
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stylistic Features in One Medium of Computer-Mediated Communication: Internet Relay Chat IRC

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ABSTRACT

This study is a quantitative-qualitative, descriptive study in one medium of computer-mediated communication, CMC. It attempts to investigate some stylistic features in the medium of Internet Relay Chat IRC that are used by online chatters. The data of this study are gathered from open access chatrooms through screen shots. The number of screen shots that are used in the analyses is (30) screen shots. The findings reveal that chat systems allow chatters to use different stylistic features such as graphic features, orthographic features, discourse features, flaming, spamming, spoofing, trolling, and lurking. The most frequent features are orthographic features such as "abbreviation, acronyms and punctuation". These features are widely used in internet relay chat to save time, effort and as economy expressions.

KEYWORDS

Computer-mediated communication, CMC discourse, interactive written discourse, electronic discourse, stylistic features of CMC, and internet relay chat IRC.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of technology gives rise to many new conventions and stylistic features in online discourse. In computer-mediated communication, people try to reflect face-to-face conversation in online discourse writing by adapting many new strategies and styles. The technologies of the Internet that tend to be interesting for CMC scholars are (email, newsgroups, blogs, Internet Relay Chat and instant messaging). All these technologies facilitate interaction. Thus, the internet is not a single communication technology but rather a collection of different technologies for communicating (Thurlow et al., 2004:31).

The Internet is one of many factors influencing the way language is changing, and the linguistic forms of Internet language are influenced a lot by the physical constraints of technology itself. There are also social factors that are influenced by CMC, such as the jargon of the computer. Furthermore, the language reveals a speech community that enjoys playing with the possibilities of the keyboard. This means that language relies on creative typology, and many rules of grammar and style are sometimes broken (ibid:124).

Computer-mediated communication has many different types, and this study focuses on one synchronous type, which is "internet relay chat IRC". The study aims to discover and investigate the stylistic features of CMC. The importance of the study comes from the widely use of some new conventions and features in online discourse. The source of the data is online chatrooms which are open access. The data was gathered by screen shots in a limited number which is only (30) screen shots. Crystal 2006, which classifies different stylistic features of CMC, is adopted as the model of this study.

The main research questions that the study tries to answer are:

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1-What are the stylistic features of CMC?

2-What are the most frequent features of CMC?

The study also aims to:

1-Classify and understand different stylistic features of CMC.

2-Know the most frequent features used in CMC.

This study hypothesizes that:

1-There are many stylistic features used in CMC, such as orthographic features, graphic features, flaming, trolling and lurking.

2-The most frequent features are orthographic features.

2. Computer-Mediated Communication (beneath as CMC)

Computer-mediated communication is also called the "language of the internet, netspeak, electronic communication, online communication". According to Herring (1996: 1), CMC can be defined as "a communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers". Squires (2016: 2) defines computer-mediated communication as "a broad designator that encompasses multiple linguistic/semiotic modes including (text, voice and image) as well as technological interfaces and platforms (social media, tablets, mobile phones, virtual workplace environments, immersive online game and more)".

Bodomo (2009: 6) defines CMC as "the coding and decoding of linguistic and other symbolic systems between sender and receiver for information processing in multiple formats through the medium of the computer and allied technologies such as mobile phones, PDAs (personal digital assistants) and blackberries; and through the media like the internet, chat systems, email, text messaging, YouTube, Skype, and many more to be invented". Li (2018: 21) defines CMC as an interaction which takes place in real time in which users arrange meaning through either verbal or written language.

Baron (2008: 11-12) mentions that in the 1980s, the term computer-mediated communication, known as CMC, emerged to encompass a range of platforms used for conversing online, including chat, email, listservs and instant messaging. With the development of mobile phone devices, CMC has become something of a stretch. CMC shares features with formal or informal writing and with formal or informal speech.

CMC has particularly dynamic properties that encourage specific self-presentation in the pursuit of relational goals, encouraged by unique features of the channel and the context in which it is deployed. Studies show that CMC permits users fluidly to adapt their self-presentation to their expectations or perceptions of a conversational partner in order to encourage impressions and positive interactions in both adaptive synchronous interaction and asynchronous statements (Walther et al., 2011: 32).

