Tweetaliano: a Native 2.0 Approach to Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper presents Tweetaliano, a Twitter-based experimental service, developed within Project APRIL of the University for Foreigners of Perugia, aimed to support informal learning dynamics of learners of Italian as a second language. Through a bot that automatically retweets every mention received by the profile to all its followers, Tweetaliano works as common platforms for both learners and native speakers of Italian where to share language as it would happen with files in a peer to peer (p2p) network. Anyone can tweet @tweetaliano any question about language (how do you say...? what does … mean?), the bot will automatically retweet it to the whole community of followers, who can then share their knowledge and competence by providing answers.

Tweetaliano has been thought and developed according to a new approach to second language acquisition (SLA) which suggests a reshaping of the discipline according to the revolutionary impact that the advent of the Web had on the information and communication paradigm as a whole, referred to as SLA 2.0. Informal dynamics play a fundamental role in effective language acquisition, in particular for what concerns aspects as motivation and meaningful interaction, but due to their intrinsic nature they had so far remained out of reach because impossible to elicit directly, while lacking tools to effectively scaffold them. The rise of the Web now offers a chance to fill this gap, and Tweetaliano represents an example of application natively developed adopting a 2.0 approach. Not only, in fact, is Tweetaliano based on a platform such as Twitter, paradigmatic expression of Web 2.0 service, but the very approach to language and to its development as a systemic competence embraces this new, wider and inclusive approach to SLA.

1. Introducing Tweetaliano

Tweetaliano [1] is a Twitter-based service, developed within the Project April [2] of the University for Foreigners of Perugia, designed to support learners of Italian as a second language in informal contexts.

Tweetaliano is a Twitter profile enhanced by a bot (a small piece of software designed to run automatically simple and repetitive tasks) which allows every tweet mentioning '@tweetaliano' to be automatically retweeted and delivered to all the other followers of the profile. Tweetaliano thus becomes the pivot around which a whole community of learners and native speakers of Italian revolves. Whenever a user/learner asks a question by sending a tweet mentioning @tweetaliano, the whole community is notified and can therefore answer.

This mechanism allows for multiple advantages:

- learners have an instrument of reference to use whenever and wherever help is needed;
- being the instrument of reference actually a community of people, learners can afford to ask contextual questions. For example, they can share doubts about politeness or regarding other sociolinguistic or pragmatic topics, that would otherwise require a much more complex process of research (complicated to undertake in situations such as waiting to order in a café or before asking for information on the street) or would even be impossible to obtain through traditional tools;
- in order to obtain the information interaction is needed, pushing learners to take charge of their own learning process, supporting the development of metalinguistic competence. At the same time it is left to learners to take the initiative, respecting their contingent silent period and offering them, through the mediation of the platform, a sort of "sandbox" to try out one's initial linguistic tools without feeling excessively exposed. In a context half way between the "outside world" and the controlled environment of a classroom, interaction is authentic, spontaneous and developed within an extended and relatively generic community. Still, interaction is not face-to-face and partially asynchronous, allowing learners a greater control over it;
- learners are exposed to other learner's queries, being given the chance to learn from them as well; interaction on Tweetaliano thus creates "opportunities of immersion...in an environment rich of negotiable input" [3]. Moreover, in case they were able to answer, learners can share

their acquired linguistic competence, allowing for its further processing and elaboration, functional to a more stable retention [4] [5].

Altogether, Tweetaliano aims at scaffolding learning instances that arise spontaneously in a learner. Without interfering with their intrinsic informal nature, Tweetaliano offers support to aspects which have been proven to be fundamental in SLA such as motivation [6] [7] and meaningful interaction [8].

2. Natively 2.0

A superficial approach to the matter might justify the use of the expression "2.0" when referring to Tweetaliano simply because it is based on Twitter, an emblematic example of 2.0 platform. However, it is not the case. Tweetaliano can claim to provide a *native* 2.0 approach to language learning because of the very idea of language and second language acquisition (SLA) that inspired and set the ground for its ideation and development.

The expression "SLA 2.0", as already discussed in a previous work [9], refers to an approach to SLA based on interaction and cooperation among learners and speakers of a target language (or also among learners of the same foreign language) taking full advantage of possibilities offered by the Web to leverage informal dynamics, fundamental aspect of language acquisition, through their scaffolding. Language as a whole is regarded as a shared communicative platform whose constitutive elements, spread more or less evenly among its users, are "copied" by L2 learners in their quest to build their own portion of the platform.

