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THE PRAGMATICS OF VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS
Compliment responses in Second Life

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[…] The most exciting experience of virtual reality is not so much the one that totally alters the viewer's perspective on the real as the one that is able to expand, augment and enlarge the real. In other words, it is in its relationship with the real, rather than in its attempts to substitute itself for the real, that the most original use of virtual reality is found.
(G. Giannachi, "Virtual Theatres. An Introduction", 2004, p. 125).

1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

In the last fifteen years the Internet has grown fast and dramatically changed everyday life, including the way people interact. Almost everyone owning, or being able to access, a computer can benefit from an Internet connection and all its advantages. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC),[1] both in its synchronous (e.g. online chat, instant messaging, Multi-User Dimension – MUD) and asynchronous (e.g. e-mail) modality, seems to have replaced telephone communication in business and partly replaced face-to-face interaction in many contexts. Whether it represents a step forward or backward is arguable. What is sure is that it represents a step towards other directions, sometimes unknown, which need to be constantly explored because, as Morrison and Oblinger stress, "technology challenges people's assumptions about what it means to be educated" (2002, in Thurlow *et al.* 2004, p. 9).

This seems to be the case of CMC in educational settings, particularly language teaching, where many instructors are increasingly recognizing the role of technology-based teaching approaches, and are doing their best not simply to integrate technology in their teaching practices, but especially to make the most of it.

One of its widely recognized benefits in language teaching and learning is that it offers plenty of opportunities for learners to practice their foreign/second language (FL/L2), overcoming constraints of time and space. By simply typing on a computer (provided with an Internet connection) keyboard, it is potentially possible to communicate with people living on the other side of the world. This is a great advantage considering that, following one the approaches to language teaching and learning most in vogue in the last twenty years – the communicative approach –, communication is not simply the end to language learning but it also constitutes a means to that end.

[1] Defined by Herring as the "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentalities of computers" (1996, p. 1).

But what is communication? As is predictable, communication is such a broad concept that it is almost impossible to grasp it extensively. The Oxford Dictionary of English (2005) defines it as "the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium" and yet "the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings", stressing its multi-functional aspect. What is certainly true is that we use language primarily to achieve communication purposes – that is, sharing of ideas, feelings and information – and for ages scholars have been looking at how language works in the communication process, identifying recurrent patterns in different modes, namely, oral and written. But, if the Internet has changed the way people communicate, has it also changed the way language functions? And if so, how? In order to answer these questions, the study of Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD) has developed alongside with CMC – the former being "a specialization within the broader interdisciplinary study" of the latter (Herring 2001, p. 612).

Defined as "the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers" (*ibid.*), CMD has been explored by those researchers exposed to and interested in communication through the new medium since when it was firstly recognized as an emergent genre by Ferrara *et al*. (1991). For instance, these authors stressed that computer-mediated language contains traits of both written and spoken language, and at the same time is somehow distinct from both of them. As is self-evident, CMD, especially in its synchronous modality, could be described as written speech. However, although it is a rather immediate form of communication, it still lacks such channels as visual, auditory and gestural, typical of face-to-face communication. For these and other reasons, CMD has been defined as a "lean medium", since it mainly relies on a written channel, in contrast with face-to-face interaction, which, relying on multiple channels, has been defined as a "rich medium" (Herring 2001, p. 614).

Nevertheless, despite the increasing interest in CMD, most research has focused on linguistic structures, social practices, or gender asymmetry (for related literature see Herring, *ibid.*), whereas less attention has been paid to other aspects of discourse analysis, such as pragmatics. However, if the Internet has changed the way people interact, it is also plausible that it has changed the pragmatic norms underlying this new form of interaction. This study sets out to look at how language is used in a virtual environment (VE), or virtual world (VW) – the two labels are here used interchangeably –, namely Second Life (SL), describing the production of compliment responses (C/Rs). The rationale behind this choice is that responding to compliments, together with giving compliments, is among those speech acts that serve a social purpose in that they help interlocutors create solidarity, thus fully interpreting the true spirit of VEs themselves. In my analysis, I start from the assumption that VEs are being regularly used for language learning purposes (mainly distance and/or autonomous learning). However I cannot help wondering to what extent the language used in such environments does reflect the actual language used in real contexts and, therefore, to what extent it is convenient and significant for instructors to integrate VEs in their teaching practices.

In sections 1.2 an introduction to VEs, and SL in particular, is provided. Hence, in section 1.3 aims and research questions of the paper are presented. In chapter 2, I first briefly introduce C/Rs and politeness principles that govern conversation, I then review previous research on C/Rs. I conclude the chapter with a description of the main characteristics of chat room language, and a review of some studies on pragmatics in CMC. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to collect data. In chapter 4, I first present qualitative and quantitative results. Then I discuss the findings, and consider some

pedagogical implications and possible directions for future research. In the final chapter conclusions are drawn.

1.2 Context

Before looking at how language is used in VEs, it might be useful to describe some of the dynamics underlying VWs and, particularly, SL. In fact, although the interactions occurring in such environments have some traits in common with face-to-face interactions, the first and most intuitively obvious being their synchronous modality, they are modelled by and through the new medium and its characteristics.

In order to understand how the language is affected by computer-based interactions, the following section provides a brief but explicative insight into VWs and their mechanisms.

1.2.1 Virtual worlds

As the name itself suggests, VWs are computer-based simulated environments where users interact by means of avatars, that is, digital representation of themselves. VWs – often referred to as Multi-Users Virtual Environments (MUVEs) or Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) – result from the evolution of Multi-User Dimesions (MUDs), first developed in the late 1970s by Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw "to facilitate multi-player role-playing games run over computer networks" (Dieterle, Clarke 2008, p. 1).

Since then, they have been rising in popularity and attracting more and more users, partly because of an engaging 3D environment that provides users with visuals and animations as well as plenty of opportunities for socialization, and partly because of socio-psychological and anthropological reasons, which, however, are not the main interest here (for related literature, see Castronova 2007, Boellstorff 2008).

VWs are being increasingly employed in many different areas of interest and, most relevantly to the present study, in educational contexts. According to Dieterle and Clarke (op.cit.), VEs have been used in education, among other things, to teach and learn languages. The main reason for their success seems to be their suitability to get users immerse themselves in linguistically and culturally appropriate environments, where they can meet native speakers from all over the world and communicate using their target language. Some of the potentialities and benefits for language learning of such environments – identified in one of the few articles on VEs' role in language learning – are reduced affective filter, persistent records that allow learners to critically examine their own performance, as well as physical and linguistic co-presence (Henderson *et al.*, 2009).

