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Language Data Investigation – The Language of Internet Chat Rooms

Introduction

‘Internet Relay Chat’ (IRC), created in 1988 was one of the first forms of synchronous Computer-Mediated communication (CMC) where people could ‘chat’ in real time by typing their contributions. Since then, it has been growing rapidly in popularity with the Internet’s general rise in influence during the 1990s. This can be seen with the recent explosion of online manuals and guides, as well as extensive web-based listings of IRC channels on commercial catalogue sites such as ‘Yahoo!’ (www.yahoo.com) which itself boasts several hundred channels.

Initially, research into CMC, in the late 1970s (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978) focussed more around work-aspects like ‘organisational functioning’, hierarchical relationships, efficiency and so on. More recently, however, there has been considerable recognition for its ‘playful’, ‘expressive’ and ‘recreational’ use.

It has become especially popular in this respect amongst the younger generations who have been brought up ‘computer literate’ and are therefore not discouraged by any technicalities associated with it. Indeed, its appeal is so great that we are actually encountering problems with people becoming ‘addicted’ to the new communication medium; their social life and interests revolving more around virtual discourse, in a virtual environment than with real-life (RL) interactions. The increasing commonality of this phenomenon, highlighted by the presence of the Usenet newsgroup ‘alt.irc.recovery’ (aimed at IRC ‘addicts’), indicates how ‘communities in cyberspace’ can serve as genuine alternatives to those in RL.

RL community is therefore recreated online solely through the collective use of keyboards. Identity is created entirely through the use of language and typography onscreen. ‘Computer networks’, therefore, ‘nullify our physical existence’¹. Relationships are formed between participants (chatters) in real-time without the prejudicial restrictions that would normally be derived IRL by physical presence, such as age, gender, race, skin colour, body language, facial expressions, clothes and so on.

As a ‘stripped down’ medium, chatters can only retrieve information about each other by what is ‘explicit or can be inferred’ from the text itself. Furthermore, this of course may not be an entirely accurate representation of the truth. I view that it would be impossible for us to abandon the concept of prejudice totally, and I therefore perceive that it must be maintained even in this ‘ultra-free’ cyberspace. It would actually be plausible to argue that the anonymity the medium provides, accentuates social prejudice problems. The tendency of users to assume multiple persona for comical reasons – in order to make fun of marginalised groups often with a racist or sexist tone – clearly doesn’t encourage RL social relations. Indeed, concerns raised recently

¹ Haya Bechar-Israeli 1998

about the virtual acting out of paedophilia in chat rooms highlights the danger this could potentially hold to RL society.

Most notably the ability of chatters to **graphically express emotions** and **simulate speech-phonology** (through phonetic spelling) certainly gives the potential for gesturally and linguistically created social-tension to exist.

There is also clearly a lot of scope for the development of a **prestige language variety**. This could be determined grammatically, through **syntax, ellipses, punctuation** etc, lexically through **'relexicalisation'**² and through **phrasal 'covert norms'**.

In fact, IRC may actually catalyse this effect, as participants are more conscious of the way in which they construct their utterances online than IRL:

The missing 'dynamics of the in-person interactive process'³, as well as heightened control over the timing and content of utterances means there is a greater sensitivity to how patterns of 'speaking' are received.

This creates a situation whereby new IRC users ('Newbies') will tend to overuse the conventions to which they are becoming accustomed in order to try to accommodate to their audience (regular IRC users).

Hypothesis

In his chapter: 'Internet Relay Chat' in 'Computer-Mediated Communication'⁴, Christopher C. Werry asserts that participants use 'abbreviation' simply to combat the 'limiting conditions' of the medium itself. These, he defines as the 'pace of channel conversation', channel population and the 'competition for attention'. The use of 'syntactically-reduced forms', acronyms, symbols, word-clippings is therefore purely for practical reasons – they 'reduce the time and effort necessary to communicate'. Users therefore tend to produce utterances of an average of 6 words. Respect is given to those who can communicate the most information, whether direct or implied in the shortest amount of time.

Whilst Werry's study recognises the presence of 'relexicalisation' by the fact that 'participants tend to play with language, to produce hybrid, heteroglossic forms', he falls short of analysing the '*overlexicalisation*' of certain terms...especially amongst acronyms which simulate laughter: 'lol' (laughing out loud), 'lmao' (laughing my arse off), 'rotflol' (rolling on the floor laughing out loud) and so on. He also fails to examine the exclusive effect that such intense abbreviation can have on 'newbies':

² Halliday 1978

³ Cullen 1995

⁴ Herring 1996

how is a novice supposed to know that ‘omg’ means ‘oh my god’ and ‘gtg’ means ‘got to go’? These aspects of IRC, as well as the clear presence of IT knowledge-based power would appear to suggest the formation of an antisociety with an ‘antilanguage’. IRL, technological expertise is stigmatised through pejorative terms like ‘geek’/’nerd’/’techy’, whilst online it’s the ultimate status symbol.

Aim: My aim is to assess the extent to which the language of IRC can be viewed as an Antilanguage as defined by Halliday or simply a ‘speech community’⁵ that employs different language varieties for purely practical reasons.

