

How to say “Good-bye” in Second Life
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How to say “Good-bye” in Second Life

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the act of closing a conversation in a virtual world—Second Life. The participants in the conversations are 64 avatars who produced 39 dialogues. The structure of the act of conversation closing comprises 4 components: pre-closing, insertion, terminal closing and after-close. The study results indicate that most players give a signal to pre-close their conversations to avoid face-threats whereas a few use an abrupt closing. Informing the other interlocutors of the need to leave and mentioning a future relationship are the most often used strategies to pre-close the conversation, and saying goodbye is the most commonly employed strategy for terminating the conversation. These findings indicate that Second Life participants, even though they are represented by their digital avatars, are concerned about “face” or “face-saving” in the cyber/virtual world.

Key words: *CMC, face and politeness, conversation closing*

1. Introduction

In the real world, when we do not have any further topic to talk about while engaging in a face-to-face conversation, we recognize that it is time then to end, or close, our conversation. To terminate a conversation, according to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), the closing section of a conversation is constructed by adjacency pairs. Button (1987: 101-102) posits that to achieve a relevant act of closing, there are four turns of talking or two adjacency pairs of talking. Let us consider one of his examples.

Example 1

- A: I'll be down there, oh en you'll-you'll be around then when I come in.
B: Yeah.
1st A: Okay.
2nd B: Okay dear.
3rd A: Buh bye.
4th B: Bye bye.

As A and B have no other topic or reason to continue their conversation, A starts to close the conversation by saying, "*Okay*". B then reacts similarly with "*Okay, dear*". A continues with the third turn saying, "*Buh bye*", and B, accepting the termination of the conversation, immediately responds with "*Bye bye*". The conversation is then completely closed.

According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), the second pair (the second and the fourth turns in Button's example above), especially the last pair, appears to show an appreciation of, or agreement to, the intention of closing. It would be a distinct sort of activity or a possible expression of anger if one party says, "*Good-bye*" without leaving a slot for the other to reply.

Following Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness (1987), the act of closing a conversation can possibly offend the other interlocutor because he or she may not want to stop talking at that moment. Therefore, a good closing strategy is needed to save the other's face and to maintain a positive relationship.

What will happen if A makes an abrupt closing without any signal? Or, how will B feel if A does not wait for B's response to A's signal? Let us consider some examples.

Example 2

B: How was your last summer?
→ A: Bye.

Example 3

B: How was your last summer?
→ A: Sorry, I have to go now. Bye.

If you were B, the closing strategy used by A in Example 2 could make you feel worse than that in Example 3. Nevertheless, compared with Example 1, both are less preferred closing strategies.

On the other hand, according to our preliminary observations, in Second Life (SL), a virtual world that is purposefully designed to simulate real life situations where users can create their own representation or avatar, the strategies used in Examples 2 and 3 are nevertheless found.

In this article, we propose to study the act of closing a conversation in SL: What is the conversation closing structure like? What are the closing strategies used by SL participants in the form of an avatar? What is the most common or most often used strategy?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Second Life and computer-mediated communication

Second Life (SL), a rich 3D massive multiplayer virtual world, has become very popular among Internet users around the world as a social networking community. According to Duffy and Penfold (2010) and Au (2008), there are over 15 million residents in SL who utilize varieties of SL applications for many purposes relating to either personal or non-personal activities such as business (de Mesa, 2009), education

(Campbell and Jones, 2008; McKay, Van Schie and Headley, 2008) or higher education (Cooke-Plagwitz, 2008; Duffy and Penfold, 2010; Esteves, Fonseca, Morgado and Martins, 2009; Herold, 2009; Walker, 2009).

SL is purposefully designed to challenge the concept of reality. SL members use their virtual bodies—avatars—to travel or teleport around virtual lands and to communicate with each other by using a variety of both verbal and non-verbal strategies, such as eye contact, gestures, body posture, and facial expressions.

In computer-mediated communication (CMC), numerous authors suggest that CMC language has special characteristics and patterns that differ from oral conversation; CMC is, therefore, considered another type of discourse that calls for analysis (Mitra, 1999; Crystal, 2001; Zitzen and Stein, 2004; Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger, 2008). Furthermore, the language used in certain virtual communities in individual settings such as emails, mailing lists, chats, instant messaging, and social networking sites has group-specific features. Research of online worlds was, therefore, conducted to understand each online context through understanding and describing the language in use, its linguistic features, and the organizational discourse in the particular medium in which it is used (Herring, 1999; Garcia and Jacobs, 1999; Marcoccia, 2004; Holmer, 2008; Berglund, 2009).