1.2.2. Second Life

One of the most successful VEs employed for language learning purposes seems to be Second Life (SL). First launched on 23rd June 2003 at the hands of Philip Rosedale, it counted barely one thousand users in the same year (Rymaszewski *et al.* 2007), a million users in 2006 (Stevens 2006), over nine million in 2007 (Diehl, Prins 2008), almost twelve million users in 2008 (Mennecke *et al.* 2008), and over twenty million in 2011. Additionally, over 700 educational institutions have already integrated SL in their own curricula (many of them have also purchased an island, which is a piece of virtual land to use as a learning environment) – some examples are University of Hawaii, Open University, London Metropolitan University, University of Warwick and Virtltantis. In

particular, the last is a non-profit extension of the German and Dutch Oxford School for English, partnered with the University of Western Australia in SL, which offers around thirty launched rooms to be used as language classrooms.

In order to get started with SL users need to create their own avatar, which can be as realistic or as fictitious as they would like it to be. A free and basic membership provides users with all the privileges, except for owning their own land (for which a priced premium membership is required). Once an avatar has been created, users can enter and explore this VW simply by downloading the viewer from SL website www.secondlife.com.

SL has its own currency (Linden Dollar – at the time of writing, 1 Euro is worth 330,11 Linden Dollars), and time zone, which is equivalent to Pacific Time. Here interaction occurs through text chat, instant messages and, since August 2007, voice chat. Most importantly, all chats can be subsequently logged for future reference, and this feature makes SL particularly suitable for learning as well as research purposes.

However, in spite of the many advantages, SL also presents some drawbacks. First of all, it may require a long time to fully understand all its potentialities, especially if users do not receive adequate guidance. Furthermore, distractions are multiple and it is easy for users to lose their focus. Last but not least, there might be technological problems – such as slow responses, need to empty cache memory after crashes, or to update software, as well as slow chats – which can affect any beneficial outcome.

1.3 Aims and research questions

Commenting on the advantages of learning in 3D environments, Linden Research (2009) points out that it:

> [...] can be as effective as traditional classrooms and for many students it's an even more effective learning environment. In a few words, Second Life as an educational platform is engaging and it works. And it's eco-friendly.
> (http://education.secondlife.com/whysl/advantages/).

Explaining the reasons for such a success is almost impossible; however, as SL becomes more pervasive, research examining its dynamics is needed. In fact, whereas the attention of many scholars is already focused on whether L2 learners effectively benefit from CMC, in general, research on the specific efficacy and pedagogical validity of VEs is certainly required.

The present study constitutes one attempt to fill a gap in the literature on the pragmatics of VWs. On one hand, it sets out to analyse a VW, namely SL, which is being increasingly employed for language learning purposes, thus fulfilling the need for a better understanding of such an environment. On the other hand, it looks at the pragmatics of SL in order to find out whether a different medium can affect the pragmatic norms underlying conversation, and, if so, in what ways. Hence, the main research questions are as follow:

1) How do SL users respond to compliments (Cs)?
a) Do they mostly accept or reject them?
2) What are the differences between C/Rs in SL and real life?
3) Is it significant for instructor to implement VEs in their teaching practices?

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Compliments responses and politeness

C/Rs have been pragmatically studied as politeness phenomena, whose most thorough description is offered by Brown and Levinson (1987). Observing cross-cultural transactions, they noticed that any linguistic interchange is somehow guided by a few politeness principles. "The kernel element in folk notions of politeness" (Brown, Levinson op.cit., p. 57) seems to be represented by the notion of face, derived from Goffman's, who talked about "[...] the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [...]" (1967, in Spencer-Oatey, Franklin 2009, p. 110), but also from the English expression *losing face*, which directly relates face to the idea of being embarrassed. Drawing on this, Brown and Levinson proposed the notion of face-threatening-acts (FTAs), that is, speech acts which intrinsically threaten interlocutors' face in that they run against their wants to "be unimpeded by others" and to "be desirable to at least some others" (Brown, Levinson op.cit., p.62). Therefore, in performing a FTA, interlocutors unconsciously judge its weight, given by social distance, power relation and its degree of imposition in a particular culture. Following their model, every adult member of a society has *face* and *rational capacities*, where the latter refer to particular modes of thinking that allow him/her to choose the most appropriate means to achieve his/her linguistic aims, while the former includes

> (a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition
> (b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants [...].
> (*ibid.*, p. 61).

This theory, although often cited in cross-culture politeness studies, has been strongly criticized, especially by Eastern scholars, as a Western-centric one. Indeed, in its twofold distinction between negative and positive face, it seems to disregard the sense of community typical of Eastern societies, and over-evaluate the idea of individual rights, conceiving the conversation as a fighting ground where interlocutors' face is always at stake. Taking these criticisms into consideration, Spencer-Oatey (2000), among others, has developed a rapport management framework, where *rapport* refers to "people's subjective perception of dis(harmony) [...] in interpersonal relations" (Spencer-Oatey, Franklin op.cit., p.102). According to Spencer-Oatey, in managing rapport, individuals adopt strategies aimed to enhance either their, or their interlocutors', *face* or *sociality rights*. The former described, drawing on Goffman's definition, as "people's sense of worth, dignity, honour, reputation, competence and so on [, while the latter as] personal/social expectancies [...]" (Spencer-Oatey op.cit., p. 14). In agreement with this criticism, hereafter I use Spencer-Oatey's framework and terminology in referring to FTAs.

In one of the earliest studies on Cs, Wolfson claimed that the majority of Cs we pay function as "social lubricants", necessary to "grease the social wheels" (1983, p. 89) – we all compliment to convey a certain degree of sympathy towards our interlocutors. As a common social practice, Cs have been studied in many different languages and socio-cultural contexts and were included by Brown and Levinson among those speech acts that make the interactants feel uncomfortable, since the acceptance of a C damages the sociality rights of the complimentee, if it involves self-denigration, or his/her face, if s/he feels obliged to return the C. Indeed, it seems that responding to a C creates a conflict

between wanting to agree with the complimenter on one hand, and wanting to appear modest on the other, which, in Leech's (1983) words, can be described as a tension between the maxim of agreement and the maxim of modesty. As such tension is normally solved according to the speaker's attitudes towards those principles, even the act of responding to Cs is sensitive to variables like social distance and power relation. However, what happens when such variables are not so clearly perceivable, which seems to be particularly the case of VEs, where speakers' identities are idiosyncratically hidden behind avatars? Before attempting to answer this question, it is worth reviewing some of the main studies on C/Rs.

