SPEAKING AND WRITING IN ASYNCHRONOUS COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The article deals with the elements of speaking and writing appearing in asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). In history, the two channels of human communication were perceived as separate and independent and speaking was even dismissed by linguists for being too amorphous and chaotic to be studied. However, with the occurrence of modern technologies it became clear that speaking and writing in fact merge and overlap.

The aim of this article is thus to identify in which ways asynchronous CMC resembles speaking and in which writing, and how it overcomes the obstacles posed by the fact that the medium tries to speak by means of writing (i.e. typing) – the visualization of writing. The examples used to support the arguments are drawn from two threads of an Internet discussion board dedicated to dieting.

Key words

speaking, writing, computer-mediated communication, spatio-temporal aspect

1 Introduction

1.1 Computer-mediated communication – general description

Communication in general assumes a central role in human lives; therefore, it is no surprise that people are trying to develop increasingly newer ways of communicating with one another, and the new medium of the Internet seems to be more than apt for this purpose. In recent years, the popularity of this new medium has been growing at enormous speed. Thus we could witness tremendous growth in the number of Internet users, which has contributed to the phenomenon of the undoubtedly fastest-evolving field of human communication.

Firstly, I would like to briefly introduce the term computer-mediated communication (CMC) and, secondly, its sub-variety – asynchronous CMC. According to Herring (1996: 1), CMC is "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers." Such on-line communication is of special interest to linguistic researchers, as it "takes place overwhelmingly by means of discourse" (Herring 2004: 338).

Over the years, Internet language has been referred to as *Netspeak* (an allusion to Orwellian *Newspeak*); *Cyberspeak*, electronic language; or even *Netlish*, according to English, the prevailing language on the Internet (Crystal 2001: 17). CMC soon established itself as a new language variety (Lewis 2005: 1801) or non-standard register of language (Androutsopoulos 2006: 419). Of all the varieties distinguished by Crystal and Davy (1969), CMC (and in particular its synchronous form, i.e. chatting) is most repeatedly compared to face-to-face conversation; however, there are as many differences between them as similarities, relating to the alleged simultaneity of time and space, which will be dealt with in this article.

Currently, most computer-mediated communication is text-based, which means that messages are typed and read as a text on the computer screen. The form of how messages are exchanged may differ; however, the unifying feature is that the activity is performed via "visually presented language" (Herring 2001: 612).

It is important to note that the Internet as a tool is both a means and a constraint of this type of communication. On the one hand, it enables the "persistent conversation" (Erickson 1999) of millions of Internet users, but on the other hand, it does put certain limitations on their conversation, especially in respect to time and space. One of such 'situational constraints' that distinguishes it from other varieties of English is the problem of determining whether it is spoken or written communication (Collot and Belmore 1996, Androutsopoulos 2006).

1.2 Asynchronous CMC

As I deal primarily with asynchronous CMC, I would like to present its brief characteristics. Marcoccia (2004: 116) stresses two main features characteristic of this CMC mode: asynchronicity and the public nature of messages. According to him, "the asynchronicity disrupts the temporal dynamics of newsgroup interaction and makes the discussion structure more complex" (ibid.).

Asynchronous chats represent a 'one-to-many conversation' in which a single stimulus elicits many a response over a longer period of time (Crystal 2001: 392). According to Richardson (2001: 53), they represent one of the oldest means of Internet communication, dating back to 'pre-Windows times'. These asynchronous 'chats' have numerous labels: for example, discussion boards (Lewis 2005), message boards, bulletin boards (BBS), (Usenet) newsgroups (Richardson 2001, Marcoccia 2004), electronic discussion lists (Waseleski 2006), conferences, mailing lists, etc.

The threaded layout of the message board structure is illustrated in Figure 1. It shows the exact time at which these messages were posted, who they replied to and the nickname of their author.