For example, chat communication has received attention by many scholars in the area of CMC. Rintel and Pittam (1997) were interested in interaction management strategies when developing interpersonal relationships among chat partners through the opening and closing phases of conversations. Compared with face-to-face conversations, strategies adopted in these media were similar in terms of functions of use while content, structure, and sequencing of the strategies were different. Rintel, Mulholland and Pittam (2001) furthered their study on interpersonal relationships in chat communications using the framework proposed for chat interaction analysis. Particular characteristics and patterns of chat-room discourse in conversational management strategies were also studied in terms of the turn-taking system, discourse features, and interactional coherence (Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003; Castro, 2006; Berglund, 2009; Markman, 2009).

Second Life, on the other hand, has been developed as the most interactive computer-based communication form. Compared with other text-based forms of communication in virtual worlds with similar chat applications, this type of communication provides users with more vivid verbal and non-verbal interactions through avatars' expressions and postures. With their 3D digital bodies, users can socialize and perform various activities that bear a very close resemblance to those in the real world. Through this medium, the language and the way SL participants communicate with each other are likely to have certain characteristics and, hence, are worth studying.

In this study, we analyze the language used in the SL community that has been, thus far, researched little. However, a description of every aspect of the various language usage in SL would not be feasible in one paper; therefore, we narrow the scope of our work to examine only the act of closing the conversation.

2.2 Literature on conversation closings

Closing conversations is not only employed to end conversations, but is also associated with face; interlocutors attempt to maintain the face of others by ending conversations in appropriate ways (Brown and Levinson 1987). Ending a conversation abruptly can be regarded as an act of disrespect or rudeness. According to Waldvogel (2007), appropriate closing is also associated with the future relationship between the interlocutors. More specifically, if you can close the conversation appropriately, you not only establish grounds for a current good relationship with your interlocutor but also guarantee an on-going good relationship. Conversation closing is, therefore, a crucial speech/communication behavior that may reflect the language norms of the particular sociocultural context of the speaker at the time.

A number of studies have examined conversational closings. Initially, studies on telephone conversations included the examination of closing (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Hopper, 1989, 1992). Further studies examined both natural conversations in different languages, such as American English (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1992), Spanish (Coronel-Molina, 1998) and Japanese (Takami, 2002), and an analysis of fictional and non-fictional telephone conversations, which shows that the structure of closing sections tends to differ in terms of issues related to power and speed (Calvo,

1995). These studies, supported by Paltridge (2000: 86), indicate that conversation closings are context and culture specific and are usually performed in typical ways even though they are performed in the same medium.

More recently, online communication and socialization in the globally networked world have grown so quickly and have proven increasingly influential in the ways people use language in communication. CMC, particularly the section regarding closings in various forms of media, have been studied in-depth. The most common CMCs studied include emails (Scheyder, 2003; Waldvogel, 2007), instant messaging (Baron, 2005, Raclaw, 2008), and virtual meetings (Markman, 2006).

For email interactions, Scheyder (2003) studied the problem of closings for non-native speakers. The study found that more than half of the emails contained no closing at all and that the purpose of the emails and the social distance between senders and receivers were factors that influenced how formal closings were presented. Waldvogel (2007) studied the use and form of both greetings and closings in emails, particularly emails between an educational organization and a manufacturing plant. The results support Paltridge's (2000: 86) theory that the ways to close a conversation are context and culture dependent. The study further suggested that the workplace culture more strongly influences the use and form of greetings and closings than relative status, social distance, and gender. Interestingly, the study conducted by Markman (2009) of closings in virtual meetings further suggested that the chat environment, which allowed all participants opportunities to disrupt the conversation at any point, made conversations more difficult and contained more utterances and turns to terminate the conversation than would naturally occur in face-to-face interactions. These studies suggest that the requirements for formal closings vary from context to context.

Other than email, which is a non-face-to-face communication, in the cyber world, people can communicate with virtual bodies utilizing 3D animation technology. The 3D virtual world, for instance, massive multiplayer online games, is another medium that has an impact on communication and has received recent attention from scholars. Moore et al. (2007) studied the generic systematic features of social action and interaction to explain how these features are uniquely accomplished in particular

situations by people in a community. Collister (2008) analyzed chat logs from World of Warcraft games to see how turns are constructed, especially the construction of multiple-message turns in games.