2.2 Compliment responses: previous studies

A large amount of research has been carried on C/Rs, which can vary according to different cultural perceptions.

Pomerantz's (1978) study represents the first and possibly most successful attempt to provide an insight into the act of responding to Cs. Here, she postulates that C/Rs are subjected to two systems of constraints, namely the addressee's agreement or disagreement – "in this action chain, compliments have the status of 'supportive' actions" (*ibid.*, p. 82) – and acceptance or rejection of the C – here "compliments have the status of assessments" (*ibid.*). As is obvious, both agreement and acceptance represent the preferred seconds of what Schegloff (1968) defined as *adjacency pair*,[2] while disagreement and rejection are the dispreferred seconds.

As she notices, although one would expect a majority of agreement and acceptance responses, the data collected showed a prevalence of disagreement and rejection responses. Therefore, she makes reference to a third system of constraints, which involves the recipient's minimization of self-praise, to explain this outcome. Indeed, in accepting Cs, or agreeing with the complimenter, the addressee breaks Leech's (op.cit.) maxim of modesty. On the other hand, avoiding self-praise would not simply mean rejecting the C, or disagreeing with the complimenter, but also breaking Leech's (*ibid*.) maxim of agreement. In order to solve this conflict interlocutors adopt various devices, but before considering them, let us have a look at different types of responses categorized in Pomerantz's data.

The first preferred response to a C is acceptance, which is often performed with appreciation tokens, such as *thank you*, while the second preferred response, agreement, is usually performed through a second assessment in agreement with the first (*B: Isn't it cute. A: O::h he::s a::dorable.* (Pomerantz op.cit., p. 85)). Agreement and acceptance can occur in combination or alternatively. On the other hand, the first dispreferred response, rejection, often contains appreciation markers, whereas in the second dispreferred response, disagreement, the second assessment stands always in disagreement with the first one (*H: Gee, Hon you look nice in that dress. W: Do you really think so? It's just a rag my sister gave me.* (*ibid.*, p. 87)). The last category described by Pomerantz is self-praise avoidance, which, if not directly adopted by the recipient of the C, can be enforced by the speaker him/herself (*K: ..Y'see I'm so terrific, A: Y'see folks, he is very vain, an' he realizes his mature talents compared to out meagre contents of our minds.* (*ibid.*, p. 89)).

[2] Adjacency pairs are (1) composed of two turns, (2) uttered by different speakers, (3) adjacently placed, (4) relatively ordered – the two turns are divided into 'first pair part' and 'second pair part' – and (5) pair-type related – not every first pair part can be followed by any second pair part (Schegloff 2007).

Given the possible strategies, Pomerantz also identified some solutions for the agreement/modesty conflict adopted by complimentees, namely 'praise downgrade' and 'referent shift'. In particular, praise downgrade can be carried out by either agreeing or disagreeing with the complimenter. In the former case, the complimentee produces a second assessment, which usually contains a less strong term than the previous (*A: Oh it was just beautiful. B: Well thank you uh I thought it was quite nice.* (*ibid.*, p. 94)). In the latter, addressees of Cs disagree with prior Cs, normally proposing that the appraisal is exaggerated (*A: ..you've lost so much weight. P: Uhh hmhh uhh hmhh well, not that much [...]*. (*ibid.*, p. 98)). Shift of reference, instead, can be carried out either by reassigning the praise, in other words, shifting the praise to another object (R: You're a good rower, Honey. J: These are very easy to row. Very light. (*ibid.*, p. 102)), or by returning the C, that is, complimenting back the speaker.

After Pomerantz (*ibid.*), also Herbert (1986) and Holmes (1986) looked at C/Rs respectively in American and New Zealand English. In particular, drawing on previous research, Herbert firstly distinguished three broad categories of C/Rs, namely 'agreement' (complimentee agrees with complimenter), 'nonagreement' (complimentee disagrees with complimenter), and 'other interpretations' (i.e. complimentee interprets the C as a request). Subsequently, he identified further sub-categories of 'agreement' – namely (1) 'acceptances', in turn made of (a) 'appreciation token' (complimentee thanks complimenter), (b) 'comment acceptance' (complimentee accepts the C and offers a personal comment on the appreciated topic) and (c) 'praise upgrade' (complimentee accepts the C and upgrades it), (2) 'comment history' (complimentee offers an impersonal comment on appreciated topic) and (3) 'transfers', that is, (a) 'reassignment' (complimentee transfers the merit to a third person or to the object itself) and (b) 'return' (complimentee returns the C to complimenter) – and 'nonagreement' – namely (1) 'scale down' (complimentee points to some flaw in the topic of praise), (2) 'question' (complimentee questions the C), (3) 'nonacceptances', that is, (a) 'disagreement' (complimentee states the object complimented is not worth the praise) and (b) 'qualification' (complimentee qualifies the C, usually with *but, well, though*, etc.), and (4) 'no acknowledgment', which could be (a) 'no response' (complimentee ignores the C) or (b) 'topic shift' (complimentee changes topic). Then, after analysing 1062 C/Rs, he found that 65.91% instances showed 'agreement', while 31.16% and 2.92% showed respectively 'nonagreement' and 'other interpretations'. The majority of the findings appeared to be in accordance with the maxim of agreement, however Herbert explained disagreement in terms of a "democratic idealism and human equality" (*ibid.*, p. 82) which would prevent Americans from adopting a self-praise strategy. Similarly, Holmes (op.cit.) identified acceptance as the most common strategy (60%), followed by deflection (29%) and, only last, rejection (10%).

Different results were obtained by Wang and Tsai (2003), who, analysing C/Rs in Taiwan Mandarin, identified a preference for nonagreement strategies (62.4%), and, therefore, a preference for the maxim of modesty over that of agreement. And yet, Golato (2005) found that, while there was a tendency to accept Cs in German as in American English, surprisingly no appreciation token appeared in his corpus; instead appreciation was generally expressed through assessment. Finally, Ruhi (2006) recognized acceptance (60.85%) as the preferred strategy in Turkish, followed by rejection and deflection (respectively 22.77% and 16.02%). Furthermore, she argued that, in spite of a preference for acceptance strategies, responding to Cs in Turkish context is a long ritual often requiring negotiation.

