Conversational Dominance in a Thai Chat Room

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Abstract—**The aim of this research is to study a pattern of conversational dominance in a Thai chat room. Such patterns were based on data collected from the Thai chat room located at http://www.pantip.com. The results show that there was no conversational dominance whenever two people were involved. By contrast, whenever a larger number of people were involved, then those who made many greetings and often asked more questions turned out to be the center of conversation or the focus of conversational dominance.**

The conversational dominance, however, could not be established by the counted numbers of messages being sent. This is because in a chat room, people have no concern for whether their messages would be replied to or not. A large amount of repeated contents, then, would be conveyed without interactions. This pattern of conversational dominance in a chat room, therefore, seems different from that of face-to-face conversations. The reason for this difference is that less attention is paid to answers and less care is given to social status.

Keywords-conversational dominance, chat room, Thai contexts

I. RATIONALIZATION

Among a number of means used nowadays in communication, such as telephones, facsimiles, and pagers, the internet is seeing the most dramatic increase in the load of its users. Interaction via internet, such as webboards and electronic mail, is preferred for its convenience. People, therefore, switch the way they communicate based on the convenience of the internet. Moreover, such transmission is preferred for its live interaction. Chat rooms are unique among modes of interaction via internet in that they closely emulate real face-to-face communication. Examples of such websites are http://www.pantip.com, http://www.sanook.

com, and http://www.hunsa.com. In addition, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is used as well. Communication through chat room is regarded as an immediate response. Such conversation can involve more people at the same time. Chat rooms are also unique in that they allow conversations with many people at once. This is a situation that is impolite in real face-to-face conversations. In the context of a chat room, however, this is typically accepted. The example shown below illustrates how one participates in many dialogues with many different people in a chat room.

(1)   Conversation between Pu, Net, and boy
1. Net: "Where do you use the internet? Study/work?"
2. boy: "Work"
3. Net: "What about your job? Where is it? Can you tell me?"
4. boy: "Now, I'm in the factory."
5. Net: "Pu, Where do you use the internet? Study/work?"
6. boy: "I work at Chonbury province."
7. Pu: "FanJR, you can talk to me. I'm available."
8. Pu: "Net, you can talk to me."
9. FanJR: "Pu, can I talk to you?"
10. Net: "I can talk to you, Pu."
11. FanJR: "What is your name?"
12. gamo: "I just logged on .... hello"
13. Pu: "Are you asking me?"
14. Net: "When are you available, boy? Are you tired?"
15. FanJR: "Yes."
16. Pu: "I don't know who is talking to me."
17. boy: "and you"
18. Net: "Pu, are you talking to me?"
19. Net: "Study and work"
20. Pu: "Net, are you talking to me?"

From example (1) can make a schematic diagram as follow:
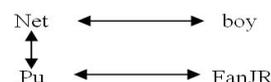

Figure 1.   Interaction of participants in a chat room

Figure 1 shows that everyone in the chat room has an equal opportunity to transmit a message at any given time. They can talk to whichever person they want. Now, what happens when the number of participants increases?
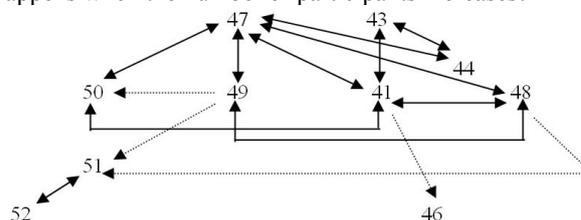

Figure 2.   An illustration of a situation where the number of participants is greatly increased

Figure 2 shows that one participant can talk to many in a chat room. For example no.47 spoke with no.41, no.44, no.48, no.49, and no.50. Additionally, also no.41 spoke with no.43, no.47, no.48, and no.50. From figure 2, no.41 and no.47 look like the center of conversation, and the controller

of the topic of conversation as well. Linguists have named this effect "conversational dominance" (Linell. 1990) [6]. It is interesting to know how people are able to gain conversational dominance in chat rooms with people they have never met before. How can this happen and what would an analysis of this look like? In contrast, in real face-to-face conversations, it is difficult for people to take on a role of conversational dominance when meeting someone for the first time. It will be assumed that dominance in a chat room is fundamentally different from dominance in real conversation due to differences in the types of media used in each mode of conversation. People have more freedom in chat rooms as they are not constrained by the need to take turns when speaking. This is because there are no cues for turn-taking in chat rooms.

