

Culture and enaction. An approach from a lexical study of the Spanish online press

Lucía Luque Nadal¹

Abstract

In this paper we will pay attention to the convergence of enaction and culture in human lexicon. To that end, we will carry out an analysis of real interactions of a special type of computer-mediated communication (CMC), i.e., the comment's sections of several Spanish digital newspapers. Our aim is to explain how both an enactive and cultural analysis of our corpus, based on authentic readers' comments, lead to a more comprehensive explanation of the cognitive and thematically related networks from a discursive point of view.

Key words: enaction – culture – lexicon – cognition – computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous prêterons attention à la convergence de l'éaction et de la culture dans le lexique humain. Pour cela, nous effectuerons une analyse des interactions réelles d'un type particulier de communication médiée par ordinateur (CMO), à savoir les sections de commentaires de plusieurs journaux espagnols en ligne. Notre objectif est d'expliquer comment une analyse à la fois éactive et culturelle de notre corpus, basée sur les commentaires authentiques de lecteurs, conduit à une explication plus complète des réseaux cognitifs et thématiques liés d'un point de vue discursif.

Mots clés : éaction – culture – lexique – cognition – communication médiée par ordinateur (CMO).

¹ University of Málaga (Spain). lluque@uma.es

1. Introduction

Since Maturana and Valera's works *De máquinas y seres vivos* (1973) and *Autopoiesis and Cognition* (1980) the enaction paradigm has undergone a prosperous development not only in the field of Biology but also in the field of Linguistics. Nevertheless, in its origins, the Autopoiesis Theory did not include explicitly either language or culture, and, therefore, could not have been easily applied to the study of languages. However, being conscious of this constraint, Valera joined the cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch, to whom we owe the prototype theory, and the philosopher Evan Thompson, and they three published the book *The Embodied Mind* (1991). In this book the term enaction appeared for the first time.

The Embodied Mind (1991) became a milestone in the field of Linguistics since the work ran in direct contradiction with the initial developments of cognitive linguistics, at least during the 1960s and 1970s. These initial cognitive postulates were based on Putnam's Computational Theory of Mind (1960), later developed by Jerry Fodor (1981, 1987, 1990, 1994). Putnam's theory paralleled the human mind with any computational system, or, in other words, he considered the human mind as a mere massive external information processing machine.

Enaction goes beyond these assumptions and bases human mind development on the interaction with its natural and social context. As Thompson (2007:37) states "the human mind emerges from self-organizing processes that tightly interconnect the brain, body, and environment at multiple levels". Therefore, enaction-based cognition can be defined as the sensomotor dynamic of interaction between a living being and its environment. As a direct consequence, our perception of the environment, as well as our cognition, will be drastically affected by our embodied actions. This new cognitive approach is known as embodied cognitive science.

Besides, enaction becomes a useful paradigm to study language from a holistic point of view as López García-Molins (2017:33) expresses:

El enfoque enaccionista no se puede caracterizar simplemente como un enfoque pragmático o discursivo, es un enfoque global que conviene por igual a todos los niveles del lenguaje, puesto que lo que le interesa es caracterizar su funcionamiento de cara a la situación y a los efectos que se trataba de conseguir.

Additionally, enaction and culture create a useful tandem to study human language since, as Luque Nadal (2019:162) poses, both share common interests and objectives:

el objetivo de ambas teorías confluye en el momento en que estudian la relación que establece el ser humano con su entorno, bien como seres autopoieticos/enactivos, bien como seres sociales/culturales. En la recreación que hacemos los humanos del mundo que nos rodea (es decir, en nuestro *enactment*) funcionamos como entidades biológicas pero también como entidades culturales. Tanto la biología como la cultura funcionan como elementos «limitadores y configuradores» de nuestra cognición.

In fact, the relation between culture and enaction seems to be configured as a symbiotic one, although authors as Sharifian (2017:2) state that enaction comprises culture. In Sharifian's words: "cultural cognition is a form of enactive cognition that comes about as a result of social and linguistic interactions between individuals across time and space".

