoded the company’s expectation for communicative behavior during the trainer-student interactions. The UI did the work of guiding the trainers’ communicative behavior by prompting them about what acts (greeting, asking, telling, saying, giving information, correcting, checking, clarifying, challenging, clicking, directing, saying goodbye, etc.) they needed to perform at what time. Simultaneously, the UI limited the options for speaking, because trainers had to follow the pre-determined sequence of communicative events encoded into the UI. Going by the interaction order, there were limited choices as to what a trainer could legitimately do when engaging in an Eloqi English lesson. Put differently, the possibilities for speaking envisaged by Eloqi and communicated via the UI were restricted, and departures from this restricted interaction order were not sanctioned.

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Eloqi’s technological platform thus served as a cue for the trainers’ communicative behavior. I deliberately use the term “cue” here to emphasize that the platform *guided* speaking but did not *determine* it. The platform provided the trainers with a finite amount of information and functionalities used to shape the sequence of events during trainer-student interactions. When used as intended, the UI standardized the language used by the trainers and students, regulated the length of the interaction, and made the outcome of the speaking events predictable. In this way, the platform exerted a kind of force on the trainers and students using it. This was precisely the intention of Eloqi’s administrators, who created the UI to organize trainer-student communication. Insofar as the trainers complied with the interaction order encoded into the UI, the platform succeeded. When the trainer and student followed the prompts, they fulfilled the goals of the interaction, as imagined by the company. In this sense, Eloqi’s UI encoded norms, values, rules, premises and an interaction order that made sense in this community.

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As Gane and Beer observe, interfaces “order and facilitate information access, and enable the reproduction and consumption of culture in particular ways.”(Gane & Beer, 2008, pp. 67-68) Interfaces are “social” in that they “reshape communication relationships” and “are also culturally defined, which means that generally, the social meaning of an interface is not always developed when the technology is first created but usually comes later, when it is finally embedded in social practices.”(de Souza e Silva, 2006, pp. 261-262) This is not to say, however, that the Eloqi UI had human-like agency of its own. The inanimate technology behind the Eloqi UI had no will of its own; rather, “the relationship governed by the interface is a semantic one, characterized by meaning and expression rather than physical force.”(Johnson, 1997, p. 14, cited in Gane & Beer, 2008, p. 54) Technology is encoded with particular social practices(Boczkowski, 1999; Galloway, 2004) and in this way shapes not only communication but also the relationships of the people using the tools(de Souza e Silva, 2006). Eloqi’s UI was specifically designed to keep the trainers speaking in a particular sequence, about particular topics, using particular language, and had permissions and constraints encoded into it. Taken as a whole, the UI and its scripts set forth the expected interaction order for the trainer-student interactions and cued the trainers to regulate their speech in the expected manner. The trainers, who were agential social actors, complied with the scripts encoded into the UI because their compliance is required for ongoing membership in this community.

Technology as a Tool for Monitoring Communicative Behavior

By entering into employment with Eloqi, the trainers agreed to follow the company’s code of communicative conduct, just as they agreed to follow the cues for communicative conduct encoded into the UI. This agreement and the communicative actions it required were conditions of the trainers’ ongoing employment at Eloqi. If trainers repeatedly failed to follow the communication protocols or the cues encoded into the UI, then their status as contracted employees was terminated. As a means of regularly assessing the trainers’ compliance, Eloqi’s administrators made one more important use of the

technological platform on which the virtual community existed: they use it to record, archive, sample, and play back the trainer-student interactions. In this way, Eloqi's technological platform was a tool for monitoring the deployment of the community's code of communicative conduct, and for promoting community members' compliance with the expected communicative behaviors.

In demonstrating that Eloqi's technological platform was utilized to monitor and gain compliance with local communication protocols, I do not impute the platform with agency. It was not the technology that demanded, checked, or evaluated compliance; rather, it was the administrators who designed the technology, and who made use of it to review the trainer-student interactions. Cameron describes this process in her treatise on call center talk:

Codification does not in practice eliminate the necessity for talk to be locally managed; what it does do, however, is change what participants have to manage. Workers who are given a script ... may deviate from it, but in that case the institutional definition of what they are doing as deviant and "accountable" behavior becomes one of the factors they must take into consideration. Where codification is backed up by surveillance, institutional interactions begin to resemble "mediated" discourse—that is, talk has to be designed not only for its immediate recipient, but also for an eavesdropping third party, namely the manager or supervisor who monitors workers' compliance with the rules. (2000, p.58)

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One of the key points that Cameron makes is that the act of monitoring talk(which, in the Eloqi community's case was accomplished through the use of the technological platform) leads to social actors' self-regulation, because the talk will be evaluated by a non-present other. This is illustrated in my case study, where it is not only the Eloqi administrators who listen to the interactions, but also the students (who listen to the recordings of their sessions as part of the process of improving their English) and the non-present IELTS examiner, for whom all of the talk is ostensibly geared

towards.

To reiterate, in designing communication protocols (through scripts, prompts, the UI, and code of communicative conduct) Eloqi established local ideas about what counted as legitimate communication. The trainers and students learned about these local and legitimized ways of communicating as they became members in this community. Knowing that their communication would be recorded, reviewed, and evaluated via the technology used to support the platform, the trainers and students chose their communication behaviors accordingly. The monitoring capabilities of the technology were undoubtedly not the only factor playing into the trainers' decisions to comply^①, but they were certainly an important one.

Conclusion

366 In this paper I have demonstrated how communication in this virtual community was shaped by the technological platform on and through which that communication took place. I have shown how the virtual space in which Eloqi trainers and students interacted had its own interaction order. I discussed the ways in which the technological platform was encoded with scripts that cued the trainers and students to comply with local communication protocols. Finally, I described how the platform was utilized by the company to oversee the community members' communication activities and to promote self-regulation. In articulating these arguments I hoped to convey the deep connection between communication and technology in this particular online community.

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① A full analysis of why the trainers complied with the communication protocols is beyond the scope of this paper, however, my work thus far suggests these possible reasons: the trainers and students had faith that Eloqi's system, if used correctly, would produce the desired learning outcomes; the company was accorded knowledge authority; the trainers enjoyed their membership and wanted to continue their work with the company; and the students wanted to maintain their eligibility for the moneyback guarantee.

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