Methodology

I collected a large corpus of data (100 pages) over the period of about a month (November - December 1999), from a variety of different ‘channels’. I retrieved most of my data using the ‘client’ program, ‘mIRC’, but also looked at commercialised web-based chat to give the project more scope. Unfortunately it was not possible to print data from webchat due to copyright laws.

Such a large amount of primary data would normally be somewhat excessive for a project of this scale, but I felt it was necessary in order to allow justifiable quantitative analysis using the program ‘WordSmith Tools’. I have, however, only included select samples of the most interesting ‘log’ files in the appendix, as a lot of the features are repetitive.

Close analysis of the transcribed Internet chat and much on/off-line research into both CMC and ‘language and society’ brought me to several preliminary hypotheses regarding the roles of gender, race, age and knowledge/experience. I became most interested in the role of social power in the new medium. Further consideration brought me to the realisation that IRC could be seen as an antilanguage. Seeking support for this, I emailed Margaret McLaughlin⁶, asking for ‘any input’ that she could give me.

Unfortunately, her reply appeared to deny any presence of ‘elitism’:

“My thought is that while both the shortcut and the in-group explanations have utility, I think for a long time it's been possible to find these acronyms deployed by Internet users who had very little interest in being elitist or who were unlikely to be stigmatized as techies.”

Although I initially considered this view at odds with my own, more in support of Werry’s analysis, I made the assertion that for the majority of antilanguage users,

⁵ Gumperz 1968

⁶ Editor of ‘The Journal of Computer-mediated Communication’ – www.ascusc.org/jcmc/

'interest in being elitist' was certainly not a *conscious* attribute; but that wouldn't stop a powerful minority...

I also questioned the actual users of IRC themselves by starting a 'thread' (discussion) on a Newsgroup specifically geared towards this subject (alt.irc.mirc). This provided me with first-hand support in the field of pointless 'overlexicalisation' (discussed later).

From here I could break down my topic into different subheadings and analyse in greater depth the different concepts associated with two main opposing theories: that of Werry and my own adapted theory from Halliday, using a wide range of other data as I went along.

Internet Chat – Antilanguage?

The main evidence to suggest the presence of an Antilanguage in Internet Relay Chat is the reformation of mainstream lexis into an ‘exclusively narrow, covert norm’⁷. By Halliday’s definition: relexicalisation.

The Acronym

The most dominant feature of relexicalisation on IRC is the use of acronyms⁸. Clearly, as Werry asserts, the main role of an acronym is to abbreviate and economise a phrase. It is, however perhaps more of psychological importance to reduce the number of ‘key-strokes’ to an absolute minimum – if you can use an acronym that will be understood by your intended audience, it is preferable to do so. Usually, an acronym will be used to replace a common RL phrase such as ‘oh my god’ (OMG) or ‘by the way’ (BTW). Chatters capitalise on our ability to predict much everyday conversation simply from the context or in this case the initial letters of the words.

In some channels, however, Acronym use has reached a cult-level whereby instances of acronymisation are more frequent, whilst being ultra-specific to obscure phrases. Such ‘covert norms’ are, however, virtually impossible to uncover because most such channels are set-up on an ‘invitation-only basis’. This use of “heavy shortenings that only a small group of ppl (!) would know”⁹ is principally to raise personal status; “younger guys that wanna be cool”, and to exclude ‘newbies’. Under these circumstances, the language is certainly ‘anti’.

Whilst the most obscure acronyms aren’t widely used, there are some that occur with considerable frequency: in my corpus, ‘LOL’ occurred over 250 times (out of 17,515 words), compared to ‘hehe’ which occurred only 39 times.

Shortening

Chatters also use such techniques as replacing words with numbers and letters that have the same phonological properties individually:

To/too → ‘2’

Are you? → ru

Why → y

⁷ Martin Montgomery – from *An Introduction into Language and Society*

⁸ See Appendix for Acronym/Emoticon lists

⁹ Extracted from Newsgroup thread (see appendix)

Such shortenings are used with comparable frequency to their full-versioned originals:

Words	Full	Short
To/2	215	112
Too/2	41	112
Are/r	62	31
You/u	127	100
Oh/o	39	100
What/wat, wot	41	4
What's/whats	2	2
He's/Hes	5	0
That's/thats	7	18
Any/ne	24	5
Why/y	34	2

Whilst their use may simply be in the interest of economy, there could be an argument that users are socially pressured to type quickly. On occasions it almost becomes a typing race – chatters frantically using every method possible to keep up with conversation, and be **noticed**:

From Chatzone2.log:
 <Sunshine1> btw, how many msgs did u just receive from all the helpful mens in here? lol
 * cat_eyes to Sunshine1: lol well.....dunno lol
 <cowboy_x> manisnowba :)
 <weebz> lol
 <cat_eyes> lol none Sunshine1 sad to say ROFL
 <Sugar-n-S> hello all
 <weebz> ya got snow there?
 <andromeda> awwwww poor cat_eyes she wants msgs lol
 <cowboy_x> where r u weebz?
 <DancNWu|f> chasidy blet like the 1800's then.
 <lokas> lataz
 <cat_eyes> noooooo
 <cat_eyes> lol
 <cat_eyes> I dont
 <Sunshine1> well, ya know how the male of the species can be about long term commitment and all!
 <andromeda> rotf DancNWu|f no kiddin
 <cat_eyes> bye lokas
 <DancNWu|f> belt
 <andromeda> cya lokas

*All shortenings are highlighted in blue

The shortness of each turn indicates the high ‘pace of channel conversation’. This is the result of users competing to fill the next line of chat and keep up with a particular line of conversation or *topicline*. This is taken to an extreme by <cat_eyes> who dominates three entries in a row by hitting return after only one or two words.