LBH 30 Something's Daily Chat:... 07-10-2007, 02:32 PM
RoadRunner *Good...*-07-10-2007, 03:18 PM

IrishJoan *Mornin' girls... Hey, did I...* 07-10-2007, 03:43 PM

IrishJoan *Morning Sheila, We posted at...* 07-10-2007, 03:48 PM
sheila1971 *RR: Good for you at least you...* 07-10-2007, 03:32 PM
LBH *I hear you guys on the...* 07-10-2007, 03:56 PM

RXZephyr *Matter of opinion, my...* 07-11-2007, 12:56 AM

lppennington *You forget, the stretch jeans...* 07-11-2007, 03:06 AM

RXZephyr *Where I'm from, stretch jeans...* 07-11-2007, 03:25 AM

Figure 1: The threaded mode of message lay-out

2 Spoken and written discourse

2.1 Historical development

According to Halliday (1989: 92), "talking and writing are different ways of saying. They are different modes for expressing linguistic meanings." The terminology concerning speaking and writing differs; Halliday (1989) calls them modes; Crystal and Davy (1969) varieties in language. I will refer to them as channels (in accordance with Leech and Svartvik 1994), as I do not want to confuse them with CMC modes.

These two discursive channels have co-existed for centuries; nevertheless, their importance and mutual relationship have differed significantly throughout the years, as have linguists' attitudes towards them. While at the onset of the first civilisations human communication was performed mainly orally, a fundamental change occurred in the fourth century BC, when the Greeks invented the alphabet, which resulted in a shift from "a primary oral culture to a literate one" (December 1996).

It is evident when looking back into the past that writing, as opposed to speaking, used to be rather idealised and its form greatly admired. Up until the second half of the 20th century, speaking was perceived as inferior. Its underestimation was, among other reasons, also due to the alleged amorphousness and apparent lack of rules identified with this channel for a long time (Urbanová 2003: 11). This might have been caused by the fact that the reader is already

presented with the 'final draft' (i.e. with an elaborated and well thought out version), whereas speaking takes place on the spot (Halliday 1989: 97). Therefore, it may seemingly lack form and appear as disorderly or confused. In contrast, while reading, we expect to encounter perfectly-structured texts and we regard any mistakes or deviations from the norm with disrespect.

In linguistics, the relationship between spoken and written language went nearly unnoticed until the middle of the 20th century (Roberts 2004: 168). It is no coincidence that at the same time there was a massive increase in the use of modern technologies (i.e. radio, phone and television). With their widespread use, humankind entered a new epoch when "the oral is more valued than literacy... and the oral and the literate intermingle" (December 1996). Subsequently, the view of the superiority of the written channel was fiercely challenged.

Halliday placed both channels on the same level, even though they differ in many ways. In Halliday's words, different goals are accomplished via spoken and written language; however, "neither has any superior value over the other" (Halliday 1989: XV). Among other linguists who have dealt with the issue of written vs. spoken language, Tannen (1994) regards writing as a priori 'detached' and speaking as 'involved'; Besnier (1988, as quoted in Roberts 2004: 170-171) claims that there are no significant differences between the two channels as far as language production is concerned, but they must be explained in regard to the actual "social context of orality and literacy traditions".

2.2 Speaking and writing in CMC

As was mentioned above, the polarisation between speaking and writing is rather artificial (Halliday 1989, Collot and Belmore 1996) and there is a continuum on which we may place individual genres. Vachek (1973) was of the same opinion when stressing that speaking and writing are functionally complementary systems.

As regards CMC, the duality between the two channels is not strictly limited and there is great overlap. There is definitely no "simple dichotomy between speech and writing" (Collot and Belmore 1996: 18). CMC can be regarded as "a hybrid form of communication" or "written conversation" (Marcoccia 2004: 116). Ferrara et al. (1991) refer to it as "interactive written discourse".