For non-3D communication, most analysts have studied the act of conversation closing as a part of the whole conversation, whereas in 3D communication, analysts have focused their studies on the interaction between avatars. No analysts or researchers, however, have, thus far, paid particular attention to the closing section in their conversations. As a result, little is known about how participants in the virtual world close their conversations. To help fill this gap, we propose to study, in depth, the closing section in 3D communication in SL.

In terms of analysis, although closings have been analyzed in a wide range of media, most of the analyses follow Schegloff and Sacks (1973), who originally analyzed the spoken language in terms of structure and sequential organization. For example, a study by Markman (2006) on the structure of virtual chat-based meetings as a quasi-synchronous medium found that the virtual team employed a two-stage process of closing that also employed a pre-close in the first stage and a second turn that projected future action of some sort. Raclaw (2008) suggests that the way communicators close conversations in instant messaging is similar in structure to spoken closings in face-to-face interactions, though it is contoured specifically to the online medium in their application.

Following this analysis, but avoiding the use of pre-conceptual categories of language sets in closings or sequence types in closing, this study adopts the broad structures of the closing section composed of the pre-closing (an offer to close the conversation) and the terminal-closing (an exchange of goodbyes) as a basis for its analysis.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Data and participants

The data consist of conversation texts produced by 32 known participants and 32 unknown participants. The known participants are Thai undergraduate students enrolled in an oral communication course at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, while the unknown participants are players with

whom the students had conversations in SL. First, SL was introduced to the students as one of the resources for practicing English language skills. To explore SL, the students were allowed to freely create virtual identities and make friends. They were also free to talk on any topic. Some students produced more than one dialogue if they talked to several players. They were also free to continue a conversation until either they or their interlocutors wanted to close the conversation. They were not forced to be the person who closes the conversation.

The students were asked to print out the text of their conversations immediately after they had finished chatting. Note that, to avoid a time-consuming data collection procedure, we needed to control the setting by asking certain people, our students, to access SL rather than waiting for a natural conversation to occur because the time of occurrence of a natural conversation is unpredictable.

In the analysis, 21 (out of 60) conversations, which were not one-to-one interlocutor communications, were abruptly ended and went offline or were closed because of internet connection problems. These conversations were excluded from our analysis. Therefore, only 39 conversations were used in the analysis.

3.2 Data analysis:

The analysis was conducted presuming that basic sequences of closing sections contain pre-closing and closing components according to the following steps:

1. Signals for pre-closing and closing turns are analyzed and classified on the basis of linguistic and paralinguistic features that include symbols such as emoticons.
2. To analyze a closing section of a conversation, the researchers begin from what they consider to be the final turn of the conversation and continue the analysis upward until they find the ending turn of the previously discussed topic. However, if there is no signal of pre-closing, the end of the topic would be used as the criterion to separate the closing section from the entire conversation.
3. With respect to step two, the data are limited to only successful closings. The unsuccessful closings, those that resulted in a continuation of the conversation, are not the focus of this study.
4. “Turn” in this paper is defined according to the communication of each player, not how many times the player pressed “enter” (“post” is counted according to

the number of times “enter” is pressed). Therefore, even if 3 utterances were sequentially entered, all of them are considered to belong to one turn of the player as long as the utterances occurred consecutively without any interruption by another player.

5. The structure of closing sections is analyzed to determine how many smaller parts make-up the closing and the manner of the pattern.
6. Linguistic strategies used in pre-closing and terminal closing turns are analyzed, categorized and counted to determine their frequency of use.

4. The structure of the conversation closing in SL

The results of this study reveal that even though the structures of the closing sections of 39 dialogues in SL may vary in detail, they typically comprise 4 elements: a terminal closing turn (symbolized by C), a pre-closing (symbolized by P), insertions (symbolized by I), and after-close (symbolized by A). These four components are sequentially combined in the following pattern:

(P) (I) C (A)

The symbols with brackets are optional; thus, only one component C is obligatory. In other words, the basic structure of closing sections suggests that, at the very least, the structure must contain a terminal closing component. Without a terminal closing component, a closing is not really complete.