Verbal Art?

Interestingly, about 30% of the 400 inmates Podgórecki¹⁰ questioned on the use of their antilanguage gave the response that it was ‘a communicative force or verbal art’. Brenda Danet’s study of ‘Play and Performance in IRC’ highlights a similar structure. Participants become heavily involved in using the language and onscreen characters as part of an intricate online game. In her study, she suggests that RL has little relevance, whilst the IRC game and chatter’s linguistic performance (‘lets show each other what we can do with the keyboard’) are given prominence (esp. the latter). Her specific example looked at the virtualisation of smoking a ‘joint’ online by using ‘emoticons’¹¹. When looked at from this perspective, a strong element of ‘verbal art’ can surely be seen, and any ‘newbie’, providing they were mistakenly granted access, would feel completely isolated.

In this example (Cybersex.log), a ‘nude contest’ is being simulated:

<nude_fis> mitziiii take off your clothes,,,,, i dare u
<m35> hi nude
<nude_Fant> brrrrrrrr
* Richard_G gathering all clothes
<nude_max> WoooHoo fant!
<nude_Baby> lol
<Swng`nBal> lol
<mitzi> sorry bit chilly
<m35> hi nude fis
* nude_kar shows EVERYONE HER TITS
<nude_kar> loll
* nude_max huggles fantasy and gets her warm
<nude_fis> hi m35
* nude_Fant snuggles max
<nude_fis> skip the clothes....

¹⁰ From ‘Anti-language’ in *Language as a social semiotic* by MAK Halliday

¹¹ See section on ‘emoticons’ for example

<nude_max> omg karen!!
* nude_kar snuggles herselffff
<nude_fis> ;)
* nude_Baby huggles in with max and fantasy
<nude_fis> LMAO
<nude_Fant> lmao
<nude_kar> someone
<nude_kar> snuggle
<nude_kar> me!!!!!!!!!!

And here, drinking at a bar is simulated:

<Rizlaskin> wheres the bar - i need a swift pint
<sandy`> hmmm guess he thought i was talking to him oh well
<`Boo> !buy Softdream beer
* CupCake gives Softdream a beer, "Compliments of `Boo!
* Rizlaskin has a dry throat
<Softdream> thanx
<`Boo> !buy Rizlaskin beer
* CupCake gives Rizlaskin a beer, "Compliments of `Boo!
<Rizlaskin> ahhhhhh - cheerz!
<Rizlaskin> i needed that lol
<`Boo> heheh
<`Boo> np

Notice how the basis of the online game is fanaticising reality, aided greatly by the ‘/me’¹², 3rd person option. When involved, there is clearly a pressure to conform to this – it would be unthinkable to point out, for example that ‘you can’t actually see me!’. Appreciation is displayed through acronyms (lol/lmao), ‘expressive intonation’¹³ and emoticons. All of which require previous acquaintance with the medium to enable comprehension (let alone participation!).

Although it may seem improbable that a language could be created ‘just for the purposes of contest and play’¹⁴, it can become this as a result of more logical origins. In the case of the inmates, this was secrecy. In the case of IRC, it was timesaving, through abbreviation. As participants become increasingly involved in the virtual community, however, it becomes more a marker of identity and a way of being

¹² Way of adding self-descriptive utterance in the 3rd person (see ‘/me’ section)

¹³ Christopher C Werry

¹⁴ MAK Halliday

noticed. This development is exaggerated further still by the fact that IRC users are relying entirely on the appearance their language to raise their status. The principal way of achieving this is through linguistic recreation.

Overlexicalistion

Clear evidence of this ‘never-ending search for originality...for the sake of liveliness or humour’¹⁵ is the presence of too many ‘relexicons’ that are, on the whole synonymous with each other.

There are roughly 16(+) synonyms to express leaving a chat room:

AFK	Away from KB	C4N	Ciao for now
AMF	Adios mother f*cker	CU	See you
BBL	Be back later	CUL8R	See you later
BBIAB	Be back in a bit	CYA	See ya
EOD	End of discussion	GTG	Got to go
EOT	End of transmission	HAND	Have a nice day
TTFN	Ta Ta for now	TTYL	Talk to you later
GFC	Going for coffee	TTYL8R	Talk to you later

About five to express opinion:

IMO	In my opinion	IMNSHO	In my not so humble opinion
IMCO	In my considered opinion	IMVHO	In my very humble opinion
IMHO	In my humble opinion		

(Although these are strictly speaking, not synonymous, they are still unnecessary)

And about eight (+) number of abbreviations used to express laughter:

LOL	Laughing out loud	FOCL	Fallen off chair laughing
LMAO	Laughing my arse off	FOCLOL	Fallen off chair laughing out loud
ROTFLOL	Rolling on the floor laughing out loud	ROTFLMAO	Rolling on the floor laughing my arse off

¹⁵ MAK Halliday

ROTFL	Rolling on the floor laughing	HEHEHEH	Graphic simulation of laughter
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There is even an acronym to express annoyance at the overuse of acronyms on IRC:
YABA! = Yet another bloody acronym!