As presented above, enaction has fully become a new scientific paradigm whose origin can be traced back into Biology, firstly, then into Psychology, but in modern times has evolved into a

new paradigm for cognitive science (Stewart, Gapenne and Di Paolo, 2010) that can be also applied to the study of languages and cultures.

In the next section we will apply enaction to the study of language and culture in a specific type of discourse, namely, computer-mediated communication (CMC).

2. Analysis of computer-mediated communication (CMC) from a cultural-enactive point of view

As Herring (2001:612) states “Computer-mediated discourse is the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers”. We can trace the origin of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to the late 1960s in the United States. Nevertheless, we had to wait until the 1990s to witness its most significant development with the public and massive access to the Internet. The CMC constitutes not only a particular type of human-to-human communication through a specific communication channel (*i.e.* computer), but it also involves the creation of a recently developed type of communication. Social and cultural contexts embedded in this type of language result in the fact that they show different linguistic properties and may even be considered the spark of language change (Baron 1984).

This modern discourse genre has its origins in the 18th century in Europe, specifically in French *salons*. A *salon*, a place where the most relevant intellectual and political meetings were held, was organised by women, called *salonnières*. A most known *salonnière* of the time was Madame de Staël. De Staël’s salon became the centre of many key political issues of that century. In Spain, during the early 20th century, this type of social gathering took the name *tertulias literarias*. In the *tertulias* poets and writers met in different *cafés* along the main cities of the country to discuss literary and political issues, as its French forebears. These Spanish *tertulias* evolved during the 21st century into the comments sections of digital newspapers.

Language used in this type of discourse presents some culturally specific characteristics: abundant use of metaphors, proverbial comparisons, similes, allusions and traditional rhetorical resources, along with other negative ones like the use of profane and aggressive language (Mancera Rueda 2009; Acebedo Restrepo 2013). Actually, these characteristics are not random. They they are motivated by the fact that, unlike in television discourse, commentators cannot rely on his voice, excessive gestures, laughter, etc., as a communicative element. Thus, as a communicative element, these expressive resources are the chosen way to support and sustain different arguments that appear in the comments.

From a cultural and an enactive point of view, computer-mediated communication (CMC) poses a great field of study “in which to study verbal interaction and the relationship between discourse and social practice” (Herring 2001: 612). Furthermore, Fingerhut (2021), based on the reading of Roepstorff et al. (2010), affirms that “Media are the core currency of culture. Alongside images, texts, and sounds, new varieties of media (especially in digital form) profoundly shape human “pattern practices” across cultural domains”.

Therefore, we will pay attention to a specific typology of computer-mediated communication (CMC), *i.e.*, the comments sections of Spanish digital newspapers. Our interest in this type of

CMC stems from the fact that it has experienced a great growth in the past decade and, somehow, it is evolving into a new discourse genre (Moya Muñoz 2015). Moreover, nowadays the comments sections of Spanish digital newspapers build up a most useful corpus to the linguists since, as Luque Nadal (2023: 176) states:

They represent a comprehensive corpus for the linguists where we can study the most up-to-date aspects of colloquial Spanish. Another characteristic of the language used in this special type of forum is that a high percentage of idioms are not registered in any kind of dictionary, thus showing a high degree of innovation.

Likewise, from an enactive point of view, the use of certain types of words used in these digital comments, i.e. insults or profane language, configures the commentators' way of "enacting" their frustrations towards a given social or political situation. Besides, by studying these insults, we can obtain a clear image of those ideological and social changes that our present-day societies are undergoing. As Luque Durán and Luque Nadal (2023) declare:

[...] el insulto en los comentarios de la prensa digital es un elemento al que se ha de prestar atención ya que, mediante su estudio y análisis pormenorizado, se puede facilitar el entendimiento de la mentalidad política y social de una época, y también contribuir a la comprensión de cómo se producen cambios ideológicos y sociales en nuestra sociedad, ya que estos necesariamente se apoyan y reflejan en nuestros usos lingüísticos.

Bearing in mind that the whole set of idioms, proverbs, jokes, insults, etc., used by commentators in this new type of discourse genre is mainly oriented to convey the message with the maximum strength and expressiveness, we have to concede that, apart from a pragmatic function, commentators are somehow showing their opinions, their beliefs, their judgements, and, eventually, their worldviews.