These four elements or components are combined into, or co-occur, in 4 patterns as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Patterns of closing structure in SL

Closing patterns	Frequency	Percentage
PC	30	76.9
C	5	12.8
PIC	3	7.7
PCA	1	2.6

Although it seems that pre-closing in SL, unlike in a normal face-to-face conversation, is not necessary for ending the conversation, it occurs in three of the four combination patterns. The study results indicate that the most frequently used pattern, namely, PC, corresponds to previous research where closing sections contain pre-closing and closing sequences. From the politeness theory-based point of view, the frequent occurrence of pre-closings in SL indicates that avatars, as the representatives of SL members, are aware of face-saving techniques as they tend to give signals before leaving the conversation. In other words, SL members apparently communicate in the virtual community according to the accepted conventions of the real world.

Let us consider the patterns in detail.

4.1 Pre-closing + Closing (PC)

As shown in Table 1, 30 out of 39 sections adhere to the PC structure. In the PC structure, P and C occur sometimes as separate turns, some of which occur repetitively with more than one pair, but sometimes they occurred consecutively within one turn. The latter, however, is a rare case.

According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), normally the first participant who initiates pre-close will wait for acceptance from the interlocutor after which the initiator will utter the terminal close. However, the data from SL show that sometimes terminal closings can immediately occur without even an acceptance turn of the pre-close from the other participant (see Excerpt [1]).

[1]

- 1[P] Andante Galicia: oh sorry
- 2[P] Andante Galicia: but it's time for me to go
- 3[P] Andante Galicia: see you next time
- 4[C] Aleph Quandry: good bye ~
- 5[C] Andante Galicia: bye

Aleph Quandry did not explicitly signal any acceptance of Andante Galicia's pre-close. Instead, she (in line 4) gave a terminal closing immediately after Andante Galicia delivered the pre-closing sequences.

Most closings of the PC structure reveal that the pre-closing and terminal closing parts were displayed consecutively in one turn by the same player, that is, the closing was promptly delivered by the person who initiated the pre-close (see Excerpt [2]).

[2]

- 1[P] Serenia Sabra: I'll be coming back here from time to time. I
have to go now! Come back too!
- 2[C] Serenia Sabra: bye
- 3[C] Kitt Xenno: bye

Serenia Sabra (in line 1) gave signals to close the conversation and then immediately said “bye” (in line 2) to end the conversation without waiting for any responses from Kitt Xenno. Kitt Xenno, then, had to say “bye” to accept the termination of the conversation.

Compared with excerpt [1], Serenia Sabra's action seems less polite. However, the utterance, “Come back too!” plus the promise in her first utterance can mitigate the face-threatening act because it shows that she still cared for the other's face as she used the imperative to invite Kitt Xenno to come back to talk again; thus, there is still a chance that they will meet.

In a rare but interesting case of PC structure, the first participant gave the pre-closing and terminal closing and then left the conversation without even waiting for the interlocutor's response (see Excerpt [3]).

[3]

- 1[P] Gifzaa Quintessa: hey!!
- 2[P] Gifzaa Quintessa: I've got to go
- 3[P] Gifzaa Quintessa: see you very soon
- 4[P] Gifzaa Quintessa: i'll change my RAM
- 5[C] Gifzaa Quintessa: Good byeeeeeeee

In comparing [2] and [3], it seems that Gifzaa Quintessa's verbal actions are less polite; the interlocutor might be upset with Gifzaa Quintessa's actions. However, a

more positive viewpoint could be that Gifzaa Quintessa's action is still polite. At least, Gifzaa Quintessa stretched the word "bye" with a repeated vowel to "byeeeeeeeee" rather than an abrupt "Good-bye", thus resembling the aural cues that are typically present in face-to-face conversation. This is one of the paralinguistic features in a chat environment that was observed by Negretti (1999) and Jungmi (2003). They suggested that the use of different paralinguistic features plays an important role in conveying shades of feelings and leading more smoothly to conversation. Following Negretti (1999) and Jungmi (2003), the "Good-byeeeeeeeee" in this conversation sounds softer and smoother than the normal one. Possibly, the softer and smoother an utterance, the greater the intimacy created, which can lead to a good relationship. Therefore, the stretching of the word can be considered a politeness strategy.

4.2 Close (C)

In 5 out of 39 sections, the participants ended the conversations abruptly without giving any signal or pre-closing at all.

[4]

1	You:	you live in Bangkok
2	Pacco Roussel:	sometimes...
3	You:	you not Thai people?
4	Pacco Roussel:	just 6%
5	You:	why
6	Pacco Roussel:	are you thai?
7	You:	yes
8	You:	I'm Thai people
9	You:	where do you come from
10	Pacco Roussel:	south america
11	You:	oh
12[C]	Pacco Roussel:	bye!