Conclusion

Whilst acronym usage may be commonplace, Internet chat, like RL chat is subject to situational variation. People will tend to refrain from using too many “heavy shortenings”, for example, when talking to a newbie or to somebody for whom English isn’t their 1st language.

Speech simulation in Internet Relay Chat

The close similarities between IRC and F2F speech are not hard to notice. The underlying reason for this, is however, harder to define.

Werry argues that “the conventions [of IRC] that are emerging are a direct reflection of the physical constraints on the medium combined with a desire to create language that is as “speech-like” as possible.”

It is my view, however that whilst it’s certainly true to assert that participants tend to favour using language which is closest to speech, this is not necessarily due to their ‘desire’ to do so. When a ‘newbie’ first enters a channel, his/her previous acquaintance with the written medium tells him/her to type in full sentences, using all the correct grammatical cues, codified spelling structures and so on. The simulation of RL speech is therefore something he/she learns from exposure to the medium.

E.g. “Does anyone want to talk with a 17 year-old male?”
May become : “ne1 wanna chatto 17/m”

Discourse Conventions

Much apparent simulation of speech comes about from the inherent need to form utterances quickly. F2F Speech is not only *physically* quicker to produce; it is also faster than the written medium by its use of ellipsis: missing out unnecessary cues, which can be picked up from the context. This quality of the spoken medium is therefore replicated online as one of the first ways in which a ‘newbie’ will try to shorten his/her utterances and save time. So, in terms of syntax, the speech like qualities of IRC can be explained logically: They save time when spoken, so they save time when written.

Virtual Phonology

Phonological aspects of everyday speech in real-life (IRL) communities are also maintained in the purely text-based world of online chat. It is, however difficult to ascertain the extent to which online phonological simulation is a result of social pressure to break conventional spelling rules and comply with IRC’s nonconformist, hacker image. Or whether it is simply the medium’s speech-like spontaneity that gives users a desire (subconscious/conscious) to recreate aspects of RL chat like accent, intonation, emphasis etc, in order to maintain the similarity.

Phonetic spellings like ‘wanna’, ‘gotta’, ‘nah’, ‘yall’, ‘cuz’, ‘dern’ and ‘kewl’ require initial conscious subvocalisation – ‘the simultaneous use of ear and eye’¹⁶. Unfamiliarity with their appearance prevents comprehension from purely recognising the ‘shape’ of the words as done with ‘skim-reading’. We thus virtually hear the pronunciation in our head and associate it with the verbal equivalent. Although this process with eventually become subconscious, the phonological information is still communicated.

Accent

IRL, accent plays a large part in determining social relations between interlocutors, “acting as a residue of earlier dialect differences”¹⁷. Much indirect information can be deduced from a speaker’s accent – social class, locality, and race. It is for this reason that we try to vary the severity of our accent with regard to our situation – either to socially ‘converge’ or ‘diverge’ with our audience. IRL, ‘situational variation’ only goes as far as softening (or indeed, hardening) accent divides.

Online however, it is far easier to adopt completely the current virtual-accent and therefore ‘fit-in’ with the given group.

‘There’s not a standard.. some channels and places has their own dialects’¹⁸

It should be anticipated therefore that virtual communities are also segregated according to the ‘accent’ of their text. In fact, because of users’ heightened control over the timing and content their ‘self-disclosures’, there is a greater sensitivity to how patterns of ‘speaking’ are received. Being a realtime, logged transcription, previous utterances are also open to scrutiny for a considerably longer time frame than IRL. Participants are therefore far more conscious of the way in which they construct their utterances online than IRL as dissension from the *current norm* is much more obvious:

‘Colloquial verbalisations and non-standard spellings appear to be self-consciously selected in preference to “standard” linguistic expressions’¹⁹.

On IRC there is a striking preference to the US accent, often over the use of standard spelling.

Various from Cyberchat4.log

¹⁶ Christopher C Werry

¹⁷ Martin Montgomery – from *An Introduction into Language and Society*

¹⁸ Extracted from Newsgroup thread (see appendix)

¹⁹ Christopher C Werry

<HoHoHo> kinda named after my ma..Crabby Ole Bitch
 <Kan`dee> hiya
 <HoHoHo> then ya got the gramma..Crazy Ole Bitch
 <A-OK> hey roomies
 <JnglBell> hey ya A-OK
 <A-OK> hey jnglbell
 <HoHoHo> hey A-OK
 <Kan`dee> hiya A-OK
 <JnglBell> my side hurts..from laffin

*Notice the preference to ‘Hiya’ over simply ‘Hi’.

Key features of US accent in IRC are:

- The suffixation of ‘a’ to replace the prepositional ‘to’/‘of’ or ‘you’ eg.

Want to	→	wanna
got to	→	gotta
Going to	→	gonna
I’ve got you (I understand)	→	gotcha
Sort of	→	sorta

Interestingly, both *wanna* and *gonna* can now be found in The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as officially recognised colloquial contractions. It does, however stress that they are ‘non-standard and should generally be avoided in both speech and writing’. This shows the informality of their online speech – they are ‘chatting’.