Moreover, embodiment changes its form in these new digital spaces of communication till the extent that "if we adopt an interaction-centred or relation-centred approach when designing virtual environments, we should not focus only on the user –and his expectations, desires, motivations– as the main actor of the learning context, but on the interactions and the relations that might occur between that user and the environment, and between the user and other users" (Forte & Bonini 2010: 54).

3. Cultural-enactive analysis of interactions in digital newspapers

The two main objectives of this study are, firstly, to show the way that enaction and culture converge into the human lexicon. Secondly, to illustrate how an enactive approach along with a cultural analysis can lead towards a better explanation of the cognitive and thematically related network created by the speakers of any language from a discursive point of view.

To fulfil these two objectives, we will study a set of interactions of commentators taken from different news comments from several Spanish digital newspapers such as *Infolibre*, *El Debate* and *El Confidencial*. The comments were published during current year 2023. We have selected this period of time since our aim is to describe the most recent comments that could draw a precise political and social scenario of present-day Spain. That is, to closely determine the environment in which the potential readers are going to "enact" throughout their comments. To that end, our research has not been limited to a specific section of the selected newspapers,

since we wanted to get a holistic vision of those phrases in which culture spread its most influence and that serve the reader to built up his textual argumentation, i.e., the linguistic allusions. Besides, the methodology that has been followed consists of a descriptive analysis of distinct allusions used in the comments sections.

The term allusion can be defined as “a tacit reference to another literary work, to another art, to history, to contemporary figures, or the like” (Preminger 1965: 18). From a communicative perspective, the use of allusions is associated with a number of pragmatic phenomena studied by Grice (1975) such as implicature, inference and relevance. If we consider communication as a basically inferential process, an allusion can be thought of as a stimulus sent by the communicator that is to be completed by the receiver. According to Gutt (1990: 145), a shared cognitive environment is essential for the understanding of the allusion to be possible, in such a way that if the receiver belongs to another culture it may be impossible for him to correctly understand the message. Even more, this shared cultural ability to understand the allusions used in our daily conversations depends on the reader’s background knowledge as Valotka (2016: 5) states: “An ability to understand intertexts depends on the reader’s background knowledge, therefore heterogeneous audience read the author’s idea differently. To create an allusive connection, the author should employ the assumption that his/her readers are disposing of cultural and life-experience baggage which suffices to recognise the referent and interpret it”. From this quotation we may state, at first, the idea that the use of allusions in every language is a certain form of enaction that is strongly determined by the environment in which the speakers lives. Therefore, following with Valotka’s ideas “The success of communication relies on the education of the author and reader and on cultural thesaurus, on how close the personalities and life experiences are” (2016: 5).

Furthermore, according to Paul Lennon (2004: 100), the most frequent allusions in the English press correspond to the following types, from the most frequently used to the least: Set phrases, Names, Quotations, Titles, Proverbs and Formulaic text. Apart from this formal typology, allusions in the press can be divided into a five-group classification in terms of the type of background knowledge that an average newspaper reader has to have in order to understand different types of news. According to Lindemann (1989: 50-51), this background knowledge can be divided into five large classes arranged in a scale ranging from a more stable knowledge to a more transitory knowledge:

- a. Analytically universal knowledge
- b. Empirically universal knowledge
- c. Culturally specific knowledge
- d. Belief systems
- e. Transitory knowledge

Considering the whole set of background knowledge that speakers posses, once they issue an opinion or they put into words whatever kind of thought, an enaction takes place between, at least, three items, i.e, the news’ content, the reader’s background knowledge and the social/natural/cultural environment in which the reader lives.

Therefore, to better understand the cognitive and thematically related networks created by Spanish readers from a discursive point of view, a cultural-enactive analysis of the comments

written in the digital press must be carried out. In those comments several allusions may appear. Some of them are related to the Spanish popular culture, together with other examples related to some other kind of universal knowledge.