Pacco Roussel abruptly closed the conversation (in line 12) although the other player, You, had not given any signal of pre-closing at all. The word "oh" in line 11 is just an

interjection that has nothing to do with signaling a pre-close, but the conversation was closed suddenly by Pacco Roussel.

“Oh”, when it occurs alone, is normally viewed as an exclamation expressing an emotion such as surprise, fear, or joy (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2000). In other situations, when “oh” co-occurs with an utterance, it indicates the receipt of new information that can be neutrally, positively or negatively unexpected (Schiffrin, 1999). In the excerpt [4], Pacco Roussel might interpret “oh” as a negative unexpectedness. In other words, Pacco may perceive in You’s response that “south america” is something negatively unexpected. Therefore, such an interpretation possibly caused the conversation to break down. In fact, You might just be uttering a neutral “oh” to acknowledge receipt of new information.

Similarly, the abrupt closing in Excerpt [5], line 12, is caused by a misinterpretation of the recipient of the message.

[5]

1 Hiyoko Skytower: my job is police?
2 My Lord Vahe: yup
3 My Lord Vahe: u see Imagine Karu?
4 My Lord Vahe: over there
5 Hiyoko Skytower: yup
6 My Lord Vahe: he’s my superior
7 Hiyoko Skytower: aha
8 My Lord Vahe: follow order by Karu
9 Hiyoko Skytower: ok
10 Hiyoko Skytower: ... where R U?
11 My Lord Vahe: I left
12[C] Hiyoko Skytower: ok bye!

In the conversation, Hiyoko Skytower and My Lord Vahe were in a role-playing game as police officers. A sudden “ok bye!” closing was delivered after the reply “I left” to the question “... where R U?”. In this case, it is unclear what “I left” means. It is possible that it was interpreted by Hiyoko Skytower as an impending departure

because of the past tense form “left” while it was communicated concisely by My Lord Vaher to state his location only, as in “I am on the left”.

These two cases of abrupt closings are probably caused by a misunderstanding and, consequently, may lead to conversational breakdowns.

On the other hand, the other three cases of abrupt closings are not caused by a misunderstanding as they contain an email exchange before closing. Therefore, it is not rude to make an abrupt close, as exchanging an email means friendship and suggests they will have a contact in the future. Their relationship is not impolitely ended even though the conversation is abruptly ended.

In response to the question, “Are many SL members impolite?”, the answer, on the basis of the results of this study, is “No” because the percentage of impolite closings is very low when compared with that of either PC or the total amount of all the patterns that contain P. Moreover, the abrupt closings are caused by linguistic misinterpretations and are preceded by email exchanges.

4.3 Pre-close – Insertion – Close (PIC)

Another pattern, PIC, has a new topic inserted between the pre-close and terminal-close turns. The participants introduce new issues, the insertions, after one has already delivered the pre-closing, as shown in the following excerpt.

[6]

- | | | |
|-------|-----------------|---|
| 1[P] | Canoro Philipp: | im gonna go explore around |
| 2[I] | You: | _you |
| 3[I] | You: | Take a photo with me please |
| 4[I] | Canoro Philipp: | ok :D |
| 5[I] | Canoro Philipp: | we can sit in one bench and then take the picture |
| 6[I] | Canoro Philipp: | there you go |
| 7[I] | Canoro Philipp: | you can now take the picture |
| 8[I] | You: | ok |
| 9[I] | You: | thank you very much |
| 10[I] | Canoro Philipp: | :] |

11[C] You: see you next time

Canoro Philipp made a pre-close by saying “im gonna go explore around”, but You requested Canoro Philipp to take a photo (in line 3) before leaving. In leaving, this kind of behavior is quite unfamiliar for users of an online communication system such as chat or email as such a function is unavailable and their communication is mainly text-based. In SL, on the other hand, members have their own virtual bodies to use as an alternative to verbally closing the conversation. In the real world, taking a photo before leaving frequently occurs as a normal situation to show an appreciation of the meeting and to keep a good memory, which can lead to a positive relationship in the future. Perhaps You and Canoro Philipp appreciated meeting each other, so they took a photo, which commonly occurs in face-to-face communication, to express their appreciation of each other, and it is highly possible that they will keep in touch in the future.

4.4 Pre-close – Close – After-close (PCA)

Let us consider excerpt [7] below. Although the conversation had already been closed (in line 6), the participant began a new topic, apologizing for her broken English. It is interesting to note that the use of correct English is also the SL member’s concern even though L1/L2 status is not normally an issue in SL.