O'Dowd (2012: 240) reports that CMC activities such as the internet and email have become the primary vehicle for maintaining relationships with folks back home, replacing many of the more traditional activities of making long-distance phone calls and writing letters. Many studies suggest that mediated communication may not change the positive theoretical relationship between active participation in host social processes and successful adaptive changes in the host society at large. Investigating asynchronous CMC, Collot & Belmore (1996:28) call communication a hybrid variety of language, while Yates (1996: 46) characterizes it as neither speech-like nor writing-like. Davis & Brewer (1997: 2) call it writing talking.

Baron (2008: 48) mentions that CMC "is essentially a mixed modality. It resembles speech in that it is unedited, it includes many first and second person pronouns, it is generally informal". At the same time, CMC looks like writing in that the medium is durable, and participants commonly use a wide range of vocabulary choices and a complex syntax.

The earliest discussions of CMC focus on new forms of language in online communication, such as (emoticons, acronyms, abbreviations, spelling, punctuation and grammar (Baron, 2008: 28). The use of CMC depends on specific forms of appropriation. Accordingly, groups of users as distinctive recognizing communication cultures are regarded as the object for the analysis of mediated personal communication, especially CMC. In this case, a new term becomes important 'electronic communities'. "This term came into prominence in the discussion of forums and forms of CMC that is communication on computer screens, leaving the bodies behind. Electronic communities are not based on living together but on communicating together via medium" (Rothkegel, 2001: 217).

On the one hand, Rooksby (2002: 103) mentions four structural characteristics of CMC: first, CMC is characterized by machine-dependency, which means one cannot use CMC without a computer and a computer system. Second, CMC is characterized by an unusual temporality of communication. Third, CMC is characterized by textuality, and textuality is characterized by the peripherality

of the non-verbal. Fourth, CMC permits the proliferation of inhabited places, not all of which are found in physical space. These features give CMC interaction its most pervasive qualities.

On the other hand, Herring (1996: 3-4) mentions three issues about the interesting of CMC: The first is about the language of CMC; it is typed and once like writing, but exchanges are often rapid and informal, and others like a spoken conversation. The second is that participants interact without the benefit of extra-linguistic cues as to the gender, identity, personality or mood of their interlocutors. The third relates to the phenomenon of community formation in cyberspace. Online communities take shape, and generate norms of interaction, for example, rules of network 'etiquette' or 'netiquette' and conflict resolution procedures, literally before our eyes in the text that can be saved and mined later for insights into the genesis of human social organization. Finally, there are many mediums of CMC such as "E-mail, instant messaging, websites, social networking, blogs, and chats or internet relay chat. This study focuses on one medium of CMC, which is internet relay chat "IRC".

3. Computer-mediated communication discourse

Seargeant & Tagg(2014: 6,9) mention that the use of social media as means of communication is interesting for two reasons: First, the circumstances that people perform identity online and the resources they have are different from offline situations. Second, distinctiveness and the novelty of online interaction bring many ideas about the nature of identity. They also propose that identity performance cannot be in isolation from communities with which individuals align themselves and the ways in which those communities maintain and establish the relationships that comprise them.

Computer mediated discourse focuses on language and language use, and it depends on discourse analysis methods(Herring, 2001: 612). So, it applies four levels of language ranging prototypically from smallest to largest linguistic units of analysis (structure, meaning, interaction and social behavior). The structural level is focused on the use of particular orthography or typography, sentence structure and word formations. The meaning level is focused on the meaning of utterances, words and larger functional units. The interaction level is focused on topic development, turn-taking and other means of interactive exchanges. The social level is focused on linguistic expressions, power, conflict and group exchanges(Herring, 2004: 341).

Yus (2011:28) argues that in the past, CMC was text-based, and even at this time, the text typed by participants is important in virtual interactions. So, analysts make a general distinction between two types of text-based communities: On one hand, synchronous virtual communities, such as chatrooms where participants are connected simultaneously to the Net, build up a kind of textual interactive dialogue that appears as soon as the participants stop the connection and switch off the computer. So, in synchronous communities, there are no traces of the presence, nor are there options for a long-lasting form of community. On the other hand, asynchronous virtual communities such as newsgroups build up an archive of interactions and, therefore, an increasingly complex form of community where stronger communal ties can be reinforced. In both of these two kinds of communities, the interactive key lies in the text typed by participants.

