Chapter 6

Conclusion, Discussion and Suggestions

Conclusion

The study deals with the English language in the Internet chat room. It aims to describe and investigate characteristics of this electronic language in terms of phonological, lexical, syntactic, discourse, non-verbal and certain unique features. Communicative functions of certain features are also analyzed. A representative of population of this study is derived from Yahoo, the top-ranked website (**Top-Ranked Web Site**, 2000), which recorded chat transcripts of 22 web sites during 1998-1999. All chat transcripts of these web sites are purposively selected so that many characteristics of the electronic language are covered. Since language of teenagers is innovative and distinctive (Finegan, 1994 : 373; Holmes, 1994 : 184-187), the chat transcripts of the teen chat room are examined. Even though there is a tendency to mask identities, this phenomenon is not considered. The results of the analysis are then discussed and concluded as in the followings.

1. Phonological feature : Prosody

1.1 Pitch

To compensate for pitch in the chat room, certain creative methods are invented. A distinctive one is the use of question marks in yes-no questions. When question marks are inserted at the end of the yes-no questions, the speaker's rising pitch can simply be perceived. This phenomenon indicates the chatter's ability to go beyond the spatial limitation of the Internet chat room. Sometimes question marks are multiple. This multiplication of question marks not only indicates rising pitch but also signal emphasis.

1.2 Duration

In the chat room, duration is intentionally conveyed through the unusual visual representation of reduplicated letters, particularly the long vowels. The

number of letters repeated indicates the length of such a word or a syllable. The more the letter is reduplicated, the longer it is pronounced. This repetition is also a linguistic alternative to using adverbs. That is, if the repeated word is an adjective, the adverbs "very" or "so" used to give its modification may be no longer needed.

1.3 Loudness

Loudness in the chat room is normally perceived through the use of capitalization, which functions to simulate shouting, yelling (Doell, 1998), the special emphasis and screaming, as found in the chat room studies. In this way, the chatter can attract his partner's attention more immediately. It is noticeable, sometimes, that capitalization is invented together with other creative uses representing phonological features; for instance, words may be at the same time capitalized and multiplied in order that both loudness and long duration of a word could be possibly "heard".

2. Lexical Features

2.1 Sociolinguistic Features : Social and Regional Variables

2.1.1 Social Variables

Social variables can be identified through the language used in the chat room. Chatters type their utterances similar to those they utter in everyday conversation. One example is the phenomenon of "g-dropping" normally indicating the lower social class of the speakers, but in the chat room, it emphasizes an informal atmosphere. Slang, which is mostly used among teenagers (Finegan, 1994 : 373; Holmes, 1994 : 184-187), is another interesting area. Since the chat room in this study falls in the teen category, slang terms are very common. It is found that the terms "hot" and "cool" are frequently used among the teen chatters to express their personal feelings towards their favorite celebrities.

2.1.2 Regional Variables

Since the chatters come from many parts of the world, the way they speak is of course different. Their particular regional variables are mirrored

through the language used. In the chat room studied, U.S. regional variables are the most dominant. It can be therefore concluded that the speakers of this chat room mostly come from the United States.

2.2 Onomatopoeia

The use of onomatopoeia in the chat room expresses the chatter's attempt to convert emotional sounds into a written form. The chatters freely create it in many playful ways. In this study, onomatopoeia can be divided into two types : non-lexical and lexical types. No matter how various they are, these types of word share the same functions. That is, they can reduce the impersonal atmosphere, color written or typed messages and make them more speech-like. The chat participants are also allowed to perceive an immediate feeling. But this word formation is rare in the chat room.

2.3 Clipping

Clipping is one of the favorite word modifications in the chat room since it takes less time to type. In this study, clippings can be divided into three main groups : common clipping, clipping with the plural from and clipping for phonological imitation. Among these, common clipping is the most dominant. In common clipping, hind-clipping is more common than front-clipping.

2.4 Vague Expression

In speaking, vague expression is used especially when it is not appropriate to be precise. However, in the synchronous chat room, the use of this expression is related to the speaker's inability to think of an appropriate word or phrase at that moment because of the time constraint. It also marks casualness of communication. In this study, the term "stuff" is most frequently found.

2.5 Deixis

Like speech communication, the communication in the chat room occurs in real time and synchronously. Because of the situation or context shared between the chat participants, deixis (personal pronoun, place and time deixis) is common

in the Internet chat room. Among the personal pronoun deixis, the first and second personal pronouns are most prominent because they refer to the individuals engaging in this real-time communication. More importantly, by deixis, proximate meanings can be simply conveyed in this non-visual environment.