- ‘G-dropping’ to replace the /ŋ/ sound with /n/. This is also a slight abbreviation thereby saving time as well as showing US accent.
- Also, perhaps with reference to ‘Beavis and Butthead’²⁰, the use of ‘kewl’ instead of the standard ‘cool’.
- Markers of recognition like ‘gee’ are also used frequently.

Departure from this *covert* norm will normally, therefore **grab attention**. If used intelligently, in context and inline with virtual play, it can serve to increase the user’s status.

From Werry:

<ari> whutta dowk
 <ari> hewwo?
 <bomber> Lilus: No worries... ;-)
 <ari> vewy interwestin

²⁰ US Cartoon

```

<bomber> ari ????
<ari> rosanne roseannadanna hea
<ari> yup yup?
<ari> <---- in a goofy mood
*** Action: Lilus grins evilly.
<bomber> dwou you haphe annny pwoblewms???
*** Action: Bomber breaks out laughing

*Here you can see the replacement of 'w' for 'r' by <ari> gains respect from bomber.

```

Clumsy, misuse can, however have a detrimental effect on one's image:

```

Casual2.log:

<Rizlaskin> Really? me too, where 'bouts you from?
<dr^evil}> bbiab
*** dr^evil} has quit IRC (bleh.)
<LAONDA> como estas
<butternut> cya dr..
<realsmiff> well, problem is, i'm not exactly in the
vancouver area
<^cass^> hey BerG_-_21
<twonk> south wales near cardiff u?
<realsmiff> "where bouts you from" yall from the south or
somethin?

*notice the assumption that <Rizlaskin> is from the southern states.

```

There are chat rooms where other accents hold the prestige – indeed there are a large number of foreign language rooms. Werry shows an example of Australian accent reproduction, and I have come across the ‘English Pub’ room where fuller sentences hold preference.

```

Englishbar.log:

<Boo> how are you kiell
<Kiell> I'm good, ta. Just missed a meeting for the radio ← use of full punctuation.
show which was silly seeing as I really ought to have gone.
<Boo> aww
<sandy`> oh kiell thats so silly
<sandy`> hmmmhmmmmmmmm
<sandy`> how irresonsible

*notice the use of 'silly' – making fun of traditional English euphemism.

```

Understandably though, the US accent is still most popular.

As Werry points out, IRC tends to host a ‘Bricolage of discursive fragments drawn in from songs, TV characters and a variety of different social speech types’, employed in the interest of verbal play, to gain attention and respect. This doesn’t however override the presence of a default, recognised ‘norm’. It is merely the online equivalent of people temporarily abandoning their speech style to enable humorous, imitation or impersonation.

Intonation & ‘Paralinguistic cues’

IRC has also developed ‘an innovative set of linguistic devices’ to recreate voice, gesture, and tone through the creative use of capitalisation, spelling, and punctuation. The use of these follows an unwritten Internet etiquette or ‘Netiquette’.

Reduplicated letters are used to represent drawn-out or expressive intonation:

Cybersex.log:

```
<nude_max> WooooHoooo!!
<nude_lips> WOOP~!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
<Richard_G> ooooooooooh
<nude_max> awww
<nude_too> woooooohooooooo
* nude_too gets all excited!!
```

Here, ‘excitement’ is communicated through the repetition of monophthongs and diphthongs.

Capital letters are only necessary to show emphasis or to simulate ‘SHOUTING’ – their conventional use (at the start of utterances, for names etc) may actually cause confusion:

Chatterz5.log:

```
<Rizlaskin> HELLO PPL
<dinny> hi riz
*** kanibalka has joined #chatterz
<Rizlaskin> HOWS YALL DOIN!?!
*** PostG has joined #chatterz
<anachroma> nice.
*** Tittix has quit IRC (Ping timeout)
<PostG> hi
*** PostG has left #chatterz (PostG)
```

<Rizlaskin> IM FEELING KINDA LOUD 2DAY!
 <the_rock> ehy caps lock
 <the_rock> ?? caps
 <wip3out> 2 # caps = there is a key on ur keyboard called (Caps Lock \). Its on the left side (where 'left' is where ur thumb is on the right side)...would u be so kind to press that key so you don't excess us with your CAPS? Thank you.
 *** ^^_SoN_Ve has quit IRC (Leaving)
 <anachroma> use anticaps :-P

*Notice how 'SHOUTING' initially gets immediate attention – then quickly turns to an insult – as it would IRL.

*****There is one, main striking property of online phonological simulation:**

The willingness of participants to sacrifice the 'crucial' efficiency of keystrokes in favour of communicating originality through written sound. Phonetic spellings often take more time to type than their official counterparts.

So the encouraging force, whether personal desire or external pressure to display originality contradicts and often overrides the principal behind abbreviation – showing that the language use itself has more importance in many cases than the desire to compact information.

Discursive aspects unique to CMC

Whilst many aspects of IRC are simply online adaptations of either the written or spoken modes IRL, there are certain ways in which it is pioneering unique communicative methods of its own.

Emoticons or 'smilies'

Hidden emotions, desires and motives that we would normally pick up through body language, facial expression and eye-contact can, obscure the intention of a statement; whether the creator is 'just-kidding' (J/K), serious, being sarcastic etc. Normally in the written mode, this problem would be negotiated by the use of explicit explanation:

“You fool”, [Josh said jokingly](#) / “You fool” [Josh scorned](#).