4. Interactive Written Discourse

Crystal (2006: 19) and Baron (2008: 11) argue that netspeak or CMC is an alternative to interactive written discourse and netspeak or CMC is succinct and functional and 'speak' involves writing as well as talking and that any 'speak' has a receptive element containing listening and reading. According to Themisocleous (2010:321), netspeak, especially its synchronous modes, such as virtual worlds and chatgroups, shares both spoken and written linguistic features. With globalization and the development of the internet, this medium of communication has become a multilingual environment, and non-standard features are frequently used by internet participants in an effort to represent in writing not only their native languages but also nonstandard varieties and dialects.

Davis and Brewer (1997:157) mention that interactive written discourse combines features of both the written text and oral text that is read like. Interactive written discourse is also called a variety of 'textual conversation'. Its written text has the immediacy characteristic of speech and the permanence characteristic of writing. They also mention that talk of interactive written discourse can be found in textual conversation and electronic dialogue(ibid:2).

5. Electronic discourse

Electronic discourse is writing that very often reads as if it is being spoken, that is, as if the sender is writing talking. It focuses on how participants use language to exchange ideas rather than on the medium or channel by which they deliver and transfer their messages (Davis and Brewer, 1997: 2). Electronic discourse focuses on how participants adopt their ways of communication in different contexts and what the participants do with language in order to discuss issues for understanding different levels of discourse. So, the fabric of electronic discourse is language, and the weavers of that fabric are the individual participants(ibid: 8).

Davis and Brewer (1997: 1) mention that electronic discourse is one type of interactive written communication or computer-mediated discourse. Thus, Hard af Segerstad (2002:50) argues that electronic discourse is one aspect of computer-mediated

communication which can form CMC by its concentration on language and language use on the internet and by its use of discourse analysis methods to support that concentration.

Davis and Brewer(1997:6) argue that electronic discourse cannot be characterized by speech only or writing only because it shares characteristics of both, and it is different from the conventional sense of both spoken and written language. They also mention that electronic messaging in real time or synchronous interactive electronic communication is more like informal speech because of its integration, while electronic conference writing is more like written discourse (ibid:4-5).

Moreover, Lee (2009:128) considers electronic discourse as one popular form of netspeak that allows individuals to interact with each other; for example, text chatting creates a type of semi-speech that is between talking and writing. So, electronic discourse is comparable to face-to-face communication in terms of interactivity. He also mentions that CMC differs from spoken discourse in its textual representation that relies on writing and reading. Thus, electronic discourse requires skills and strategies which are different from those employed for face to face exchange(ibid: 129).

6. Stylistic features of computer-mediated communication

The language of computer-mediated communication is considered a variety of languages which is a system governed by situational factors such as speech and writing, regional and dialects, occupational genres, creative linguistic expression, text and discourse and other styles of expression. These varieties are systematic and predictable (Crystal, 2006: 6-7). Thus, the distinctive features of a language variety are of many types, as the term CMC is a hybrid between spoken and written language. Many stylistic approaches recognize five main distinctive features of language variety for written language, which are:

- 1- *graphic features* such as typography, design, page, spacing and the use of illustrations and colour.
- 2- *orthographic features* such as the use of the alphabet, capital letters, spelling, punctuation and ways of expressing emphasis (boldface, italics, etc.).
- 3- *grammatical features* such as the use of sentence structure, word inflection and word order.
- 4- *lexical features*, which are words and idioms used in this variety.
- 5- *discourse features* such as coherence, paragraph structure, relevance and the logical progression of ideas (ibid: 8-9).

Moreover, there are many other stylistic features of computer-mediated communication used in order to point out the culture of CMC participants. Herring (1996:3) and Crystal (2006: 58) mention some of these features, such as flaming, spamming, spoofing, trolling and lurking. Flaming means messages that are always aggressive, related to a particular topic and directed at an individual recipient. Mann and Stewart (2000:15) mention that "flaming is used to hector or harangue another person electronically in response to an electronic message and is found in all types of CMC". Spamming is the sending of unwanted messages of a special size. Spoofing is any message whose origin is suspected, and it is commonplace in some internet situations. Trolling is the sending of a message specifically intended to cause irritation to others, as in chatgroups. Lurking is a refusal to communicate, people who access a chatgroup and read its messages but don't contribute to the discussion (Crystal, 2006: 55-58).