2.6 Vocative

In the chat room, vocative is very obvious. However, it is mostly redundant. The redundant vocatives are used for the purpose of calling attention and assuring the chat speaker himself that the participant is hearing his/her written utterance. It is found that the on-line vocatives are mostly name-based : first name, family name, shortened name, and name related to positive affect like "Hotties" and "Beautiful". Due to this variety, the social relationships between the chat participants are established differently. As for the targeting vocatives, they occur specifically when the celebrities are addressed in group. Their functions are to identify the particular chat person and avoid potential confusion in the chat room.

2.7 Expletive

2.7.1 Expletive that Concerns Sex or Bodily Excretion

By replacing certain letters of a word or even every element of a whole word with certain characters, such as asterisks or hyphens, the expletive is possibly employed in the chat room. However, a finding reveals that this expletive is often embedded or inserted in a clause.

2.7.2 Expletive that Expresses Emotional Involvement

Similar to speaking, this expletive is invented in the chat room by various phonetic modifications or by substitution of the related words. It is appended as adjuncts to clauses rather than produced as entirely independent moves. On some occasions, the series of this expletive is typed without any pauses to imitate the speech-like features : "ohmigod," for instance.

2.8 Interjection

In speaking, an interjection functions to express a speaker's emotion, such as feelings, curses and wishes, to convey some degree of surprise, unexpectedness or emotive arousal; or even to indicate something the speaker has just found out or noticed (Crystal, 1993 : 190). This speech feature is very frequently found in the chat room. Like expletives, it allows the chatter to express the immediate feeling and then feel as though they are casually talking in a real conversational situation.

3   Syntactic Features

3.1 Ellipsis

Ellipsis is a way that elements are deleted from the utterances or clauses. This deletion is strikingly found in the text-based chat room. The ellipsis of the unstressed subject or main verbs, which are recoverable from the situational context, is the most common. Moreover, many other elements of a clause, particularly the subject and the auxiliary verb may be simultaneously omitted. This simplified structure not only reduces time for typing but also provides the speech-like responses immediately.

3.2 Cleft Structure

In cleft structure, a sentence is syntactically split and divided into two separate clauses; it-cleft and wh-cleft (Carter, 1997b :155; McCarthy, 1998 : 176). To emphasize the key information, the chatter employs the cleft structure (both it-cleft and wh-cleft), especially when they are giving a long description of certain incidents. Compared to the it-cleft, the wh-cleft is more frequently used.

3.3 Dislocation

Dislocation, an exclusive feature in a conversation (Biber, et al., 1999 : 957), is a syntactic construction in which sentence elements appear at or outside a sentence boundary (Bussmann, 1996 : 134). It can be divided into two major types: prefaces and noun phrase tag. Dislocation is also employed to form an utterance in the chat room but only prefaces are found. Like in speech communication, the

preface, which appears at the initial position, is intended to introduce key information so that a listener can establish a shared reference.

3.4 Co-ordinating Conjunction "and"

As a result of time shortage, co-ordinating conjunction "and" is widely employed in the chat room. In spite of being written communication, the chat room does not allow the participant to look over what he/she has already written or even plan the utterances because taking time to review the message may slow the flow of real-time conversation. The electronic descriptive messages are thus highly conjoined with the conjunction "and," demonstrating the progression of linked ideas occuring at the moment of typing.

3.5 Run-on Sentence

A run-on sentence is formed by putting more than one sentence together with either no punctuation or only a comma. Both a fused sentence (without any punctuation) and a comma splice (with the misuse of a comma) are preferred in the chat room. They correspond to the concept of typing economy. With this structure, the written utterances are similar to those of speech communication.

3.6 Existential "there"

Since the existential pattern "there's" is probably easier for the speaker to pronounce than "there are," it is usually uttered in a speech interaction. Due to this familiarity, this pronunciation convenience is also employed in the chat room.

3.7 Multiple Negation

Multiple negation refers to two or more negative forms that co-occur within the same clause or sentence in order to express a single negative meaning. It is commonly found in spoken English (Carter, 1997b : 155-157). In the study, multiple negation is divided into two types : the dependent multiple negation and the independent multiple negation. They are produced in the chat room so that the negative meaning of the utterances can be strengthened.

3.8 Unembedded Dependent Clause

The two important types of unembedded dependent clauses, which include clauses of reason introduced by "because" and sentential relative clauses introduced by "which," are used in the chat room. A clause of reason is used to add some words of explanation, whereas a comment on something that has just been told is given by a relative clause. Both reflect the nature of unplanned utterances.

3.9 Repetition of the Syntactic Form

In speaking, the same syntactic form may be repeated several times (Brown, 1983 : 17). Similar to the chat room, as a sign of ongoing planning, some parts of sentence, especially subjects and verbs may be duplicated. Among many types of verbs, mental verbs are most frequently repeated.