Due to the combination of the features of both speaking and writing, CMC is said to be "creating a language variety ... which may be characterised in terms of similarities and differences with written and spoken language" (Lewis 2005: 1801). There is a general question that many (especially first-wave) CMC researchers have tried to answer: Is CMC a "typed dialogue or dialogical text?" (Storrer 2001). However, it has become gradually evident that it is not possible

to take either side. When considering a particular CMC mode, one can only ask what features prevail.

Internet language is not uniform and has many sub-varieties, which can also be characterised in respect to their similarity to speaking or writing. Figure 2 shows how the particular types of CMC spread along the continuum between the two channels. As is evident from the picture, some sub-types are more similar to traditional face-to-face conversation and others to informal writing. Asynchronous CMC assumes a middle position within the continuum and thus contains about the same degree of the characteristic features of both spoken and written language.

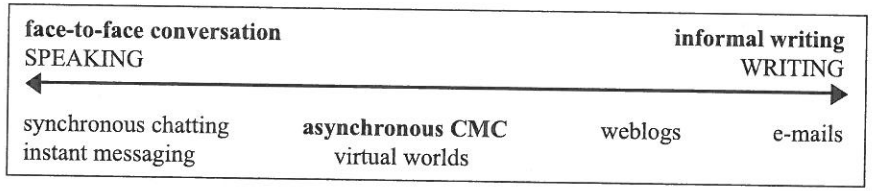

Figure 2: Various types of CMC on a continuum between speaking and writing

3 Asynchronous CMC and characteristic features of speaking and writing

In the third part of the article, I would like to take a closer look at the individual features of speech and writing in asynchronous CMC. In doing so, I would like to follow Crystal's (2001: 26-28) categorization; he distinguished the following notions when describing the differences between speaking and writing: time, space, visual means, correction of errors, prosody, language functions and informality. Due to the limited space of this article, I have combined some related categories into a single category.

3.1 Time and space

Generally speaking, the basic attribute of writing is usually permanency while for speaking it is transience. As the distance between the writer and the reader is unsurpassable, there is no possibility to ask for clarification if the reader gets confused or misunderstands. However, while speaking, the decoding of the message depends on entirely different means – "mutually shared knowledge, the relationship between speaker and hearer, the topic under discussion and its development in discourse" (Urbanová 2003: 12). As opposed to writing, both

participants are usually present at the time of speaking (Crystal 2001: 26) and that grants the speaker readily available feedback, which means that he or she can respond to the particular situation immediately. In other words, there is always a certain degree of personal contact implied in speech, whereas writing tends to be impersonal (Crystal and Davy 1969: 69).

As regards the *spatio-temporal* aspect of asynchronous CMC, Dresner (2005: 15) claims that there is a paradox hidden in the perception of CMC: we perceive spoken language spatially and written language visually (i.e. sequences ordered chronologically).

As was mentioned above, real-life face-to-face speaking is co-present and co-temporal; this means that the production and reception of the message take place simultaneously, which is very different in asynchronous CMC. One can reply to a message that was posted yesterday or ten years ago. Some threads resemble nearly simultaneous chatting; others with a few posts spread over a long period of time can be more easily compared to exchanging letters.

When comparing the two threads under my examination, Thread 1, (*30-Something Chat*) with an average of 25.8 messages posted a day, is much more co-temporal than Thread 2, (*Slimming World Chicks*) with a mere 2.3 messages posted daily. This discrepancy may have been caused by the relatively lower attractiveness of the topic in Thread 2, as it is restricted to members on a special diet called *Slimming World.* Another reason might be that the title of Thread 1 itself contains the word *chat* and therefore attracts Internet users who want to exchange more messages in a limited period of time.

Even though most asynchronous CMC is by far not co-temporal, sometimes we can speak about 'partial' co-temporality. Undoubtedly, there is always a time lag between reading a message and posting its reply, but very often the contributors are logged on and responding at the same time and thus we can view them as somewhat co-temporal. It depends on the size of the community gathering around a message board as well as on the number of posts.