[7]

1[P] Gnarf Garfunkel: I have to run for now
2[P] Gnarf Garfunkel: Check me out later
3[P] sithlord Dezzo: ok thanks for everything
4[P] sithlord Dezzo: see ya
5[C] Gnarf Garfunkel: It has been a pleasure speaking with you
6[C] sithlord Dezzo: Bye bye
7[A] sithlord Dezzo: oh sorry if my English is not good
8[A] sithlord Dezzo: ;)
9[A] Gnarf Garfunkel: Your English is actually very good
10[A] sithlord Dezzo: Thanks
11[A] sithlord Dezzo: ^^.

However, new topic initiation in closing sections occurred only once in our data. As it is a very rare case and the new topic initiated in this excerpt is not a common topic discussed to create a good relationship with the other player or to know more about each other as was the previous part of the conversation, the utterances in line 7-11 cannot be regarded as closing, but rather as after-close.

In sum, the structures of closings in SL may vary from pair to pair; nonetheless, pre-closings occurred in most of their conversations. In addition, a new topic can be introduced between pre-closing and terminal-closing turns, or even after the terminal-closing turn as an insertion and after the closing turn, respectively. However, the former concerns only one topic, that is, a request to take photos before leaving, while the latter is a very rare case, that is, it occurred only once, and the topic introduced had nothing to do with the previous part of the conversation except for language competence.

In the next section, the linguistic strategies of the major parts of the closing sections—pre-closing and closing—are analyzed and presented.

5. Pre-closing strategies

According to the results of the study, SL players used eight strategies to signal a pre-close. Among the eight strategies, the two most frequently used strategies were informing the other interlocutors of the departure and mentioning future relationships (see Table 2).

Table 2: Pre-closing strategies

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
1. Expression of thanks	6	7.6
2. Wish expression	4	5.1
3. Show appreciation	8	10.1
4. Mentioning future relationship	18	22.8
5. Emoticons/ facial expressions	7	8.9
6. Informing of the leave	23	29.1
7. Apology for leaving	4	5.1

8. Giving reasons	9	11.4
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Informing the other interlocutors of the need to leave is the most common strategy (29.1%) used by participants for pre-closings. Approximately half of the participants (12 out of 23 closings) who employed this strategy used the verb “have to” to show their necessity to leave such as *I have to go now, hey!!_I’ve got to go., Ok.. I have to go now., so, I have to go now., Mr. String I have to go now, etc.*

In addition to politely showing the necessity with the verb “have to”, many players used discourse markers such as *hey!!*, *ok*, and *so*, or they used the other person’s name before stating their intention to leave. In a number of prior research studies, discourse markers have been found to serve a variety of functions. One function is to establish discourse coherence (Schiffrin, 1988 and Johnson, 2002 as cited in Bolden 2009). Raymond (2004) and Bolden (2009) proposed a variety of pragmatic functions for “so”, including its use for establishing discourse coherence such as deployment of “so” to signal the end of the preceding turn and to prompt a recipient to produce the next relevant action. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) and Condon (2001) viewed “ok” as the marker of topic transition and closure of the discourse. More recently, Grieve (2010) studied the conversational structure of telephone conversations and considered particles such as “ok” and “so” as initiation markers of pre-close. In this study, it is possible that the SL participants use these markers not only to introduce the pre-closing turn to get the attention of their interlocutors, but also to implicitly ask their interlocutors to acknowledge the move before stating the need to leave. Therefore, these linguistic devices can be considered politeness markers. Consequently, these devices help to mitigate the threat of loss of face before terminating a conversation as the players show not only the necessity to leave but also a recognition of the interlocutor’s acknowledgement of the move.

Mentioning a future relationship is another strategy that SL participants frequently use (22.8%). Most pre-closings (11 out of 18 conversations) that include this strategy have “see you” as part of the expression such as *See you, see you next time, See you very soon, Hope to see you later, Ok see u tomorrow then, and see you (plus)“interlocutor’s name”*. Such expressions are quite similar to face-to-face conversations. Apart from this, a few players also use expressions such as *Let’s talk*

again, Ill be coming back here from time to time, Cool we will keep in touch, and Check me out later in the pre-closings. These utterances do not explicitly appoint a specific time and cannot be regarded as a real promise for future contact, even though they are polite pre-closings, because their content is concerned with a possible future relationship. In other words, it is much better than indicating a complete end to the current relationship. This strategy recognizes that real human beings or avatars as their representatives in the virtual world are likely to be sensitive to being cut off or dismissed. Therefore, this strategy is a good not only for saving the other's face but for maintaining a positive relationship.