4 Discourse Features

4.1 Exchange

The exchange of the real-time chat room is highly structured with Initiation-Response (IR). However, it is governed by the immediacy and a swelling number of participants. To allow members of the chat room (as many as possible) a chance to take a turn and to keep up a rapid pace of communication, the structural unit of the exchange has to be short. Hence, the follow-up (F) does not appear.

4.2 Adjacency Pair

Like in the spoken language, the adjacency pairs in the chat room are very fluid. Three significant types of adjacency pairs including question-answer, greeting-greeting and compliment-thanks are respectively examined in this study. They are routine sequences usually found in face-to-face interaction. It should be noted, however, that in greeting-greeting, the first and second pair parts need not to be adjacent. Furthermore, the structure of this routine may be abbreviated or violated as a result of informality and urgency of situations. Most of them are the short social expressions, such as "hi" and "hey".

4.3 Turn-taking

Turn-taking is a constant change of a speaker's and a listener's roles (Richard, Platt and Platt, 1992 : 390). The present speaker may take a turn to be the listener. However, this structure is difficult in the chat room because of a lack of turn-taking cues. To solve this limitation, the utterances are intended to be gradually sent, providing multiple streams of split utterances of a single speaker. This indicates the chat speaker's insistence on holding the turn. Since each utterance is chronologically produced, overlap and interruptions, which normally appear in everyday conversation, are not found.

It is important to note that the size of the chat room and the importance of the chat speaker are significant factors to determine the length of the utterances. Since the celebrity is the most important person of the room, he/she can provide the longer messages than the teenagers. Furthermore, there is only one celebrity or no more than four of them visiting each chat room, whereas no less than 30 teenagers are involved. This affects the size of the turn. That is, the celebrity's turn is significantly long but the teenager's is kept short.

5   Non-verbal Features

5.1 Eye Contact

To indicate eye contact in the chat room, the chatters make use of a nickname. That is, they will place their names or nicknames before the utterances, representing virtual eye contact. This is very similar to the use of vocatives.

5.2 Facial Expression

A facial expression can be recognized in the chat room through the so-called emoticon (the graphic use of keyboard) and punctuation. Emoticons are mostly placed at the end of the utterances. The shortened pattern that lacks a character denoting a nose is frequently used. Sometimes, emoticons are repeated several times to intensify the meanings they convey. It can be found, however, that emoticons of the chat room studied do not have any various forms and obvious

meanings. Only plain smiling faces with a positive meaning are regularly employed. Additionally, punctuation like a question mark or an exclamation marker may be used to verbalize facial cues. By this way, the luxurious use of many words is not necessary.

5.3 Gesture

The chatter simply verbalizes his/her gesture by typing the action either in asterisks, colons or parentheses. Such a typed action is not included in a sentence. An emoticon may be applied to indicate the gesture but it is rare. Sometimes, a series of periods, which is related to a speaker's thinking, is also used to imitate the actual pauses as perceived in a conversation.

6 Unique Features

6.1 Phonological Spelling

A phonological spelling refers to a replacement of a word with a shortened form based on the same phonological properties. Even though the way the word is typed is unusual compared to Standard English, its meaning does not change. Instead, the word itself looks simpler. The chatter seems to be familiar with this simplified form rather than the standard one. This specialized spelling can fulfill communicative and social needs in the chat room; it increases typing speed, suggests the chat speaker's casual and relaxed tone with an enjoyable style, and also makes the chatter appear modern. Although certain phonological spellings consume much time for typing, they are welcome since they help color the written messages and immediately attract the participant's attention : "you're" is intended to stand for "your" even though it uses more keystrokes than the common spelling, for instance.

6.2 Shortened Form
6.2.1 Initialism

Importantly, initialisms found in the chat room are very specialized since they are not related to institutions, or used in a particular field. The way words are formed is more flexible and casual; they are mostly typed in lower case letters, whereas some have a variety of forms, depending on the individuals' preference. Markers, either a hyphen or slash, are applied on some occasions. A word is thus easily observed while the boundary of its syllables is identified.

6.2.2 Vowel Dropping

Vowel dropping is a specialized feature found in the chat room. Actually, with a lack of vowels, a word will be very difficult to pronounce. In this visual typing communication, pronunciation is not necessary. Thus, vowels can be simply and deliberately formed without any vowels, such as "ppl" for "people".

6.2.3 Abbreviated Word

In the chat room, abbreviation mainly functions to give the chatter convenience in typing. It is formed by combining the letter with several markers, such as a slash, a period or a hyphen. By doing this, not only the small word is easily observed but also the boundaries of each syllable are marked. Sometimes, this electronic abbreviation may duplicate an existing one, which stands for other things. But, the surrounding words help the participant understand its specific meaning.

