Modes of Participation, Identity Creation, and Group Maintenance in Different Technical Discourse Communities

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What is this all about?

- Normatively identity-neutral interactions “hide” identity work
- Identity-oriented purposes are “hidden” in form and function of discourse events
- Community constructs combine
  - Discourse Communities
  - Epistemic Cultures
  - Communities of Practice
- Newsgroup analysis will illuminate these themes
  - Research still unfolding
Newsgroup Backgrounder

- Newsgroups are subsections of the Usenet system
  - Created in 1979 at Duke University
- Users read and submit public messages ("posts") to newsgroups
- Discussions are threaded
  - Largely driven by news reader client software
- Still available and see high-traffic use
  - Via portals like Google and Yahoo
How was that again?

- Compare newsgroup discourse for C++ and Lisp
- Analyze all posts for 15 days: 7/1/2008-7/15/2008
  - comp.lang.c++ (1440 messages in 238 threads)
  - comp.lang.lisp (649 messages in 95 threads)
- Why these newsgroups?
  - Significantly different focus of each group
  - Both are high-traffic (in top ten within comp.lang.* branch)
  - C++: Largest single subscriber base in comp.lang.*
What Do Newsgroups Do?

- "Official" or Normative purposes
  - Solve intractable technical questions
  - "Be there for the newbie"

- Identity-oriented purposes
  - Determine what counts as knowledge
  - Create and maintain group mythologies
  - Pass-on shared history
  - Validate and maintain practices
  - Establish individual credibility
  - Maintain and strengthen boundaries with other languages
Technical Foundations... Mostly

- C++
  - High-level language, Object-oriented
  - General purpose
    - Commercial
  - Created by Bjarne Stroustrup at Bell Labs in 1979
  - ANSI/ISO standards maintained
    - Strongly “defended” or “protected”

- Lisp
  - Early high-level programming language
  - Central to classic AI research
    - Academic
  - Created by John McCarthy at MIT in 1958
  - Many sub-dialects, with two dominant
    - Common Lisp, created 1984
      - ANSI standard established 1994
    - Scheme, created 1970s
      - IEEE standard established 1990
Newsgroup “Style”

- Both unmoderated – community and individual policing
- Both dominated by small group
  - C++ top 5 = 24%; Lisp top 5 = 26%
  - C++ dominated by one guy (James) at 10.83%
- comp.lang.c++
  - Standards for interaction published
  - Regular reference to “the standard”
  - Regular answer writers never start threads
- comp.lang.lisp
  - No official standard of interaction
  - Less policing of off-topic posts
  - References to standards more diffuse
  - More “professionals” initiate posts
- Differences are qualitative, rather than quantitative
Analyzing the texts

- From & Function on a spectrum
  - “Normative” to “Identity-oriented”
  - Differs from “discourse”, “style”, and “genre”

- Form
  - Modes of expression
    - Genre / generic structures (e.g., “article”)
    - Grammatical forms (e.g., “interrogative” or “third person”)
    - Literary forms (e.g., “irony” or “sarcasm”)
    - Cultural references (e.g., Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Universe)

- Function
  - Relevance to the community’s normative goals for the discourse event

- Re-emphasizes that differences are qualitative
Google Is Your Friend

All Smart People Use Google

It Appears That You Are Not One Of Them
Self-regulation by public ridicule

plonk: excl., vt.

[Usenet: possibly influenced by British slang ‘plonk’ for cheap booze, or ‘plonker’ for someone behaving stupidly (latter is lit. equivalent to Yiddish schmuck)] The sound a newbie makes as he falls to the bottom of a kill file. While it originated in the newsgroup talk.bizarre, this term (usually written “*plonk*”) is now (1994) widespread on Usenet as a form of public ridicule.
A complete picture

- Understanding technical communities requires synthesis of three frameworks for community analysis
  - Programming newsgroups...
  - ...Are fundamentally about discourse (DC)
    - Traditionally, as a text-based community
    - Topically, since programming is a linguistic task
  - ...Create knowledge (EC)
    - Programming methods
    - History of programming
    - What counts as programming culture
  - ...Evaluate, establish, and maintain practices (CoP)
    - Programming
    - Community interactions
      - For both newsgroups and physical-space