Other studies have looked at Cs and C/Rs from a cross-cultural perspective. In her research on Japanese complimenting behaviour, Daikuhara (1986) found that 95% of all strategies adopted to refuse a C fell into Pomerantz's (op.cit.) category of 'self-praise avoidance', with the two most common strategies being 'open disagreement' (35%) and 'smile or no response' (27%). The remaining 5% of the whole corpus was represented by 'appreciation tokens'. She explained these findings arguing that in such a culture as the Japanese "this denial serves to sustain harmony between parties and to emphasize their commonality" (*ibid.*, p. 125). Different results were reported in Saito and Beecken's (1997) contrastive study of Japanese and American speakers. In particular, these authors found that 57% of Japanese accepted the C, while 28% of them deflected it and only 15% rejected it.

In two studies on American English and Chinese Mandarin, and Australian English and Taiwanese Mandarin responses to Cs, respectively Chen (1993) and Tang and Zhang (2009) identified a great tendency of American and Australian English to accept Cs, compared to a Chinese and Taiwanese tendency to reject them, in accordance with the great value given to modesty in these cultures. Also, comparing C/Rs in Irish, German, American and Chinese, Schneider and Schneider (2000, in Chen 2010) observed that, while the differences between Irish, Germans and Americans were not noticeable, Chinese speakers showed a greater tendency to reject Cs, confirming Chen's (1993) results on their preference for modesty maxim over agreement. However, after replicating Chen (1993), Chen and Yang (2010) found that Chinese speakers overwhelmingly accepted Cs, revealing a great influx of Western cultures in the last decade.

And yet, comparing American English and Egyptian Arabic, and American English and Syrian Arabic responses to Cs, respectively Morsy (1992, in Chen 2010) and Nelson *et al.* (1996) found that a great majority of Arabic speakers accepted the Cs (respectively 72% and 67%). These results seem to be also confirmed by Farghal and Khatib's (2001) analysis of Jordanian college students' responses to Cs.

Finally, comparing British and Spanish, Lorenzo-Dus (2001) claimed that British questioned the value of the C more than Spanish, while the latter often asked for repetition and expansion of the C. Additionally, both groups used irony – although in different ways – and reassignment as a strategy to avoid self-praise in Cs on natural talent and intelligence. More research on C/Rs has been carried out in the field of second language pragmatics (for reference, see Yuan 1996, Junko 1997, Cedar 2006, Shimizu 2009, Jiemin 2010, Mustapha 2011).

As is clear from this description, the act of responding to Cs varies according to the value that complimenting has in a certain culture and, therefore, requires some sociolinguistic skills as well as careful judgment of the contextual factors playing in interaction. Keeping this in mind, pragmatic competence involves "deciding in what context it is appropriate to use a compliment and [...] interpreting the function of compliments and responding appropriately." (Holmes op.cit., p. 505).

Overall, the great deal of studies on this topic shows that Cs are generally positively accepted in most cultures, with some exceptions in Eastern cultures. However, more recent analyses (Chen and Yang op.cit.) have highlighted an inversion in trend as a result of the increasing influence of Western societies.

While many studies have shed light on the production of this speech act in different languages and cultures, no study, as far as I am aware, has explored this politeness' feature in VEs. Before considering how C/Rs are encoded in such environments, it is useful to identify the main feature of chat room language.

2.3 Chat room language

The language used in chat rooms interactions has attracted the attention of linguists since CMC has expanded as a new form of communication. In one of the first attempts to describe the linguistic features of CMD, Yates (1996) compared two corpuses of spoken and written texts with a corpus of texts coming from a computer conferencing system. Drawing on Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics, Yates identified the ideational, interpersonal and textual aspects of CMD, and found that the language used in CMC is more similar to writing than speech in the range of vocabulary used. And yet, measuring lexical density, that is, how much information is packed within a text, he observed that CMD users tend to convey information in more written- rather than speech-like ways. However, while most studies on CMD have been concerned with defining the linguistic features of this new form of communication through the virtual medium (see Chafe 1982, Yates op.cit, Werry 1996, Herring 2001), only a few of them have investigated the pragmatics of CMC, and they will be briefly reviewed in the next section.

If it is true that pragmatics refers to language use in context, then it is more than likely that remarkable changes in the context in which communication takes place also affect the pragmatics of virtual interaction. In order to understand this statement, it might be helpful to briefly consider Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING acronym, often adopted to explain the notion of context and its impact on language usage.

Setting – place and time where communication occurs
Participants – speakers and hearers, and their relationship
Ends – stated and unstated aims of the communicative act, usually shared by participants
Act sequence – form, content and sequence of utterances
Key – tone and manner of the utterances
Instrumentalities – channel and varieties of language used in interaction
Norms – conventions of interaction based on a shared knowledge
Genres – different kinds of speech event

Adapting this model to virtual synchronous communication, it is possible to notice that, while, as in face-to-face communication, speaker and hearer need to share the time of interaction, they by no means need to share the place; indeed, one of the distinctive features of CMC is that it allows distant communication. Additionally, not only does virtual conversation not follow the traditional organizational patterns – for instance, studying the linguistic and interactional features of IRC,[3] Werry (op.cit.) noted that, unlike spoken interaction in its ideal form *no gap, no overlap* (Sacks *et al.*, 1974), interactive written discourse is characterized by an apparently incoherent structure since at least two obstacles impede the interaction flow, namely a disrupted turn adjacency, due to the fact that messages are displayed in chronological order as received, and lack of simultaneous feedback (Herring, op.cit.) – but it also differs from face-to-face communication in the channel, which of course cannot be defined as either spoken or written, and the varieties of languages used. In fact, although much of cross-cultural CMC takes place in English, one cannot ignore the existence of many different varieties of English, without considering the cases in which English represents a second language. Last but not least, the conventions of interaction are hardly shared in such a communicative context as the virtual one, since participants' socio-cultural backgrounds are often different, if not even in conflict with one another.

[3] Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is a form of synchronous messaging mainly designed for group interactions.

For all these reasons, it seems reasonable to assume that face-to-face and virtual communication do not simply differ in their linguistic structure but also, and maybe most importantly, in the pragmatic choices that their users make, which require systematic investigation.