This research will address the issues raised above by observing and analyzing patterns of conversational dominance in a Thai chat room. It is unique since there are no previous studies of conversational dominance in chat rooms and it will provide a first step into the field of computer-mediated communication in Thailand. It will especially highlight the importance of the media type in communication. The data used in this research was taken from http://www.pantip.com, chat rooms "jaja" 1-3, 5-7.[1] In total, six two-hour blocks of conversation were taken from these chat rooms over a period of two weeks in November, 2005. In the first week, three two-hour blocks were taken from 6-8 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from "jaja" 1, 2, and 3 respectively. In the second week, three more two-hour blocks were taken, again from 6-8 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, this time from "jaja" 5, 6, and 7 respectively. The time block of 6-8 p.m. was chosen because it is after work and school, and therefore, it is a busy time for chat rooms. This presumably will maximize the sample size for the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEWS

A. Conversational dominance

Sociolinguists have been pioneers in the study of conversational dominance. Their investigations mainly have focused on aspects of gender. Therefore, research was conducted in order to shed light on the topic of conversational dominance when men and women interact. Many parameters were considered, such as the amount of conversation, the number of interruptions, and methods of theme handling. A number of studies have revealed that men chiefly control the conversation when compared to women. They tend to interrupt, state their opinion to, confront, and ignore other speakers more often. According to this research, men normally lead and control the conversation. In contrast, women ordinarily raise questions, encourage the speakers, and allow more interruptions (Maltz and Boker 1982) [7].

Zimmerman and West (1975) conducted research on interruptions and overlap in conversation in public places such as coffee shops and universities. Their study confirmed that men both interrupt and overlap more than women do in

conversation. This investigation also showed that men would control conversations with women. The main tactic used by men to control the theme of conversation is the use of interruptions [10].

Linell (1990) carried out a study of conversational dominance that considered various aspects of linguistics. The author concluded that conversational dominance involves many components and influences the entirety of the conversation. In short, conversational dominance implies that the speaker would dominate the conversation and would interact with others. In other words, (s)he should have more control over the context than the others, and (s)he should be the one who directs the conversation [6].

Linell (1990) classified conversational dominance into the following 4 kinds [6]:

1. Quantitative dominance: defined purely by the amount of conversation.

2. Interactive dominance: defined by considering the number of conversation topics started, only. Interactive dominance is established based only on ability to start the conversation; it only applies if the participant in question is not also dominant during the conversation.

3. Semantic dominance: based on the ability to direct or change the topic of conversation. The one who achieves this would be regarded as having semantic dominance.

4. Strategic dominance: evaluated at the end of each conversation. Strategic dominance, then, is based on a more holistic approach to conversational dominance.

Itakura (2001: 72-85) who carried out a conversation study of Japanese, gave the following 3 kinds of conversational dominance [5]:

1. Sequential dominance: established when one person directs the topic of conversation. This can be directly measured by counting the number of role exchanges between participants in the conversation.

2. Participatory dominance: established when someone uses tactics such as speaking over and interrupting others in order to gain momentum.

3. Quantitative dominance: established when one person says more words, phrases, or sentences than the other participants.

B. Related research

The study of conversational dominance in Thailand was written by Rasikawan (2001) [9]. This author concentrated on conversational dominance regarding both formal and informal situations in real life. The investigation was divided into two categories: quantitative and interactive. The former was examined by counting the frequency of turn-taking, the number of words, and the average length of sentences. The latter was evaluated based on interruptions and speech acts. Interruptions were counted as either successful or unsuccessful in this approach.

The topic of conversational dominance in a Thai chat room is one that has not been documented. Research that is relevant, albeit indirectly, is that of Herring (1992, 1998, 2003) [1] [2] [4]. Herring performed a study on the difference between men and women, both in synchronous (for example, internet chats) and asynchronous mode (for

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[1] There was no chat room "jaja" 4

example, email). The results reveal that men would send longer and more frequent messages when compared to women, in the case of asynchronous mode. As a result, men get more responses than women. In contrast, women send shorter, less frequent messages, and so they receive fewer responses. From this, we can conclude that men might tend to dominate asynchronous conversation, while women would not. By contrast, in the synchronous mode of conversation, men obtain fewer replies than women because this mode usually contains topics that are more casual than those of asynchronous conversation. Men, in addition, often prefer to speak with other women. Women, therefore, tend to get more responses than men.

