

Chapter LXV

Innovations and Motivations in Online Chat

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the defining linguistic innovations and social motivations for one of the most popular modes of computer mediated communication: the online chat. Due to its nature of being largely synchronous, anonymous, and mainly text-based, online chat offers a social interactional environment where people can experience the feeling of making new friends or acquaintances, psychologically experiment with different identities, and explore new relationships without the shyness that face-to-face interaction can bring. The largely informal and recreational nature of online chat, together with the time constraints that force communicators to come up with interesting ways to sustain efficient communication, turns online chat into a frontier of linguistic innovation. In turn, this leads to a deeper understanding of the nature of online communities.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology over the past 2 decades has contributed considerably to the flourishing of computer mediated communication (CMC). Its emergence has not only expanded our conceptions about communication by offering options never available before, but also blurred the boundary between speech and writing. Computer mediated communication was once held to be ill-suited for social uses (Baron, 1984). Among the various CMC types (modes or registers) such as Web

pages, e-mail, chatting systems, and blogging, online chatroom (hereafter referred to as online chat) holds its own special distinctiveness in terms of being real-time, interactive, anonymous, and mainly text-based. These features of online chat place communicators in a situation of dual “cluelessness:” the lack of social cues (as people do not really know whom they are communicating with due to the largely anonymous nature of the system) and that of the nonverbal and paralinguistic cues. Both social and paralinguistic cues are of great importance to the success of face-to-face communication. That is why online

chat is sometimes depicted as a “lean” medium in contrast to the “rich” medium of face-to-face communication in which information is available through visual, auditory, and gestural channels (Herring, 2001, p. 8). It seems hardly imaginable that such a “lean” medium could gain popularity, considering the range of different communication means available. Oddly enough, millions of people from almost all over the world seem to enjoy using this lean medium and very often for social interaction. -

We could attribute the popularity of online chat (especially by youths) a decade ago to its technical novelty at that time, but how can we explain the popularity it is still enjoying today? There must be something unique about it which cannot easily (or is even impossible to) be achieved by other existing means of communication. Exploring the reasons behind people’s choices and their consequences will give us some insights about who we are, how our language is working, and how human communication is going on. The answers to these questions may or may not have something to do with ever-changing information and communication technologies. As Herring (2004, p. 34) has rightly pointed out, “CMC researchers would do well to take a step back from the parade of passing technologies and consider more deeply the question of what determines people’s use of mediated communication.” With this in mind, let us focus on investigating the following two aspects of online chat:

1. Online chat as a unique means of communication, and
2. Online chat as a frontier of linguistic innovation.

BACKGROUND

Before we proceed to a more detailed discussion of the two aspects outlined above, it is necessary to introduce an overview of the definition of online chat and the existing studies related to it.

What Is Online Chat?

Online chat is a way of real-time communication realized through sending (mainly) text messages via networked computers to people who log on to the same chatroom. The most popular of this kind is Internet Relay Chat (IRC) which was first developed by Jarkko Oikarinen in late August, 1988. IRC provides a way of communicating in real time with people from all over the world who have access to the Internet. Generally, the user runs a program (called a “client”) to connect to a server on one of the IRC networks. Once connected, the user will usually join one or more “channels” and “converse” (through the keyboard) with the people there. Each user is known on IRC by a “nick” which is actually a self-chosen name. Conversations may be public (where everyone in a channel can see the messages sent out by a participant) or private (messages can only be seen by the two participants engaged in the private chat).

Technical Features

Online chat can be totally text-based, although multimedia channels are available especially in Web-based chat. A majority of online chat systems are operated under the so-called “one-way transmission protocols” (Herring, 1999a) which only allows the “speaker” (i.e., the message sender) to send his or her message in its entirety; therefore, the “hearer” (i.e., the potential message receiver) knows nothing about what message is being constructed before it is displayed on the monitor screen. Unlike face-to-face or telephone conversations, online chat seldom follows a sequential pattern. Here, turn-taking is determined by the speed of electronic transmissions as well as the speed of participants’ responses. When there are many “voices” at once, conversation becomes chaotic. The usual way to follow who is “talking” is to look at the nicknames. Due to differences in design, the issue of “tracing who is talking to whom” may not even occur in some chat

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