2.4 Pragmatics in CMD: previous studies

A first attempt to investigate the pragmatic features of computer-mediated language is represented by Hongladarom and Hongladarom's (1999) study of a Thai virtual community. In their study, the authors focus on the notion of politeness, seen as a threefold ideology. In particular, the first two types of politeness correspond to Watts *et al.*'s (1992) first- and second-order politeness, defined respectively as "a commonsense notion of politeness" and a technical term "within a theory of social behaviour and language usage" (*ibid.*, p. 3), whereas the third one corresponds to a social and cultural politeness, that is, a politeness embedded in the cultural and social practices of a community. Thus, from their examination it appeared that even in multi-cultural environments Thais' interactions are characterized by a positive politeness orientation (expressiveness, in Spencer-Oatey and Franklin's (op.cit.) words), which is typical of Thai culture, also in situations that would possibly become inflammatory in any other society. In fact, while members of Western virtual communities tend to be more agonistic towards one other, Thais try to find common grounds and to avoid any tension, showing, therefore, to withstand the wave of globalization coming through the Internet.

The second analysis of chat room language from a pragmatic perspective is Jara's (2003) and Herring's (in press) study of CMD in the light of Gricean maxims. Specifically, using IRcap, a script for the chat program mIRC, Jara looked at some samples of chat room language and found that the maxims of quantity and quality are hardly broken by the members of this community. Conversely, the maxim of relevance seemed to be the most easily broken. However, he also noted that every time breakdowns occurred, there was always a reason for it (normally a new member entering the chat and needing clarifications). Similar conclusions are drawn by Herring, who, after analysing samples of interactions from IRC and MUD, demonstrates that the maxim of relevance is relaxed in recreational synchronous CMC due to constraints of the medium itself, and suggests that "if the future of human communication were to depend on computer chat, relevance could continue to decline in importance" (*ibid.*, p. 18).

The last study considered in this section is Scheyder's (2004) investigation into indirect speech acts in chat rooms. In her article, the author compares responses to indirect requests in a chat room, where members of a recent undergraduate university meet, with responses in a telephone conversation from Clark (1979, in Scheyder, *ibid.*). According to Scheyder, responses to indirect speech acts can consist of (1) answer to the question, (2) answer and information indirectly required, (3) only information indirectly required, or (4) other forms of response. Thus, starting from the assumption that, because writing requires a greater effort than speaking, responses to indirect requests in chat room interaction include only the information requested, she found that, for the majority of indirect requests, only the information required was provided. Scheyder concludes her article claiming that it represents one attempt to begin "to address the void of available information" (*ibid.*, p. 60) on the linguistic features and pedagogical implications of CMC. However, since then, very little has been done in this direction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methods of data collection

What is interesting of SL is that it is divided into regions or islands, which resemble cities and places in real life, and that users can explore. For example, one might decide to visit Moscow, Berlin or London, and possibly find Russian, German or British users to interact and practice respectively Russian, German or English with (however, it is not always that obvious). This is particularly important from a language learning viewpoint as it allows users to easily meet speakers of the languages they are willing to practice.

Hence, after creating my own avatar, I personally accessed SL over a period of two weeks between May and June 2010, gathering seventy-four C and C/R formulas, sixty taken from 'nearby chat', where avatars that are in the same place can interact with one another, and the remaining fourteen from 'immediate messages' privately sent to single avatars.

One of the methods most widely employed in collecting Cs and C/Rs is 'field observation' (adopted, among others, by Manes and Wolfson 1981, Wolfson op.cit., Holmes 1988, Herbert 1989, 1991), where researchers write down not only all the C/Rs they observe in their daily lives, but also the ones they themselves give or respond to. In addition, they take note of some contextual information, such as gender, age of speakers and location. Although this method allows one to collect a large amount of natural occurring data, it suffers from some limitations. The most obvious is that researchers have to rely exclusively on their observational and memory skills, thus biasing and "limit[ing] in both quality and quantity" (Labov 1984, in Golato op.cit., p.17) the results obtained.

Other methods of data collection often adopted in pragmatic research are DCT (Discourse Completion Task) and role play. The former is a questionnaire including "a situational description and a brief dialogue which has one turn as an open slot [and a rejoinder] to terminate the exchange" (Kasper 2008, p.292). The latter has been defined as "a social or human activity in which participants 'take on' and 'act out' specified 'roles', often within […] (a 'scenario')" (Crookall, Saunders 1989, in Kasper op.cit., p. 288). However, their limitation resides in the fact that they respectively "reveal[…] a participant's accumulated experience within a given setting" (Golato op.cit., p. 13), and provide "beliefs about roles […] [subjects might] have never played in real life" (Golato *ibid.*, p. 16).

For the present study, naturally occurring data were collected in SL following a field observation approach. At the same time, the particular nature of the medium used allowed me to overcome the main limitation in collecting naturally occurring data. In fact, I did not rely on my memory skills, but I accessed and transcribed all my chat and 'nearby chat' logs, automatically stored in the computer's hard drive. To this regard, some researchers have pointed out that the participation of researchers themselves would sometimes lead to biased results. Nonetheless, as McKee and Porter (2009) stress, research in VEs cannot be limited to researchers' neutral observation but requires their own participation in the world.

Lastly, an important issue to take into consideration doing research with human subjects is the ethical one, which always emerges from the collection of natural occurring data. In particular, online research has been defined as "*researcher-friendly* data-collection method" (Ryen 2004, p. 236) because it allows to gather a large amount of data in an, apparently, easy way. Nevertheless, several questions have arisen from research in VEs, such as, whether VWs, and everything inside them, is public or not, if researchers need

users' consent before carrying out any kind of research, and also, whether research should be done overtly or covertly. The answers seem straightforward, but they are not. In fact, if virtual realities, and everything related to them, belong to the public domain, then it is logical to assume that also conversations occurring in such environments are public, and, therefore, their use does not need to be authorized. Despite these considerations, individuals' identities and anonymity have to be preserved in a VW as in the real world.

Unfortunately, disclosing the researcher's presence would inevitably lead to what Labov (1972) defined the 'observer's paradox', which emerges from the necessity of studying talk produced by people when they are not being observed, exactly by observing them. In traditional research, this obstacle is overcome through the establishment of a trust relation between researcher and participants, as well as deception devices which help to shift subjects' attention. However, applying these methods to virtual research appears unrealistic. Indeed, building a trust relation online would require a longer time than what usually researchers have at their disposal.