Another study that is related more directly to this research was that of Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) [8]. The aim of their study was to determine whether or not gender affects the turn allocation in a chat room. Both returned and unreturned messages were counted in this study. The data was taken from the Pantip website. The outcome illustrates that women opt for a tactic where they try to identify the name of the person with whom they are speaking. In contrast, men self-select more in chat rooms. They also tend to send repeated messages, ignoring whether or not they get responses. Because of their different approach, women acquire more replies than men. The approach used by women is more successful because it establishes a good relationship by using the person's name, thus communicating that they are interested in talking with that person. A person who is treated this way is more likely to respond. In contrast, men tend to interrupt more and this yields fewer responses. They, however, continue to send messages until they eventually gain a response. To summarize the work of Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) [8], women seem to gain more attention and get more responses. According to Linell's study, on the other hand, a person who initiates more of the conversation but does not receive many responses will nevertheless gain interactive dominance. However, Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) were not concerned with how often each gender initiates the conversation. Still, their work would be described as the most closely related to this research based on the study of communication via internet in Thailand [8].

III. RESULTS

This section introduces an analysis of using Linell's (1990) criteria [2] to formulate the type of conversational dominance in the context of a chat room [6]. Strategic dominance is argued for an entire conversation. Chat room conversations are live and continuous. There is no discernible beginning and end. Therefore, a holistic approach is not an option for an entire chat room conversation.

Quantitative dominance is untenable for measuring dominance in a chat room because chat room participants have complete freedom to type as much as they want, but

this does not guarantee that they will have any dominance over the conversation topic. Chat room conversations are different from real face-to-face conversations in that participants cannot physically see each other. This lack of physical contact allows participants the freedom of saying what they want regardless of the reaction from others. In fact, many of the messages sent do not even have an intended recipient. One example of this is someone typing lyrics to a song as can be seen in the following messages:

(2) Taken from "jaja 7"

313. ออยมาเร๊ะ: "แม้ไม่ใช่คนโปรดอย่างคนอื่นเค้า แม้จะดูว่างเปล่าในสายตาเธอ ไม่เคยทำให้คำว่าฉันรัก เธอลดน้อยลงได้เลยซักวัน"

328. ออยมาเร๊ะ: "ไม่ว่าเป็นที่เท่าไหร่ของเธอ เธอก็คือที่สุดเสมอไป ถ้าหากเธอพอมีเหลือ แค่เพียงเสี้ยวใจ จะแบ่งปันให้ฉันได้หรือเปล่า"

334. ออยมาเร๊ะ: "และคนๆ หนึ่งซึ่งไม่สำคัญ ก็ยังเฝ้ารอซักวันของเรา เต่ออยากได้ยินว่ารักซักคำ เบาๆให้ ฉันได้หรือเปล่าคนดี"

Another example is seen when someone posts the same message many times without regard for the feelings of others. This is seen in the following excpet:

(3) Taken from "ja ja 1"
360. 500xp: "I've just logged on…hello"
361. 500xp: "I've just logged on…hello"
362. 500xp: "I've just logged on…hello"
…
377. 500xp: "I've just logged on…hello"

This clearly is not a favorable criterion to use for chat room dominance because quantity is meaningless in this context.

While there is compelling evidence of Linell's theory for spoken language, interactive dominance can only be based on initiating a conversational topic; this is not the case in chat room conversations. In order to keep the dominant role in a chat room conversation, you must both initiate the topic and also reply and participate in it. If one initiates a conversation but (s)he does not reply to any responses, they will lose their role of conversational dominance and the topic of conversation will likely be abandoned.

With this account, the key determiner of conversational dominance in a chat room was the number of people that responded. Table 1 shows the participants who got the most responses in each chat room.

TABLE I.   THE PARTICIPANTS WHO GOT THE MOST RESPONSES IN EACH CHAT ROOM

Room no.	The participants who got the most responses	Number of received responses	Total number of messages sent
1	No. 15 (SM)	11	28
2	No. 4 (kie)	37	60
3	No. 6 (B)	22	51
5	No. 1 (LO)	61	97
6	No. 4 (kik)	61	125
7	No. 6 (cry)	36	72

From the data, it was found that these people generally filled the role of conversational dominance by posting a large number of greetings and also by asking a large number of

open questions.[3] Therefore, many other people in the chat room were able to respond to them. As a result, the person initiating the conversation might try to respond to each of these people individually in order to keep the conversation going. It is assumed that the number of messages sent and received is correlated with the number of individual interactions for a given participant. This can be verified by comparing a raw count of messages received by each participant with the following schematic diagram that illustrates interaction types between different participants.

Figure 3 reveals that participants number 4 and 5 are the center of conversation, as seen by the large number of arrows associated with each. This directly correlates to the number of messages received, as shown in Table 1. Participant number 4 filled the role of primary dominance, while participant number 5 filled a role of secondary dominance in that particular chat room.