Beisswenger (2005: 64) adds that the main disparity does not lie only in the fact that speaking on the Internet is performed through the medium of writing, but that the difference between real-life speaking and CMC is also affected by *channel reduction* due to its non-simultaneity. Therefore, it is not possible for the receiver to react until the whole message is typed and sent. This lag then results in a slower pace of conversation (ibid.: 30-31) and partial loss of spontaneity typical of everyday speech (ibid.: 40).

In the examples below, we can see how the time lag between messages is perceived by the users themselves, especially if it is too long. In Example 1, the writer starts in a manner typical of letter writing and apologises for not writing sooner. It is quite frequent that when a regular Internet community member has been absent for some time, they usually feel obliged to apologise and give reasons

for that. On the contrary, in Example 2, the writer is surprised at the absence of other contributors and tries to encourage them to post a message. She does so in an inventive way, using capital letters and creative spelling (e.g. *at 'um*) as if she was shouting and the others could hear her. She also tries to attract them by addressing them with a humorous form of address, *ladies and rockstars.*

Example 3 shows how the contributors sometimes make reference to the real time they are writing their message in order to embed their words in real-world context. In Example 4, the interlocutor expresses her opinion about the 'speed' of the thread (i.e. in her opinion there are not too many posts and thus she calls it slow and finds it easier to follow other contributors' messages and respond to them). Therefore, she shows an entirely different perception of time in the message board.

(1) ***Sorry for not posting*** *the past couple of days ... things have been crazy round here*

(2) ***WHERE IS EVERYONE****? Get the heck up and out of bed and get moving* ***ladies & rockstars****!* ***LET'S GO!*** ***Up and at 'um****!*

(3) ***Its Sunday 6.51am*** *and where am I?* ***At work****!!!! This is my last day in my 7 day shift and boy I cant wait to get outta here tonite.*

(4) ***Slow thread****, which is good cause I need to catch up with everyone.*

As regards the aspect of *space*, the situation is somehow paradoxical. The new medium of the Internet has introduced a unique quality into the world of communication; never before was it possible to communicate with as many people at once. As Lewis points out (2003: 1802), "where speech is designed primarily for few-to-few and writing is ideal for few-to-many, CMC for the first time makes many-to-many communication viable." By means of technology, it is possible to start conversation on any topic imaginable with whoever is connected to the Internet wherever in the world.

The fact that participants are not physically present does not cause any problems; feedback is readily available on the computer screen, as quickly as it is allowed by their Internet connection. In asynchronous communication, participants gather in particular threads of message boards (i.e. special categories indicating and also determined by their fields of interest). Participants can read and contribute to any threads according to their personal mood and interests, and know that they inhabit a place where it is possible to engage in on-going conversation. Therefore, it can be concluded that in asynchronous CMC, participants do not share the same physical space, but their environment is shaped around a shared topic instead (e.g. dieting, parenting, personal problems).

3.2 Visual means, prosody and correction of errors

When speaking, one selects from a wide range of paralinguistic features and deictic expressions which make the meaning more dependent on the context, whereas in writing, this meaning is clearer and with no 'immediate feedback' (Crystal 2001: 27).The emotionality and personality of speaking are enhanced via visual means and prosody.

All text-based CMC lacks sound and hence, as opposed to face-to-face conversation, which transfers information via multiple channels, it employs only the visual channel. Owing to that, some linguists perceive "the computer medium as 'impoverished' and unsuitable for social interaction" (Herring 2001: 614). Due to the absence of an auditory channel and in order to replace non-verbal means of communication, a greater role must be assumed by orthography and graphetics.

Sandbothe (1998) identifies two basic tendencies in the language of the Internet: "*scriptualization of language*" and "*visualisation of writing*"; they are two contradictory tendencies taking place simultaneously and bringing about a number of consequences for the language itself. This poses the question of what means CMC uses to overcome the constraints that are set upon it by technology and, on the other hand, what new means it develops to make up for these constraints.