In the light of these considerations, I personally decided to first observe, and sometimes participate in, interaction, without revealing my identity and/or intentions, because I reckoned that in doing so I would have possibly altered users' behaviours. Therefore, I only revealed my identity and intentions at the end of any data collection, aware that I was running the risk of losing all data collected until then, if even a single participant decided not to give their permission. Finally, in order to completely preserve users' anonymity, I hid their identities behind the initials of their pseudonyms.

3.2 The corpus

The corpus examined for this study is made of seventy-four Cs and C/Rs (although only the latter are presented here) taken from a database of 1633 words organized in 382 turns and collected by accessing SL at irregular intervals over a period of two weeks. One issue that arose from data collection was that of subjects' identities. Due to the peculiarity of virtual conversations, variables of gender and age could not be taken into account – indeed, the whole VEs' philosophy seems to rely on the idea of hidden identities.

By the same token, also participants' first language was not taken into consideration. Indeed, while all C/Rs analysed were uttered in English, it was impossible to establish whether English constituted first or second language to participants.

Given that Cs represent "a politeness expression of praise or admiration" (Oxford Dictionary of English 2005) and "explicitly or implicitly attribute[…] credit to someone other than the speaker […] for some 'good' […] which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (Holmes 1986, p. 485), Cs and C/Rs were identified. However, only the latter were categorized following the taxonomy suggested by Herbert (op.cit.) in order to find whether Cs are preferably accepted or rejected in SL. Herbert's taxonomy has been chosen over other possibilities because, building on Pomerantz's (op.cit.) preliminary study, represents the first and most accurate attempt to provide a classification of C/R types.

4. Results

4.1 Qualitative results

As mentioned earlier, Cs constitute the first part of an *adjacency pair*, whose second is

represented by C/Rs. Ideally, the second part should be in agreement with the first. However, more often, as noted by Pomerantz (op.cit.), there is a conflict between agreement and modesty maxim, which leads to reject Cs.

C/Rs in SL were analysed and categorized following Herbert's taxonomy (op.cit.), which was introduced in 2.2 (finding are summarized in Table 1). Herbert's categories mostly fitted the data collected, notwithstanding the 'other interpretations' category and one agreement sub-category, namely 'reassignment', were not instantiated at all, while an additional nonagreement sub-category, that is, 'irony', was identified. Therefore, in agreement with Herbert's finding, the majority of C/Rs (45.94%) presented an appreciation token – even a greater majority compared with Herbert's (29.38%) –, e.g.:

s) 1. [11:30] Z.L.: like your tiara m. :-)
2. [11:30] V.N.: oh really?
3. [11:30] M.G.: thx

In particular, 12.16% (9) of those appreciation tokens were combined with other strategies, which in 55.56% of instances were other agreement strategies, such as 'comment history', e.g.:

t) 1. [12:15] V.N.: oh btw...ur english is perfect
2. [12:15] V.N.: :P
3. [12:16] E.K.: thank you.. i had english courses when i was still a kid

whereas in 44.44% were non-agreement strategies, such as 'scale down', e.g.:

u) 1. [03:13] V.N.: hey nice dress!!!
2. [03:13] V.N.: i like it [03:13] V.N.: :)
3. [03:14] L.E.: thanks...it was free

On the other hand, the second most recurrent of Herbert's categories, 'comment history' (19.30%), only appeared in 9.45% of the instances in my corpus, whereas the third most frequent in Herbert's categories, 'disagreement' (9.98%), only accounted for 2.70% of my categories.

An interesting feature of C/Rs in SL is that a relatively high percentage of Cs (28.38%) received 'no acknowledgment'. Specifically, 17.57% were not responded to at all, e.g.:

v) 1. [13:23] M.S.: s. is a pretty name
2. [13:23] M.M.: I hope you are well on this lovely summer's evening
3. [13:24] S.K.: yes i am fine thanx
4. [13:24] S.K.: how are you

while in 10.81% of instances there was a shift of topic, e.g.:

w) 1. [11:31] A.B.: hi t.
2. [11:31] s.J.: adios
3. [11:31] A.B.: love the outfit
4. [11:31] M.R.: why nobody answer me
5. [11:31] C.A.: /dance
6. [11:31] d.R.: guess the y the coach r doin the nite b4 christmas lol silly mee

7. [11:31] P.P.: i just have mak
8. [11:31] T.F.: hi A. ...u ok\\?

It is also interesting to note that in 54.55% of the Cs which received no response the C's addressee did not talk anymore after being complimented. This is not unusual in VEs, where interlocutors go on- and off-line, thus starting and ending conversations, without taking leave as they would do in face-to-face interaction. Lastly, laughs were categorized as shift of topic and constituted 25% of this type, e.g.:

x) 1. [13:13] M.M.: I am sure it would look very pretty on you too
2. [13:13] T.K.: heheh

In addition to Herbert's categories, I then identified and labelled a further non-agreement strategy, namely 'irony' in all its forms, including sarcasm. In fact, sarcasm can be considered as one of the many facets of irony, and yet differs from it in that the "sarcastic potential [of an utterance] is immediately obvious to all participants in a situation" (Barbe 1995, p. 28). In this sense, irony was used by 5.40% of the subjects. To this regard, consider the following example:

y) 1. [05:02] J.M.: cant take my eyes off you sweetheart!
2. [05:02] E.F.: i can imagine

To conclude, in responding to Cs in a VE, the majority of users (54.07%) made use of agreement strategies; 39.18% of them preferred nonagreement strategies, while a small number (6.75%) chose to combine agreement with nonagreement strategies. The following table shows how *agreement* and nonagreement strategies were variously combined by users in SL.