The corpus of allusions to work with is the following:

Number	Example of allusions	Newspaper and date
1.	Feijóo está como un pulpo en un garaje. Si gana las elecciones triunfará del odio a Sánchez. Se le admite como animal de compañía.	<i>Infolibre</i> , 07/01/2023
2.	Si Esaú perdió la primogenitura por un simple plato de lentejas, ¿no va a perder Feijoo su honor por todo un Brioche de Lobster Roll?	<i>El Debate</i> , 14/02/2023
3.	Nadie se atreve a decirle a Sánchez que está desnudo	<i>El Confidencial</i> , 04/06/2023
4.	Parecen sacados de un comic de Mortadelo y Filemón	<i>El Confidencial</i> , 05/07/2023
5.	El Gary Cooper, político de “Solo ante el peligro”	<i>El Debate</i> , 10/08/2023

Table 1. Corpus of examples of allusions used in the comments ordered by date of issue

Allusions in readers' comments appear either alone or together with other phrases such as idioms, proverbs, puns, etc. The joint use of both elements reinforces the argumentation developed by the reader. In this example² the erratic attitude of the current leader of the opposition party in Spain, namely Alberto Núñez Feijóo, is compared firstly with that of “un pulpo en un garaje” (literally, an octopus in a garage). Since there is no formal equivalent of the Spanish idiom, an English reader might have used, for example, *feeling out of place* or *feeling like a fish out of water*.

Secondly, in this comment we see a clear allusion to a very famous TV commercial in Spain during the 90s to promote a game called *Scattergories*. In this commercial, the owner of the game threatened the rest of the players with taking home his game immediately if they did not accept the term ‘octopus’ as a pet name. According Lindemann's classification, this allusion will be considered as a type of transitory knowledge. Nevertheless, although the TV commercial was aired during year 1996, the allusion is still quite operative in Spanish discourse. In this specific comment the meaning of the allusion is that of accepting something even when one does not want to or to resignedly compromise with something that is not desired. Even when the reader does not want that Feijóo wins the elections, he will accept his victory only because he is the only politically alternative available in this moment.

Biblical allusions are also most commonly used in digital readers' comments related to any political event or person. This case is found in allusion number 2 where we find the following sentence: Si Esaú perdió la primogenitura por un simple plato de lentejas, ¿no va a perder Feijoo su honor por todo un Brioche de Lobster Roll?³ This allusion is based in the passage of Genesis

² INFOLIBRE #16 Alfonso_J_Vazquez 08 de enero de 2023. 09:06 h Feijóo está como un pulpo en un garaje. Si gana las elecciones triunfará del odio a Sánchez. Se le admite como animal de compañía.

³ ELDEBATE 14/02/2023 Astur67 hace 3 días No entendía por qué Feijoo y demás cúpula pepera asistía a este evento, dando honores a las películas pro etarras, a los filo etarras y a los etarras. Visto el menú degustación que

25:34 that says “And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised *his* birthright” (New King James Version). Esau’s behaviour is compared to that of the current leader of the opposition party in Spain. This comment makes reference to the excessive amount food served during the Spanish cinema awards, known as the *Ceremonia de los Goyas*, to which many politicians, including most of the opposition party assisted. The main reason for their assistance to these awards seemed to be, in the reader’s opinion, because of the splendid menu served during the ceremony. The reader criticizes Feijóo’s decision of assisting the ceremony even when he knew beforehand that during the act speeches against his own political party and his ideology will be given. Therefore, both Esau and Feijóo become paradigms of loss of honour and reputation for the same reason (food).

Readers may also make a comparison between one politician and a literary character with which he shares many characteristics, physical or psychological. In allusion number 3, we find a literary allusion to the popular folktale *Kejserens nye Klæder* (*The Emperor’s New Clothes*) written by Hans Christian Andersen in year 1837. The reader bases his argumentation on the possible winner of the elections that took place in Spain in July 2023 by making a clear allusion between Pedro Sánchez, the president at that time, and the main character of Andersens’ tale⁴. Although, in the end, Pedro Sánchez was re-elected, when issuing the comment, the reader was deeply convinced that he was going to lose and that no one was brave enough to tell him the truth. Not even his most close political partners. Therefore the reader affirms that “Nadie se atreve a decirle a Sánchez que esta desnudo” (literally, “no one dares to tell Sánchez that he is naked”).