7. Internet Relay Chat IRC

Internet Relay Chat is a multi-user, real time communication system that is used by many people all over the world (Charalabidis, 2000: 11; Hutchby, 2001: 12; and Reddy, 2004:303). IRC is a common protocol for real time (synchronous) internet text-messaging and one of the early genres of social networks (Thurlow et al., 2004: 182; Witt, 2004: 311; and Deumert, 2014: 28). According to Crystal (2006: 12), IRC is one of the synchronous situations and one of the main systems available to participants consisting of many rooms dealing with different topics.

Hutchby (2001: 173) argues that in IRC, conversations are carried on through the means of written text rather than speech, and IRC channels involve a multiplicity of users attempting to interact at any time. Beatty (2010: 71) mentions that IRC is also known as chatlines and appears on screen as a window that presents what the participant is writing in one pane while public discussion among other participants continues in another.

Deumert (2014: 28-40) conducted two chat experiments at the University of Cape Town in 2008 for participants who connected to a chat program to study the features of language use. He finds that participants use mixtures of English and other languages like Chinese and African. He also notices that capitalization and punctuation are used to indicate tone and rhythm as well as to express emotions of admiration and annoyance, such as I DONT WANT YOU, man!!!!!! Acronyms are also used to function as interjections, such as "LMAO" and "laughing my ass off". In addition, Werry (1996: 47) conducts a study to examine 'Internet Relay Chat' in terms of addressivity, abbreviation, prosody and gesture by analyzing IRC conversations. He finds that individuals employ a number of

innovative linguistic strategies which function to compensate for spatial, contextual, temporal and social constraints. This medium considers the core of the current study.

8. Data Collection and Description

The data of this study are a type of synchronous chatgroups, "Internet Relay Chat", that occurs in real time. The researcher gathers the data randomly in the form of screenshots from the internet. The source of the data is online public English chatgroups, "chatrooms". The reason for selecting this kind of data is that "chatrooms" include many participants from different ages, cultures, education, backgrounds and regions who exchange online messages in real time. Another reason is that these chatrooms are open access and free with different topics. This means that the data will be in a variety of formal and informal language. Participants in these chatrooms are looking to communicate with those who share the same interest and those who can collaborate in creating an online dialogue and communicating information. The number of participants in each room varies according to the topics of discussion, and it ranges between 300 to 2000 participants. Each participant has to choose a nickname before he/she enters the room so that the researcher selects a random nick to enter the rooms and is kept silent while collecting data.

<https://chat.ukchat.com/room/Lobby>

<http://www.chatting.chatkaro.in/online-chat/>

The messages of synchronous chatgroups tend to be short because all members are online and messages are sent and received from the same server, and economic messages are preferable. Thus, the language of chatgroups is full of slang, abbreviations, and smileys. The messages that are sent display immediately on the screen, and the topics of the rooms vary according to the room's name. Most participants have their own nicknames, which are not real, and sometimes they change their nicks during the conversation. The electronic systems allow the user to choose different strategies and conventions during chatting.

The researcher created a nick name and entered those which are open access chatrooms that do not require any permission or an account to enter, and collected 30 screens shots; each screen shot includes different conventions such as abbreviations, smileys, punctuation, flaming, spamming, spoofing, trolling and lurking. The examples are written as they appear in the data, and they seem to be more informal and have some mistakes or violate the formal language rules. Crystal (2006: 6-7, 58), who classifies some stylistic features of CMC, will be adopted as the model of this study.