In addition to the two strategies that are most frequently used by the SL players, there are six other strategies used with different purposes: giving reasons such as *I'll change my RAM*; showing acknowledgement as in *nice to meet you*; expressions of thanks such as *thank you to talk with me*; wish expressions such as *have a nice day*; facial expressions via emoticons such as *:)*; and expressions of apology as in *I'm sorry*. These strategies are similar to those found in face-to-face conversations with the exception of the use of emoticons, which is similar to online chatting. Communication in SL might be something that lies between face-to-face conversation and online chatting in that the participants have a representation, the avatar, which is quite similar to a human being even though they communicate through a written channel.

As mentioned earlier, in SL, there are two main strategies for pre-closings. Although using only one strategy to signal conversation closing is common and acceptable, in 21 out of 39 cases (53.9%) participants usually used two strategies rather than one in the pre-closing sequences. For example, wishing and showing acknowledgement, expression of thanks and the mentioning of a future relationship, or giving an apology plus informing the other interlocutors about the intention to leave were always employed together as fixed sequences.

To acknowledge pre-closings delivered by the first participant, the interlocutor simply replied using phrases such as *OK, sure, yeah no problem*. At other times, the interlocutor used *you too* or *U 2* to accept thanks, wishes, or acknowledgement.

More interestingly, some pre-closing turns also contained the word “bye” as in *bye_see ya, Bye, have a nice day, and Ok. I have to go now_Bye*. The word “bye” contained in these turns seems to make the pre-closing turn similar to a closing turn. On the other hand, the pre-closing turn can be analyzed as the closing turn already embedded in itself. However, as the conversation did not end immediately, “bye”, in this turn, cannot be regarded as a closing turn but rather as a closing catalyst. In other words, the speaker appears to be trying to end the conversation as quickly as possible by using the word “bye”, but he or she fails as the other player continues to say something rather than immediately accepting the termination of the conversation.

[8]

- 1[P] Xylarion Xubersnak: ok. I have to go now.
 2[P] Xylarion Xubersnak: bye
 2[P] Bubblebird Cyberstar: bye, have a nice day.
 3[C] Xylarion Xubersnak: thanks, you too
 4[C] Bubblebird Cyberstar: thank you

6. Closing strategies

SL players use six strategies to terminate their conversations. Table 3 presents the strategies used in terminal-closings in the conversations.

Table 3: Terminal-closing strategies

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
1. Saying goodbye	29	33.0
2. Expressions of thanks	10	11.4
3. Wish expressions	12	13.6
4. Showing appreciation	8	9.1
5. Mentioning future relationship	16	18.2
6. Emoticons (facial expressions)	13	14.8

The strategy of saying “goodbye” is the one most frequently used by players. With this strategy, players typically use linguistic forms such as *Bye, bye!, good bye ~,*

Goodbye, Good byeeeeeeee, and Ok bye!. The word “bye” is likely the prototypical form of this strategy and the prototype for closing.

Second, mentioning a future relationship using “see you” expressions also appears frequently in the terminal-closings in the form of *See you later, See you, Seeya, See you next time, Ok, see you, Cool c u around, or Hope to see you again*. Even though these linguistic forms are quite similar to those that occurred in the pre-closing, they are considered closings as they are delivered at the end of the conversation after other signals for a pre-close had already been given. Therefore, one linguistic form may have more than one function depending on where it occurs. Let us consider an example.

[9]

- 1[C] Fumi Beattie: let’s talk again
2[C] Fumi Beattie: bye ^^
3[C] Moji Constantine: Ok, See you

The use of emoticons such as :), ;), ^^, ^^!, 555+ is frequently found in conversational closings. The smiley symbols :), ;), ^^, and ^^! are commonly used in online chatting while 555+ is one of the most frequently used smileys among Thai chatters as the number “5” in Thai is pronounced “hâa”, thus “555” is homophonous with “hahaha” or the sound of laughter. Actually, they convey the same meaning as “lol”. The Thai SL players, however, may be influenced by L1 even when using symbols in the cyber world.