Response strategy	**Example**	**No**	**%**
Appreciation token (only)	[11:30] Z.L.: like your tiara m. :-) *[11:30] M.G.: thx*	25	33.78
No response	[13:23] M.S.: summer is a pretty name	13	17.57
Topic shift	[13:13] M.M.: I am sure it would look very pretty on you too *[13:13] T.K.: heheh*	8	10.81
Return	[08:04] T.W.: u look sexy darlin in anything *[08:04] S.S.: you to*	3	4.06
Comment history	[09:01] r.M.: i was going to say R. ...W.'s hair looks fab *[09:01] W.: I use good products hahahaha*	3	4.06
Comment acceptance	[06:02] M.S.: I wouldn't look near as good as you in your outfit *[06:03] M.B.: lol m. thats true*	3	4.06
Appreciation token/comment history	[12:15] V.N.: oh btw...ur english is perfect *[12:16] E.K.: thank you.. i had english courses when i was still a kid*	3	4.06
Scale down	[04:58] V.N.: you swedish are really honest and sweet *[04:59] K.S.: im a dwarf lol*	2	2.70
Irony	[05:02] J.M.: cant take my eyes off you sweetheart! *[05:02] E.F.: i can imagine*	2	2.70
Disagreement	[07:45] S.S.: this woman is amazing	2	2.70

	[07:45] r.T.: nah *[07:45] r.T.: stupid*		
Question	[15:03] G.B.: you look ravishing tonight *[15:03] F.X.: me?*	1	1.35
Question/*appreciation token*	[11:30] M.G.: i love your boots v. *[11:30] V.N.: oh really?* *[11:30] V.N.: thanks*	1	1.35
Question/*appreciation token*/irony	[03:59] S.B.: nice AV *[03:59] V.N.: mine?* *[04:01] V.N.: oh thanks* *[04:01] V.N.: i'm blushing* *[04:01] V.N.: ahaha*	1	1.35
Question/scale down	[11:46] s.O.: nice clothes *[11:46] V.N.: mine?* *[11:47] V.N.: these are default clothes*	1	1.35
Comment acceptance/qualification	[08:23] G.W.: sexy putfit phill [08:23] G.W.: outfit* *[08:23] P.P.: yeah* *[08:23] P.P.: i put on a bit of weight since last night though*	1	1.35
Appreciation token/*praise upgrade*	[14:48] S.S.: you are nice [14:48] S.S.: at first *[14:48] K.W.: thanks* *[14:48] K.W.: i am nice all the time*	1	1.35
Appreciation token/*return*	[10:48] V.N.: i like ur name,.. *[10:49] A.B.: thank you yours is nice too*	1	1.35
Appreciation token/scale down	[03:13] V.N.: hey nice dress!!! [03:13] V.N.: i like it *[03:14] L.E.: thanks...it was free*	1	1.35
Appreciation token/irony	[15:37] W.M.: nice your english is very good considering you have only been here for 9 mths *[15:38] V.N.: thanks...i guess i knew something even before coming :)*	1	1.35
Comment acceptance/*comment history*/*praise upgrade*	[11:33] M.G.: i love converse sneakers yours are pretty z. *[11:34] Z.L.: oh yeah.. these are from urban bomb unit.. they cost 400L lol*	1	1.35
TOTAL		74	100

Tab. 1
Compliment response *agreement* and nonagreement strategies.

Finally, consistent with previous studies (Werry op.cit.), a tendency towards addressivity[4] was found in the corpus analysed. Indeed, in 55% of the sixty Cs taken from 'nearby chat', addressees' names were directly included in the utterance, while in 33.33% they were not. Significantly, 30% of the Cs without addressees' names was not responded, against 21.21% of Cs presenting addressivity. Finally, a remaining 11.67% of Cs was given to a third person.

[4] Addressivity represents the interlocutors' attempt to capture addressees' attention by openly including intended addressee's name in their utterances.

4.2 Quantitative results and discussion

In order to find out whether there are differences between responses to Cs in real life and SL, the data collected were analysed quantitatively and compared to previous studies on C/Rs in face-to-face interaction. Table 2 shows the strategies used to respond to Cs in SL compared to Herbert's (op.cit.) research (RL).

C/Rs strategy	SL No	SL %	RL %
Appreciation token	34	45.95	29.38
Of which			
Appreciation token only	25	33.79	
Appreciation token + another strategy	9	12.16	
Comment acceptance	5	6.75	6.59
Of which			
Comment acceptance only	3	4.05	
Comment acceptance + another strategy	2	2.70	
Praise upgrade	2	2.70	0.38
Of which			
Praise upgrade only	0		
Praise upgrade + another strategy	2	2.70	
Comment history	7	9.45	19.30
Of which			
Comment history only	3	4.05	
Comment history + another strategy	4	5.40	
Reassignment	0	0	3.01
Return	4	5.40	7.25
Of which			
Return only	3	4.05	
Return + another strategy	1	1.35	
Scale down	4	5.40	4.52
Of which			
Scale down only	2	2.70	
Scale down + another strategy	2	2.70	
Question	4	5.40	4.99
Of which			
Question only	1	1.35	
Question + another strategy	3	4.05	
Disagreement	2	2.70	9.98
Of which			
Disagreement only	2		
Disagreement + another strategy	0		
Qualification	1	1.35	6.59
Of which			
Qualification only	0		
Qualification + another strategy	1		
No acknowledgment	21	28.38	5.08
Of which			
No response	13	17.57	
Topic shift	8	10.81	
Other interpretations	0	0	2.92
Irony	4	5.40	0
Of which			
Irony only	2	2.70	
Irony + another strategy	2	2.70	

Tab. 2
Compliment response strategies in Second Life (SL) and real life (RL).

The first striking feature of C/Rs in SL is that a high percentage of them presented an appreciation token (45.95%, of which 33.79% presented appreciation token only) – this result is in contrast with previous studies, where the use of appreciation tokens was relatively limited: Daikuhara (op.cit.), 5%; Herbert (op.cit.), 29.4%; Holmes (1986), 15.3%; Chen (1993), 29.50% Americans, 4.44% Chinese; Nelson *et al.* (op.cit.), 29% Americans, 0.2% Syrians; Wang and Tsai (op.cit.), 6.2%; Golato (op.cit.), 0%; Ruhi (op.cit.), 28.92%. In particular, the frequent occurrence of appreciation tokens in my corpus can be justified in light of the relation between complimenter and complimentee, who are often strangers to each other, thus confirm Brown and Levinson's (op.cit.) hypothesis that an increase in social distance determines greater politeness.

On the other hand, in line with most previous studies (Herbert op.cit.; Holmes 1986; Nelson e*t al.* op.cit.; Golato op.cit.; Ruhi op.cit.), but in contrast with Pomerantz's (op.cit.) findings, Cs were more likely to be accepted than rejected. These results reveal that in SL the conflict between Leech's (op.cit.) modesty and agreement maxim is largely resolved in favour of the latter. In other words, SL appears to be a place where those politeness constraints that normally rule face-to-face conversation are broken, and therefore users can act more spontaneously, without running the risk of 'losing their face', appearing immodest, for example.

However, a finding peculiar to this study was that a small, but yet not trivial, number of users employed both agreement and nonagreement strategies as a way to respond to Cs. Particularly, in most cases nonagreement strategies were combined with an appreciation token, in order to mitigate the possible threat to the complimenter's face represented by a rejection.