9. Analysis and Results

Quantitative-Qualitative descriptive analyses will be conducted by categorizing and analyzing the gathered data into stylistic features of CMC as they are classified by Crystal:

- The chat systems allow users to choose many different styles for their profiles, such as themes, photo frames, colours and even some smileys. The language of chatrooms or internet relay chat tends to be more informal, and participants have a tendency to use abbreviations, acronyms, a combination of punctuation marks or smileys. Moreover, they ignore where to use capital letters or punctuation marks. As in the following examples:
 1-Goerge is Dre any girl wanna chat privately.
 2-Knight: I love u Green
 3-Smith: u r so kind, haha
 4-William: ilu2 Kinght
 5-Sam: I'll be bck later.
 6-Jenie: Getupkid, happy mothers day!!!!
 7-S.K.: im ok but skit all time Sam lol.
 8-Getupkid: ty ty
 9-Goldfish: it's a wonder why im single tbh
 10-Laila: OMG sergant kill me if i had 4 kids
 11-Destiny: noooo☺☺☺☺
 12-Daniel: what's wrong????

In the examples above, participants use abbreviated forms, which refer to the shortening or omitting some elements or syllables from the word to form new shortening words such as: "Dre →there", "wanna→want to", "u→you", "u r →you are", bck→back", "ty→thank you", "tbh→to be honest", and they also use acronyms which are words formed from the initial letters of a phrase, name or title to create new pronounced word such as "lol→laughing out loud", "OMG→ oh my god". They ignore the correct use of capital letters and punctuation, or they use a combination of punctuation marks, or they use a combination of smileys instead of punctuation marks for emphasis or to draw attention. They also Finally, the previous examples show orthographic features such as spellings, punctuation, abbreviations, acronyms and smileys; ignoring grammatical rules by using ungrammatical sentences; the use of a variety of language; and even sometimes chat discourse lacks coherence because of the high number of participants who

are writing at the same time. Moreover, chatters have a tendency to use informal language and economy expressions to save time and effort and keep up the flow of the exchange.

- Other stylistic features such as "flaming, spamming, spoofing, trolling and lucking can be seen in the following example:
13-Steal: u r so foolish???
14-Heleen: hiiiiiiii
15-Heleen: hiiiiiiiiiiii
16-Heleen: hellooooooooo
17-Knight: don't hurt my feelings Steal
18-Soul: u r too stupid Steal
19-Ghost: Was that to meeeeeeeeeee
20-Olive: hiii hhhhhhiiiiiiii hellooooo

In the previous examples (13-20), participants sometimes adopt some strategies in online discourse toward other participants. This is due to electronic systems that allow participants to hide their identities. Flaming is one of these strategies in which a participant irritates other participant(s) by directing aggressive behavior. Spamming is another feature in chatting by sending unwanted messages or repeating the same message several times. Spoofing is also found in electronic discourse by sending electronic links or videos in a way that forces others. Trolling is messages that are intended to cause irritation or aggression to other participants because of their hidden identity. Finally, lurking is also found in chatrooms in that some people are online, but they do not contribute to the discussion for many reasons, such as they did not find interest in chatting, or they just want to see what others do, or they do not know how to share the discussion.

10. Conclusions

The analyses showed that internet relay chat users' have a tendency to use different stylistic features like graphic features such as the use of themes, colourful profiles or photos or nicknames. Electronic chat systems allow participants to use many of such features. Orthographic features were also widely and most frequently used in chatrooms, such as the use of small letters instead of capital letters; the use of economy expressions to save time and effort, such as abbreviations and acronyms; ignorance or random use of punctuation marks; the use of smileys instead of punctuation marks at the end of some sentences; and the use of combinations of punctuation marks or smileys for emphasis or to draw attention.

Most sentences are informal and lack grammar, and there is a tendency to use short and incomplete sentences. Internet relay chat conversations are a mixture or variety of formal and informal language because online chatters are of different ages, cultures and regions. Online discourse lacks coherence, and even there is no turn taking or adjacency pairs in most messages because of the high number of participants who are all writing in real time.

Other stylistic features of internet relay chat found in the analyses such as flaming, which is irritating or aggressive messages that are directed toward other participant(s); spamming is also found in the data in that some chatters send unwanted or repeated messages several times in the way of paying attention; spoofing is another stylistic feature used by some chatters through sending suspected or unwanted links and videos; some other participants use trolls by sending antipathy or aggressive messages to a specific person(s), and the final stylistic feature is lurking in that some participants are online, but they do not contribute the discussion.

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