From Table 1, it can be seen that the participant that got the most responses also had the greatest number of messages that were ignored. This situation where a message can often be ignored is not usually seen in real face-to-face conversations, but it does happen in chat room conversations quite frequently. In order to gain the role of conversational dominance, it is necessary to send a large number of greetings and questions for people to respond to. Some of these greetings and questions will be responded to, while others will be ignored.

In a chat room conversation between only two people, no one takes on a dominant role in the conversation, since turn-taking can be applied, much like a real face-to-face conversation. Evidence is from row one of Table 1 that participant number 15 statistically dominates in that they received the most responses in that room. However, this participant received messages from only two other people as can be seen from Figure 4 below.

These data show that true dominance does not hold if only two people are involved, since conversational dominance can only be established if there are multiple people responding (recall from 3. that I assume chat room dominance depends only on the number of people replying).

IV. CONCLUSION

Chat room conversations exhibit patterns that are different from face-to-face conversations. First, the person that dominates the chat room conversation will be the one that initiates the conversation. Further, they must continue to respond to other people who wish to engage them in the conversation in order to maintain their dominant role. If they do not reply, then the topic will probably be abandoned. Greetings and open questions are the kinds of messages that elicit large numbers of people replying, thus establishing conversational dominance. However, in cases where the person who receives the largest number of responses has

received these exclusively from one or two people, then this is not true conversational dominance in chat room.

Conversational dominance cannot therefore be simply a count of the number of messages sent. This is because many messages are repetitions of the same text over and over again, and also many messages do not have any particular recipient. This is typical of chat rooms where it is possible to behave this way, whereas in face-to-face conversations it is less likely that someone will act this way. One possible reason for this is that social status is removed as a factor in conversation when in chat rooms since you cannot see the person you are talking to.

Dominance in chat room conversation cannot be established based on overlap and interruption (Itakura's participatory dominance) because participants are only able to see the result of the message and cannot tell when the person is in the process of typing it. Chat rooms, therefore, exhibit different patterns of conversational dominance from face-to-face conversation.

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[3] Note, however, that the frequency of messages posted per unit time will place a limit on the number of people who will actually see the message. This means that a high frequency of message posting could make it difficult for any one person to gain conversational dominance.
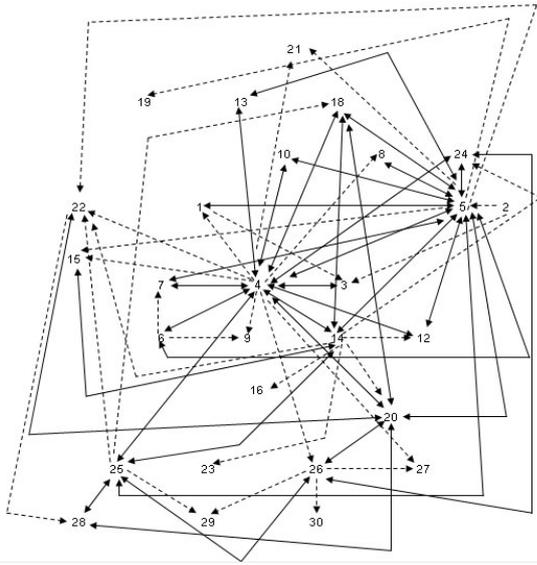
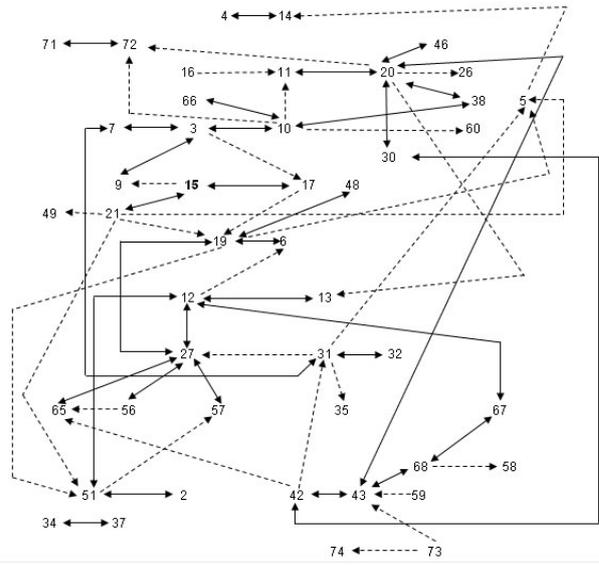Figure 3. Schematic diagram of interactions in chat room "jaja" 6

Figure 4. Schematic diagram of interactions in chat room "jaja" 1