Whilst this method is still maintained to an extent on IRC, it often proves too cumbersome and inefficient. So, abbreviations are sometimes employed to take its place:

* ^^Sun^^ feels funny talking to the devil!!! lol

Much more frequent, however is the use of emoticons – the typographical symbolisation of emotion, invented in 1981 by Scott Fahlman. Very simply, they consist of a colon, semicolon or an equals sign to represent eyes followed by a variety of different symbols to represent nose/mouth shape.

:~)	Happy/Joking etc
:-(Sad
;-)	Winking – being sarcastic/vulgar
:-P	Sticking tongue out – showing dislike
:-D	Laughing (at you)
:-]	Friendly

NB: Emoticons must be viewed 90 degrees anticlockwise.

Although there are literally thousands of variations on the above, they aren't generally used with any meaningful frequency.

Emoticons aren't just used to qualify statements; they are also used alone as a greeting as well as to show appreciation (or indeed lack of appreciation) in much the same way as LOL (laughing out loud) is used.

The following extract from Planetchat.log demonstrates the main use of emoticons:

<nikke> i h8 that guy =P	Showing disgust – used instead of exclamation mark
<nikke> and his site sucks =P	
<morphius-> i've been in school today..:/	Indifference
<IRN-BRU> then kick the shit out of him	
<IRN-BRU> :P	To qualify prev utterance
<morphius-> with a hangover ;) hehe	deviousness
<nikke> IRN-BRU: bah... u seen his pic? =P	Indicating 'pic' isn't too flattering!
<nikke> heeh	
<nikke> had a kewl day morph?	
<nikke> =)	Greeting
<morphius-> i came home 2 am ..and went up at 9	
<nikke> sum bastard woke me up @ 2pm	

<nikke> =P	Irritation
<IRN-BRU> lol	
<IRN-BRU> phoner on the sms?	
<IRN-BRU> :)	Last entry was humorous
<nikke> heheh	
<nikke> nah	
<nikke> someone else..	
<nikke> 12 calls..	
<nikke> argh	
<IRN-BRU> lol	
<morphius-> hmmz...i think i've got a new phone# to some chick...maybe i should call her..hehe :)	Showing off - laddish
<nikke> why can ppl call me later?	
<nikke> =P	Not amused (jokingly)
<nikke> morphidle: heheh.. sure it was a chick? =P	
<morphius-> i can almost sell my "chicklist" to someone ;)	Showing off - laddish

Respect is also gained through clever emoticon innovation to display a certain **action** (principally physical, rather than an emotion) in a locally understandable way. In doing this, a chatter can be seen as both visually original and linguistically efficient.

E.g. Brenda Danet observes chatters participating in smoking a joint mainly symbolised through adapted emoticons:

<Kang> :/ <Kang> :) <Thunder> hehehehehhe <Kang> *exhale* <Kang> :0 <Thunder> : : :\sssss :) <Kang> hheeeheee <Thunder> :-Q : : :\sssss :) <Thunder> heheheh *Notice the great appreciation from both chatters for each other's inventiveness, shown through laughter and 'smilies' [:-)]
--

Also, in cyberchat.log, <Lipsie> signals she overslept:

<Lipsie> :P~~~~~ <Lipsie> i was today <{\}eWbIuS> lol <Lipsie> dern alarm clock
--

```

<Lipsie> ahem
<Lipsie> lmao
* {}eWbIuS rolls on the floor laughing
<{}eWbIuS> yeah baby
*A similar level of appreciation is shown here too (from <{}eWbIuS>.

```

Graphical simulation can, therefore be taken as far as it can still be understood. Like giving a rose to somebody:

```

Cyberchat.log:
<ssg> <b><red>-----<-----<-----@
<ssg> for all the ladies in the room
<Lipsie> well how sweeeeet ssg

```

'Addressivity'

One communicative obstacle on IRC is that strands of conversation become interwoven, making it unclear who chatters are referring or 'talking' to. There is, subsequently a convention to 'indicate the intended addressee', done by placing the given 'nick' before the utterance, separated by a colon. In practice though, so long as their name is mentioned somewhere, the problem is solved. This method can also be seen as a very effective way of being **noticed** in a 'room': participants are generally much more likely to respond if a statement/question is directed specifically at them, rather than to no one in particular:

```

Funchat.log:
<Hodgy> sop torex?
<torex> Hodgy hi ya
<devil> very funny ha ha ha
<torex> ^^Sun^^ hi
<^^Sun^^> good to see you torex!
<torex> nice to see u again ^^Sun^^ :)
<torex> how u doing Hodgy ?
<^^Sun^^> thanks buddy!
<torex> :)
<devil> torex, where u from?
* torex is in england
* ^^Sun^^ winks at torex!!!! hehehehe
<devil> ok get it
<Hodgy> brb
<^^Sun^^> k Hodgy
<^^Sun^^> so devil, what do you do?
*Nicks are mentioned in the majority of utterances

```

The /me option

Another way of getting attention in chat rooms is to refer to yourself in the 3rd person by typing /me before your utterance:

E.g. if my nick was bugz, then typing:

‘/me is very tired and bored’ would appear onscreen as ‘*bugz is very tired and bored’ This is also clearly another way of compensating for the effective blindness of other participants to how you are feeling. This is also done by pointing a backward arrow towards your ‘nick’.

```
Funchat.log:
* torex is in england
<^^Sun^^> <---Tennessee, USA
<^^Sun^^> and you tinas?
<tinas> Germany
* ^^Sun^^ pokes Hodgy!.....Still with us??
<Hodgy> yea!
<Hodgy> lol
<^^Sun^^> your so quiet
<Hodgy> was checkin out this pic a girlsent me
<Hodgy> lol
<^^Sun^^> uh huh! i see
* Hodgy is a sucker for girls
<^^Sun^^> lol
<Hodgy> lol
<torex> Hodgy i got 1 u will like
<Hodgy> <---- been single too long
<Hodgy> lololol
```

Nicks

Because nicks are self-assigned, they can be tailored represent what the chatter wants. Participants therefore feel pressured to come up with an original name in order to be noticed. Bechar’s research concluded that 45.0% of nicks are ‘related to the self’:

‘Shydude’
‘Baddady’

Playfulness with the language in the given eight-letter representation is, therefore crucial for online status-success. Humorous references and radical suggestions in semantics, phonology and typography:

‘R.Spandit’

‘BeaMeUp’
 ‘{\}eWbIuS’
 ‘tamtam’
 ‘uhuh’

From Nicks play and Identity (Bechar):

Category Percent	N

People using their real name 7.8%	18
Self related names 45.0%	103+1
Names related to medium, technology and their nature 16.9%	33+6
Names of flora, fauna, objects 15.6%	36
Play on words and sounds 11.3%	20+6
Names related to figures in literature films, fairytales and famous people 6.1%	13+1
Names related to sex and provocation 3.9%	8+1

--	
Total 106.6%	231+15

As the table indicates, one in ten names used are playing with the language itself.

Conclusion

Werry underestimates that ‘around 5000 [channels] currently exist’. Anyone however can set up any number of channels directed to any purpose – the only limitations lie within the medium itself. In reality therefore, this figure is incalculable – just one IRC server (out of 1000s), for example contains an average of around 15000 channels. In this potentially infinite universe of language variety, it would be naïve to suggest that antilanguage didn’t exist at all. My Newsgroup research did indeed suggest the presence of ‘text-based virtual realities’²¹ with exclusive tendencies.

²¹ Hardy 1993

Whilst most chat rooms certainly do follow their own linguistic netiquette, encompassing virtual play and performance, their conventions are accessible enough to allow newbies to adapt with relative ease as any person would when entering a new 'speech community'.

Of overwhelming importance to IRC participants are their personal identity and the consolidation of their online status. The primary purpose of most language use on IRC is therefore to attract the attention of other 'lurkers'²². Chatters are therefore constantly striving to entertain, albeit within the confines of IRC humour.

Appendix

Special note - All boxed sections of the main project are part of the appendix, there only in the interests of readability. They do not, therefore add to the word count.

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²² People present in the chat room

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Email Research:

From: Jon Stevenson <radio.head@cwcom.net>
To: <jcmc@usc.edu>
Subject: Fw: IRC query.....
Date: 20 December 1999 13:39

Hi, I was just wondering if you may have the expertise to help me on a little hypothesis I have for a project I'm doing for college on IRC.

I'm sure it would seem an obvious point that IRC is, or has become a 'language subculture', especially amongst those who use separate IRC interfaces such as 'Mirc' instead of directly through the web browser.

The use of this facility is restricted a) to those who own a PC and b) to those who have sufficient knowledge and IT skills. 'Techies' have always had a separate and somewhat stigmatised 'identity-group' in real-life society (the fact that they have a branded name testifies this). It seems to me that, as any down-trodden social group naturally aspires to do, they will try to maintain there way of life (consciously and subconsciously) through various means, especially apparent in the use of language.

As a result, when in a chatroom, there is a pressure to conform to the language of IRC.....by using the given acronyms (lol, lmao, rotfl, omg etc.) and 'shortcuts' (ic, cul8tr etc.). It's true that in a lot of cases, there is a practical use for these terms - to save time, but in others, I can only see that they are being used to gain respect by conforming to the nonconformist image of IRC through maximum abuse of codified structures.

'Shortcuts' also have the function of excluding many novices who really could have no idea of the meanings, giving those 'in the know' greater power. Demonstrating this knowlege surely then must partly be a means of raising social status in cyberspace.

Is the shortcut therefore the prestige form? - or is it just a 'time-saver'?

I'd be really grateful for any input you have on this.

Jon Stevenson.

From: Margaret McLaughlin <mmclaugh@rcf.usc.edu>
To: Jon Stevenson <radio.head@cwcom.net>
Subject: Re: IRC query.....
Date: 04 January 2000 04:02

My thought is that while both the shortcut and the in-group explanations have utility, I think for a long time it's been possible to find these acronyms deployed by Internet users who had very little interest in being elitist or who were unlikely to be stigmatized as techies. I'm thinking of Usenet newsgroups like rec.arts.tv.soaps, which Nancy Baym has written so persuasively about, where these acronyms were in common use years ago before the current popularity of the net, even though by Baym's reckoning most of the posters were secretaries in computer science departments, hardly a group of "nerds." I also think the fact that most newsgroups with a sizable following post FAQs, and that it is commonplace for these FAQs to explain the acronyms, suggests that there is no particular desire at least in those quarters to exclude people through in-group language. While IRC may be different, I don't really think so.