Yet another peculiar feature was observed in SL, namely the highest percentage of Cs that received no acknowledgment (27.3%) compared to previous studies. Indeed – except for Daikuhara (op.cit.), who registered 'no response' as the second most frequent response, along with 'smile' – in Herbert (op.cit.), Nelson *et al.* (op.cit.), Wang and Tsai (op.cit.) and Ruhi (op.cit.) 'no acknowledgment' accounted respectively for 5.8%, 0.2% for Americans and 0% for Syrians, 2.2%, and 2.41% of the total. This exceptional result is not simply due to the peculiarity of the medium used, as stressed in 4.1., but seems to be an easy way to solve the conflict between modesty and agreement maxim available to SL users. It also supports what noted earlier, that is, SL users perceive less strongly those politeness constraints that in face-to-face conversation would lead participants to respond to Cs rather than ignore them. In fact, it appears that, protected behind their avatars, SL users explicitly evade politeness rules governing conversation.

Lastly, a small number of users adopted irony as a strategy to respond to Cs. The relevance of this finding does not reside in its frequency of occurrence, but in the fact that it was not reported in any other study – with the only exception of Lorenzo-Dus (op.cit.). The use of irony can be seen as another way, chosen by SL users, to avoid the conflict between Leech's two politeness maxims. Indeed, albeit it was categorized as a disagreement strategy, it might have been used by respondents as a way not to overtly reject nor accept the C.

Overall, our results do not clash with previous studies: in fact, also SL users have an undoubted propensity to accept Cs. However, if better analysed, C/Rs in SL present different frequencies of occurrence of the same C/R strategies found in face-to-face interactions, and that could be explained referring to the medium through which Cs are given.

5. Pedagogical implications and further research

It is an on-going debate whether pragmatic competence is naturally acquired through real-life experience or, rather, L2 learners can benefit from instruction. Particularly, much research shows that the acquisition of pragmatic competence is fostered by awareness activities, that is, activities aimed to raise students' awareness of pragmatic appropriateness (Liddicoat, Crozet 2001; Rose, Ng 2001; Bacelar da Silva 2003; Bardovi-Harlig, Griffin, 2005; Huth, 2006). These pedagogical approaches are underpinned by Schmidt's noticing hypothesis[5] (1993, 1995), and by the assumption that "in order for learners to adopt a target-like realization of pragmatics, they must notice how the target language realizes pragmatic features" (Bardovi-Harlig, Griffin op.cit.). Wherever the truth lies, pragmatic awareness activities have been included into many different L2 teaching approaches, materials and curricula.

Recently some studies have also focused on the role played by computer mediation in L2 pragmatics development (Belz 2007). Indeed, not only do computers broaden students' exposure to L2 authentic materials, and, as a consequence, L2 pragmatics, but they also enhance students' opportunities to put into practice what they have learned.

On this account, SL, and VWs in general, constitute a further tool at language learners' and teachers' disposal, which combines the two advantages of computer mediation mentioned above. Nevertheless, to what extent do such environments truthfully represent everyday language, and therefore to what extent is it meaningful and useful to integrate them into teaching practices? The present study, which is one of the first to attempt an analysis of VWs' pragmatics, reveals that, although the majority of patterns and strategies used in SL to respond to Cs mainly resemble those employed in face-to-face conversation, SL's pragmatics is in many ways characterized by distinctive features (as shown in 4.2), which result from its peculiarity. Hence, while SL can be efficiently implemented into teaching practices, instructors should not forget to warn students about its limitations, and always integrate SL with other authentic materials that could provide a complete description of target language pragmatics.

Despite the relevance of this study in the pragmatics of VEs, much and more systematic research is needed in this area. A starting point for further research is related to the size of the corpus used. In fact, albeit this analysis has led to interesting results, before any generalization can be made, a larger sample of data has to be analysed. On this basis, more studies are necessary to demonstrate whether SL, and other VWs, constitutes a valid means to teach and learn L2 pragmatics.

6. Conclusions

This study looked at a VE, namely SL, in order to explore its main pragmatic features. Thus, starting from the assumption that VEs are being more and more used in different language teaching and learning approaches, it set out to find whether the use of such an environment in the language classroom can provide L2 learners with authentic materials and those opportunities necessary to improve their pragmatic competence.

[5] "The 'noticing hypothesis' states that what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning" (Schmidt 1995, p. 20).

Offering one of the first analyses of this type available to date, the present study investigated how Cs are responded in SL, showing that VEs only partially reproduce real life language. In particular, as the above discussion shows, from the analysis of the data collected, it emerged that SL users exhibited a greater tendency, compared to face-to-face interactions, to accept Cs, thus resolving the conflict between modesty and agreement maxims largely in favour of the latter. These differences were explained in the light of the nature of the medium used, which not only filters interactions but, first and foremost, frees its users from those politeness constraints normally governing face-to-face conversation. Furthermore, SL users showed a tension between following the politeness norms governing conversation or breaking them "protected" by computer screens. Indeed, if, on one hand, both high presence of appreciation tokens and tendency to combine agreement and nonagreement strategies reflected an increase in politeness due to a greater social distance, on the other hand, the use of irony and the, more or less conscious, decision not to acknowledge the compliment represented a way not to have to resolve the conflict between two politeness principles.

Despite the novelty of this research and its findings, the present study has some limitations that should be considered. First of all, most of C/Rs were collected in a single region of SL, specifically Hyde Park. This choice was made to ensure, as much as possible, the use of English language. And, indeed, the majority of conversations collected were in English, with only a small proportion taking place in other languages, which, however, were not considered in this study. On the other hand, limiting the field of investigation to one over numerous areas constitutes a considerable restraint to the generalizability of the study itself. In fact, it is likely that C/Rs collected in such a small area were uttered by a restricted number of users, thus not representing the language employed in SL as a whole, but simply in one of its multiple areas. Furthermore, although seventy-four C/Rs might appear a reasonable amount of data, it should be borne in mind that technological devices allow larger data collection. Therefore, before drawing any firm conclusion, it is essential to remember that further research which can confirm or contradict these results is desirable.

That said, the use of SL might result helpful in getting L2 learners interact in their target language, often with native speakers, as long as they are carefully warned about the danger of taking SL as a faithful substitute of real-life language, since interactions taking place in such environments do not fully conform to real-life conversation behaviour.

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