There are infinite ways to provide the visualisation of the endless texts that can be found on the Internet. In order to understand the symbols or even create them, one needs to achieve certain skilfulness (Donath 1999). A skilled Internet user employs a number of 'orthographic strategies' in order to make up for the lack of prosodic and paralinguistic cues (Werry 1996: 56).

According to Beisswenger and Storrer (2008: 12), both synchronous and asynchronous CMC (even though the degrees may vary) are characteristic of:

1. speedwriting (e.g. *you* > *U*, *two/too* > *2*, *please* > *plz*)
2. non-standard spellings (e.g. Engl. *out of* > *outta*, *see you* > *cee ya*)
3. highly colloquial (slang) or conceptionally oral forms (in English e.g. *gonna*, *gotta*),
4. letter repetition as a means of emulating prosody (*uiiiiiii*, *sooooo*, *hellooooooo*)
5. abbreviations (*btw* for *by the way*, *lol* for *laughing out loud*, *aka* for *also known as*).

As far as posting to an asynchronous message board is concerned, there are two fundamental limitations. Firstly, the process of typing the message is *confined by the speed* with which the sender tries to send off his or her answer.

Time is more important than perfect spelling and that is visible on the number of errors that occur in the text. Even in asynchronous communication, one is not expected to spend much time typing it. Therefore, there are countless misprints and spelling errors. Most Internet users take it for granted that CMC is imperfect if judged by the rules applied to other written genres.

Another feature that adds to the high occurrence of errors is the *ephemeral character* of CMC. When producing a solid piece of writing, we are expected to come up with the best final product possible; however, when contributing to an on-line discussion or chat, we know that the receiver does not anticipate a perfect form. Thus it is not worth the effort to go back and correct it, as time is crucial. On the contrary, when typing an e-mail, where the time pressure on the sender is usually less urgent, the rate of errors is smaller. However, even e-mails do contain many errors and display time-saving techniques.

Moreover, there are also spelling mistakes made on purpose, as in Example 5, where creative spelling is used as a source of humour. The contributor finds it necessary to stress that she is aware it should be spelled differently. In this example, it becomes clear that she intends to perform what Leech and Svartvik (1994: 17) refer to as 'written representation of speech'. They claim that forms such as *gonna*, or similarly, *butcha* in Example 5 "reflect a typical phonetic reduction of vowels and omission of consonants in everyday speech."

(5) ***Gooten Morgun****...ok,* ***I KNOW that is not how you spell it****,* ***butcha*** *new what I was meanin' right???*

The sender is bound to be economical; thus they do not write more than necessary in order to be intelligible. A resourceful idea of how to save time (i.e. reduce the number of keystrokes) is *imaginative spelling*; for example, contributors write *nite* (= night), *L8* (= late), use clippings – *info* (for information), acronyms – *afk* (away from keyboard) and symbols to replace words – & for 'and' (Cherny 1999: 85-86, Storrer 2001).

The message board under my investigation offers a list of pre-prepared acronyms to its members. As the community around this message board is familiar with the meaning of these acronyms, it is a great time-saving technique. There are general acronyms that many women's message boards have in common, such as *DD* as dear daughter or *TIA* as thanks in advance. Moreover, as the threads are focused on dieting, there are specific acronyms related to this topic, for example, *FF* (fat free), *GW* (goal weight) and *OWL* (ongoing weight loss).

A number of the features mentioned above are illustrated in Example 6. There is imaginative spelling (*ur*, *gonna*), misspelled words (*know* instead of *now*), misprint (*upto*), omitted apostrophe (*Ive*), and non-capitalised *i*.