From: Jon Stevenson <radio.head@cwcom.net>
To: Margaret McLaughlin <mmclaugh@rcf.usc.edu>
Subject: Re: IRC query.....
Date: 05 January 2000 00:34

Thank you for your reply. I may not have made myself clear in my last email. I meant to suggest that there are subcultures within the Internet culture as a whole. Sure, net use has become so common today that it is no longer refined to 'techies' and the like. My point is that these groups which initiated the whole computer movement haven't just disappeared or faded into the masses who now use it, they have formed distinct groups within cyberspace. Newsgroups have become so commercialised now that the majority of traffic is communication between everyday people. In newsgroups and, indeed in any other subdivision of the communication network there remains a minority of these widely stigmatised groups. In the relatively undisturbed worlds of MOOs, MUDs and IRC (non web-based), these groups are more commonplace. They have their own social rules and structures. Principally, the ability to play with language to evoke humor via new constructions, shortcuts etc.etc. gains the most respect, whilst the use of conventional grammatical structures is on a par with 'talking posh'. In my view, these groups, or communities within cyberspace must be seen as generally anti-net-society, with an antilanguage to suit.

I await your response with interest,

Jon Stevenson.

Newsgroup Research:

I've always wondered why ppl use all these acronyms in IRC. I just assumed it was for speed. But why, then are there like 4 or 5 ways of showing laughter? Also, in practice, if you're fast enough at typing, using 'shortcuts' doesn't really save much

time. I see it far more as an online status symbol. Ppl get respect for using Net 'slang' to communicate rather than conventional sentences etc. Views?

probably yah... but also easier to write.. like when switching to the irc-client for a shortwhile, reading real quick and just answer real fast.. the laugh-methods are stupid, I use "haha" instead, or :-D ..but for shorteing dayly talk, like "zup w u 2day?" does make it faster and quicker.....

heh... should have an official language...

yeh yeh. thas what i thought - a combination of boasting (hey look, i can write fo-net-ic-aly (in a US accent) and only bother with caps when im SHOUTING etc.) with the excuse of practicality (it does save time).

the most respectable shortenings tho are the ones where you can still understand what is meant, rather than just stupidly obscure anograms (bbiab etc).

dont you ever catch yourself editing what youve said b4 pressing enter to make it IRC worthy? like changing you to u or are to r etc just because it fits in better?

i know i do!

Ppl (net slang) use it for speed and it has become a symbol of IRC and the internet

now you tell me you can spell laugh out loud faster than I can type LOL and you are one amzing person.

LOL is a general laugh.

LMAO is reserved for something very amusing

LMFAO is for something wild crazy and very amusing

FOTFL is laughing so hard you fall down

The reason peopl use these in IRC(net slang for internet relay chat) is because its easier and speedier.

until next time..

C U L8TR

BBS

BBL

for I am AFK from IRC and my ISP is LOL :)

hmm... no i dont correct from a full work to a shortening if I already wrote a full one... i dont really rememer, but maybe i did a couple of years ago :) I dont really care how i am being cool or whatever on irc, if i am going to the restroom i /nick Stoke_pooping or something like that... who cares? its a textbased thing, no-one cares :-D

I dont use irc that super actively, I am basicly just staying in the channel all day, and looking in there now and then to see if i got some messages of interest.. or so.,.. sometimes a quick chat comes up... I think that the ppl who usues the "heavy" shortenings that only a small group of ppl (!) would know, is either younger guys that wanna be cool, or a group that jdoesnt like when newbies get into their channel, they dont care, they just want to chat with their 4 dudes and the one cyber-babe that knows how to use cc. (unix c-compiler)...or something....

there is one shortening I hate, that is ASL, not because of the shortening , but because of the question... Like... compare to real life, who the heck walks up to a house, rings the bell (a strangers house), and when he/she comes out, the person staying on the doorstep ringing your bell asks you "Who the hell are you?" .. so I have a "not-very-nice" automatic answer to all asl-quests... I think its rude, impersonal, etc... Like is irc only ment for finding a partner or talk dirty? it feels like that some ppl only is searching for a "partner" or something... who cares about age or sex on a textbased irc?

/me is a sheep and doesn't really care

Hope i didnt offend anyone... or .. only the ones that doesnt dare reply :D

it looks stupid... like isntead of your FOTFL i've seen like ROFLHOMB and stuff... like... its not a standard.. some channels and places has their own dialects... but who says "lol" in real life? and who is falling on the floor in real life?

> until next time..

> C U L8TR

Lame

> BBS

soon is relative, second, minute, hour, day, week, year... use BRB instead, that means "time enough to do a couple of reboots".

> BBL

that works... means usually that i am going home from work, going to the store, installing a new OS, eating dinner or something like that..

> for I am AFK from IRC and my ISP is LOL :)

so.. you Internet service provider is laughing out loudly at you? why? because of your AFK, or maybe because they think all your shortenings are so cool? and.. you are _from_irc? woah.. cyberkid :D

later dude :-p

N.B. Each colour represents a different participant in the discussion. My contribution is in black.

Chatroom Transcriptions