Sometimes readers can link a strange or erratic political behaviour with some reality that shows the same characteristics. For example, allusion number 4 makes a comparison between the political behaviour of the Spanish opposition party (namely the Partido Popular) with a very famous children comic in Spain called *Mortadelo y Filemón*⁵. This comic series narrates the adventures of a pair of very clumsy spies working for a secret organization. The allusion used by the Spanish reader is clearly located within the Spanish culture hence, for example, a British reader will not understand this allusion. A British reader, faced with the situation described in the comment, would have enacted his own allusion, perhaps comparing the behaviour of a politician with that of Mr. Bean’s character. Both the comic characters Mortadelo y Filemón in the Spanish culture and Mr. Bean in the British culture share the characteristics of clumsiness and the inability to complete any task, apart from showing an evident inefficiency.

Finally, a political context can show noticeable similarities with the plot of a film. This is the case of the last comment that we are going to analyse. In this fifth comment, the reader makes a comparison between a politician of the fourth mayor political party, namely Iván Espinosa de

se trajinaron ya lo entiendo. Si Esaú perdió la primogenitura por un simple plato de lentejas, ¿no va a perder Feijoo su honor por todo un Brioche de Lobster Roll?

⁴ EL CONFIDENCIAL 4/06/2023 O-G 2023-06-04 10:36:45 Nadie se atreve a decirle a Sánchez que está desnudo. Ni siquiera Pudimos ni Sudamos. El PSOE va a perder.

⁵ EL CONFIDENCIAL 5/07/2023 DDJ 2023-07-05 09:07:16 En fin, entiendo que cada partido tenga fijar su estrategia, pero los estrategas del PP, parecen sacados de un comic de Mortadelo y Filemón, siempre compran la mercancía averiada de la izquierda.

los Monteros, with Gary Cooper's character of in the 1952 film *High Noon*⁶. In Spanish, the title of the film made a clear spoiler of it by choosing the translation *Solo ante el peligro*, literally, "alone against the danger". Therefore, with the sole mention of the title, one could easily make the connection between the political isolation of this Spanish politician and Gary Cooper without having to have seen the film. In both cases his colleagues abandoned Espinosa de los Monteros and the character played by Gary Cooper in the toughest moments. Thus leaving both of them "solos ante el peligro" (literally, "alone against the danger"). The underlying image in both cases is that of lack of backup of their fellows.

4. Conclusions

After the analysis carried out of several readers' comments on the Spanish digital press we have illustrate how enaction and culture merge in the discourse. To that end, we have chosen several examples where several current political events were conceptualized through linguistics allusions. As we have seen in the analysis of the example, readers have enacted throughout a given piece of news, thus creating their own linguistic output from the "interconnection of their brains, bodies and environment" in Thompson's words (2007:37).

Even more, the way that readers enact towards a piece of news also relates to their beliefs' system and to their culture. Therefore, different cultures and beliefs systems will produce distinct linguistics enactions. As a result, if we study the set of readers' comments in a more comprehensive way we find that enaction does not happen in an isolated way in the name o a single reader, but it creates a network of enactions that will cooperate among them. This cooperation creates, at last, a sort of cultural-enactive frame in which any researcher will be able to analyse and delve into the deepest ideological and social values rooted in present-day Spanish society.

All in all, even when readers make an allusion to a universally known fact or person, the linguistic enaction created by an individual Spanish speaker will be based in his own cultural environment, thus configuring a unique pragmatic and discursive text that only readers that belong to the same shared cognitive environment can understand, in Gutt's words (1990:145).

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⁶ #63# ELDEBATE 10/08/2023 Aniceto Felicitar al Sr. Espinosa, el Gary Cooper, político de "Solo ante el peligro", protagonista de lo nunca visto antes en el Parlamento. Dudo que hubiese otro partido tan masivamente aislado por el resto. Ha salido indemne de los ininterrumpidos ataques y miserables maniobras de todo tipo. Solo le faltaba tener que protegerse del »fuego amigo« ... que según parece es lo que ha colmado el vaso.

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