Tim O'Reilly, in his "What is Web 2.0" [10], puts us in guard about the abuse of the expression "2.0", to which he refers as a "marketing buzzword". Subsequently, the author analyzes this concept, defining a number of principles and practices that divide the 1.0 approach from the 2.0. In his own words, Web 2.0 teaches us a lesson: "leverage customer-self service and algorithmic data management to reach out to the entire Web, to the edges and not just the center, to the long tail and not just the head". Tweetaliano claim to be natively 2.0 comes from having put this lesson into practice. The "customer-self service" is the learner-centered approach adopted by Tweetaliano: it is mainly the learner who "pulls" the information whenever it is needed, rather than having it "pushed" by a pre-established syllabus in a traditional classroom model. The "algorithmic data-management" corresponds to the synergy of the Twitter platform and the retweeting bot: this system allows interaction to take place and linguistic "demand" and "offer" to meet. Tweetaliano leverages on the queries of learners and on the service offered by Twitter together with the retweeting bot "to reach out to the entire Web", which in this case corresponds to the all the language resources available within the network constituted by the community. Finally, the reference to the concept of "long tail", elaborated by Chris Andersen [11], describes through the rise of the Web the end of the one-size-fits-all approach and the emergence of niche markets, finally becoming sustainable to serve. The "long tail" of language learning is made of the plethora of individual queries and instances that arise constantly in the mind of a learner during the quest to acquire new language elements needed to interact and develop one's own portion of the shared language platform. Because of the limit of time and resources, none of this can find satisfaction in the traditional classroom model, but may finally emerge thanks to an approach like the one on which is based Tweetaliano. Also, the long tail of language learning may refer to all those learners, such as immigrants, that because of socio-economical reasons (e.g. working hours) would generally find themselves cut out of traditional learning channels, and may find in Tweetaliano's online community a convenient tool of reference to develop their language skills.

The intent of the project is to allow a more efficient distribution of the limited resources employed in language teaching, such as classroom time and teacher availability. The idea is that by providing an ad-hoc tool to support informal learning dynamics, language classes could better concentrate on aspects of language teaching (e.g. grammar) which because of their intrinsic nature can be effectively conveyed in a formal and pre-organized way.

2.1 P2P language learning

The 2.0 approach adopted by Tweetaliano also involves the roles of users within the community. As there is no pre-established distinction between teachers and learners, these roles are constantly and contextually re-negotiated in a functional way. The same user who has just asked a question, taking the role of learner, might, right afterwards or even at the same time, be answering someone else's question, acting as a teacher for that particular instance. This shift from a vertical structure of pre-established and fixed roles (teachers-learners) to a horizontal one made of interactive peers is functional to a more productive management of socio-cognitive conflict, as research demonstrates [12].

This organizational structure is inspired by the one of p2p networks, in which every user can be at the same time both a client and a server, and in which every shared file is broken up into fragments that can be retrieved from anyone in possession of a copy of the same file, optimizing the sharing process. Language, as a distributed and collective resource is already "broken up" among its speakers, leaving Tweetaliano the duty to act as a mediator for the retrieval process. Putting the potential of the Web at the service of language learning, Tweetaliano enhances dynamics that already happen naturally: the language resource as a whole is first provided by native speakers; once a learner has acquired part of it, "making a copy of the file", he/she can share it with others as well, and so on. Just as it happens in p2p networks, the more popular (both quantitative-wise and qualitative-wise) the chunk of language/file, the more prompt will be the answer of the network. Also, interaction and participation contribute to the shaping of the so-called "architecture of participation", embracing what O'Reilly defines as "a key Web 2.0 principle": "the service automatically gets better the more people use it" [10].

3. Future developments and conclusions

The Tweetaliano project was undertaken as a small experiment which was set up on July 3, 2012, with the Twitter profile and the first version of the bot. In the following months the project gradually developed into its current version, which is still considered a beta. Regardless of the limited official exposure that was given to it, the community of followers has been growing constantly and quite independently, forming a small worldwide grass root network with nodes, represented by users, in every one of the five continents [13]. On September 2, 2013, Tweetaliano's profile counted 672 followers and 1158 total tweets. The digital format of these linguistic exchanges suggests many interesting research opportunities, both quantitative and qualitative, for examples on acquisitional dynamics. Currently the author of this paper is conducting a study on the interactions that take place on Tweetaliano; these first results are expected to indicate the direction for corrections and improvements of the tool. Moreover, should further research provide empirical data to support the theories upon which the project is based, many more tools could be developed, as the field of application is vast. On a wider scale, the implications of such results could lead to a revolution in the field of language learning as radical as the one the Web brought into the music or news industry.

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