Three other closing strategies often found are wishing, expressions of thanks and acknowledgement expressions. For example, wishing is evidenced by phrases such as *Have fun in SL!, Have a nice day, Alright! Good luck shopping in sl, Have a good day, Be well, and Have a good night*. Thanks expressions include the following: *Thanks, Thank you, Thank you for everything, thank for today, Thank you to add me, and thanks for the chat*. Acknowledging someone is expressed by comments such as *Nice to meet you, Ok, nice to see you., It has been a pleasure speaking with you, and Nice to see you*.

Like the employment of pre-closing strategies, two or more closing strategies can occur in combination. For example, wishing plus using a smiling emoticon or showing appreciation plus mentioning a future relationship are the two fixed sequences frequently found in terminal closings. The former is realized in forms such as *Good night ;)*, *Good luck with your practice :)*, *Good luck, Pitta :)* and the latter in forms such as *Nice to meet you. See you later.*, *Nice to see you. See ya.* and *Nice to meet you. See you again.* Note that participants never use emoticons alone; rather, they usually co-occur with verbal closings. It is likely that these emoticons are used to strengthen their good wishes to their interlocutors, which corresponds to the studies of Walther and D'Addario (2001), Derks, Bos and Grumbkow (2007), and Lo (2008) who suggest that the emoticons are used to compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues in CMC and, thus, serve to balance the level of relational aspects with those in face-to-face communication. Compared with the situation in face-to-face conversation, we not only say something to close the conversation but also display our intentions visually through our body language. Perhaps emoticons are used because the facial expressions of avatars are technically not good enough yet to be performed and correctly interpreted.

7. Conclusion

The study has enhanced our understanding of the patterns and structures of the closing sections that SL participants use in conversation. The findings reveal that participants end the conversations in different ways that consist of different components. However, these closing sections share at least a basic structure, that is, (P)(I)C(A) where the most common pattern is pre-closing and closing (PC). While the most frequently used pre-closing strategies involve informing interlocutors about the intention to leave and include mentioning a future relationship, the most frequently employed closing strategy is just simply to say goodbye using different phrases. More important, in the virtual world, SL participants appear generally concerned about politeness and face-saving as they used a variety of utterances, paralinguistic features, emoticons and even insertions where appropriate in conversation closures to avoid face threats. Although the generic structure of closing sections in SL is similar to oral communication, such as telephone and face-to-face (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), the findings suggest that pre-closings are sometimes unnecessary in SL. When compared with previous studies in CMC, such as virtual meetings (Markman, 2009) and online

games (Collister, 2008), some verbal characteristics such as a production of one turn with several utterances or a turn containing multiple messages was also found in conversation closing in SL.

8. Implications for further studies

From the present results, there are a number of implications for future studies. In general, some of the issues that have emerged from the findings have possible implications for two major aspects: the context of the study and the framework for research analysis.

Although participants in SL usually gave pre-closings and closings simultaneously before leaving a conversation, they do tend to pre-close, which contains more utterances than in oral communication. These findings suggest that the ordering of sequences in SL is fairly loose when compared with the usual oral activities; however, politeness and face are as important in the virtual world as they are in the real world communication. Therefore, this research serves as a basis for future in-depth studies on issues concerning comparisons between politeness and face in virtual worlds and in the real world, the use of discourse markers, the use of interlocutors' names as a politeness marker, and the use of symbols and politeness markers in a virtual environment.

Abrupt closings were found though they were not present in significant numbers. This finding does not mean that closing without signals or abrupt closings was considered impolite or rude in SL. In fact, a formal closing section may not always be required in SL. Therefore, SL members' attitudes toward closing without signals or toward no closing at all should be investigated. It would be useful for people who would like to become part of the SL community to be pragmatically aware of the language used in SL context.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that most of the SL members were aware of politeness as many of them gave pre-closings before leaving the conversation as a means of maintaining a possible future relationship. Therefore, a longitudinal study of players who have long-term relationships, for example, those who have married in SL, would be another interesting area of research.

Finally, the current study was limited to participants who are EFL students in Thailand. Because of time constraints, we examined closings performed by this group of students as known players and their interlocutors in SL as unknown players. Therefore, at least half of the research participants were Thai. This factor might affect the language use analyzed in this study. The findings might not be transferable to a general context. Further research might be conducted in an uncontrolled environment where all participants are unknown. Such an environment might better represent the communications of SL members. On the other hand, in a controlled environment, closings by native and non-native speakers of English might be compared as different levels of pragmatic competence may affect the way people close online-conversations.

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