(6) *Hi-would like to join* ***ur*** *slimming world 'contingency' on this site!!* ***Ive*** *been a member since last summer but battling with a thyroid problem has*

*led me to having a very slow loss **upto** **know**-so **gonna** go back to the gym to try and spur it on a bit. Hopefully the online support will give me the extra boost **i** need.*

The second constraint is a *lack of prosody* and *paralanguage*, typical of face-to-face conversation. One of the functions of these visual means is to avoid vagueness; for instance, when we express sarcasm or anger in the real world, we add an additional meaning to our words through our body movements and facial expressions. In the same way, in CMC we can show our involvement or detachment via smileys (emoticons) or creative spelling. On the other hand, it seems that on-line visual means will never be able to communicate the slight shades of meaning expressed by paralanguage in face-to-face conversation. Their number is rather inadequate; even though there are whole directories of smileys on the Internet, the typical communicant uses only a few of them. Moreover, one smiley can have numerous meanings (e.g. smiling, laughing, happiness, good mood or politeness) and thus is rather vague. We have to admit that its "semantic role is limited" (Crystal 2001: 36); however, smileys also play a great part in pragmatics, in building rapport with the listener (ibid.: 38).

Nevertheless, Internet users often compensate for the absence of visual means typical of face-to-face conversation, which enables the omnipresent playfulness that pervades many Internet message boards to come into play.

3.3 Functions and informality

On the one hand, there are millions of web pages which primarily serve a referential function, such as online newspapers or weather forecasts. In these cases, web-page authors do not know anything about their future readers and "in their guessing, targeting and feedback-requesting they display the same behaviour as any paper-bound author…might" (Crystal 2001: 29). On the other hand, as was already suggested, on the Internet more people look for communication than for information nowadays. Chatting "keeps Web sites busy" and attracts the visitors to come again and find their place in the global community (Cherny 1999:1). Speaking (or more appropriately, communicating) with others who are logged on the Internet makes it a dynamic, pulsing system that is definitely alive with conversation ranging from small talk to serious discussions. The groups develop strategies, routines and their own language code very quickly. Because they often meet daily, most of their exchanges serve social purposes. Nevertheless, many members of these boards do look for information as well and thus the referential function is also apparent here. In the message board I examined, the participants become a part of a weight-support community, but they also seek information on their favourite diets and related topics.

Many of the features mentioned above serve to intensify the *informality* of CMC. Indeed, when we reflect upon discussion board communication, it strikes us immediately how informal Internet users are. The ease and comfort with which the participants approach each other would be absolutely unimaginable in real life. Everybody is on first-name terms from the very beginning (or rather first-nickname terms); users do not hesitate to confess their deepest thoughts to absolute strangers sitting somewhere on the opposite side of the world. In this respect, the aspect of proximity mentioned above mingles with distance: we feel secure enough to be highly informal with somebody who is worlds apart yet still within reach via a computer network. Perhaps it is the participants' anonymity and the transience of Internet communication that lead to this great degree of informality. Urbanová (2003: 13) calls this phenomenon 'pseudointimacy' and lists other fields where it is present (i.e. the language of advertising, radio and TV broadcasting). The level of informality is increased through playfulness and creativity; humour is an all-pervading feature that can be found in most on-line conversations. Moreover, it enhances the feeling of solidarity among Internet users and in the community as such.

4 Conclusion

The contribution examined how elements of speaking and writing are combined in Internet language, in particular in asynchronous computer-mediated communication.

Firstly, it dealt with the development of two main channels and their mutual relationship in history. Speaking and writing have been perceived differently in various historical periods; however, while speaking was rather underestimated by linguistics up until the first half of the 20th century, modern linguists place speaking and writing on the same level, pointing out their common features (especially in regards to CMC) and their merging in modern technologies.

Secondly, the article concentrated on various aspects of speaking and writing according to Crystal (2001), i.e. time, space, visual means, prosody, correction of errors, language functions and informality. Having dealt with these categories, it is evident that asynchronous CMC stands somewhere in between and that it contains both the features of speech (personality, spontaneity, informality) and writing (absence of co-temporality and co-presence, delayed correction of errors, lack of prosody). However, it must be pointed out that it is by no means an 'impoverished' variety of English, as is generally thought. It skilfully compensates for its technological limitations and constraints and introduces new distinctive ways of human communication.

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