6.3 Lack of Capitalization

Capitalization loses its traditional functions in this virtual world. It is intended to convey loudness of the word or the utterance, instead. This is why the chatter generally ignores capitalization of the first word of a sentence, the pronoun "I," abbreviations, designations following a name, the names of months, days of the week as well as holidays, and even proper nouns. Even though considered grammatically incorrect, this ignorance is acceptable since it can speed up the chatter's typing.

6.4 Typing Mistake Due to Time Shortage

Communication in the chat room requires typing ability. To give a quick response, the spelling errors possibly occur. This may result from a slip of fingers ; the chatters' fingers may slip to either the letter next to the intended letter or letters far from that one. Sometimes, the letters of a word may accidentally shift their positions; the following letter may come before the previous one. Anyway, these typing errors do not deserve penalty. Instead, they can produce playfulness in this chat world. The chatters do not correct them unless they cause misinterpretation.

Discussion

The Internet chat room becomes a part of everyday communication. Despite spatial distance, people can simply and rapidly socialize with one another. In this way, their communication has already been changed. Besides, the chat room also affects the language used. Traditional concepts about the separation of spoken and written languages have been blurred in this new environment; various features of writing and speaking are blended together. Some digital features, which are not present in other forms of communication, are also invented. These are discussed as follows :

The chat room has brought out a new convention of the use of characters available on the computer keyboard. This study shows that by non-standard use of capitalization, punctuation and repetition of letters, voice qualities including pitch, loudness and duration have been visually represented. This finding is found to be consistent with that reported in Doell's (1998) and Ott's (1993) studies. They reveal that standard rules of capitalization are largely ignored in the chat room. Capital letters are typed to virtually express loudness. A similar finding is obtained by Jaffe, et al. (1995) and Wauchope (1997). Results indicate that certain chatters employ some exclamation and question marks to convey their tone.

As for words used in the chat room, they reflect and emphasize many speech features. Words indicating sociolinguistic aspects, expletive and interjection are found in this study. This may be because of the casual atmosphere of the chat

room. The phonological spelling is also preferable among the chatters since it helps facilitate communication, save time and maintain the conversation with a particular person. This phenomenon is also found in Paolillo's (1999) finding. He explains that these non-standard spellings as well as obscene terms are frequently used, especially among members of strong-tie networks. Obscene language is also considered an indicator of the speaker's social factors : toughness and masculinity. Hentschel (1998) remarks that the way chatters spell their words very realistically represents the way in which such words are used in actual speech communication. Actually, this study suggests other types of words used in the chat room. They include onomatopoeia, clipping, vague expression, and deixis. These words are usually found in spoken language. By using in the chat room, speech qualities are therefore stressed with less typing time.

With the chatters' love for coining words, abbreviations, which are the linguistic features of written language, are also used in this study. It should be noted, however, that they are considered special since they are not related to any institutions, technical terms or even used in a particular field. Abbreviations receive more attention among the researchers. Some of them are Murphy and Collins (1998), Puterman (1994), Reid, (1991), Suler (1997) and Wohlk (1996). Their studies reveal that chatters invent vocabulary items like the abbreviation, which they never encounter in real life interactions. However, inexperienced chatters may have difficulties in interpreting these shortened forms. This indicates that the Internet chat room is available only to an exclusive group of people. Puterman (1994) and Wauchope (1997) remark on the significance of abbreviation in that it could be a marker of the chatters' "in-group" or "out-group" identity. Many examples of abbreviations are common expressions, such as "LOL," "BRB," "IMHO" and "OTOH" (Murphy and Collins, 1998; Puterman, 1994; Reid, 1991; Suler, 1997; Wohlk, 1996). However, in this study, even one word is preferably abbreviated, like "w" substituted for "with, and "d" for "day," and "q" for "question". It is noticeable that no matter whether abbreviations are formed from either one word or a long social expression, they share the same function, which is

to speed up the written communication. The use of these words may not be consistent, depending on the individual's value and style.

Non-standard syntactic features are widely observed. Suler (1997) suggests that most of the time people express what they want to say in a brief sentence or in sentence fragments. This way of speaking is very apparent, especially when people meet each other for the first time. Because the visual cues are not available in the chat room, chatters feel the need to determine the qualities of the users around them and whom they want to engage. Questions concerning age or gender, which are rarely asked in everyday conversation, are more socially acceptable here (Suler, 1997). This appears to correspond to a finding of this research. Ellipsis of certain elements of a sentence is mostly used to accelerate communication. However, some results of this study are exceptional. Since the teen participants have known for some time to whom they are going to talk, such terse questions do not appear. Moreover, there are many other syntactic features of spoken language found in this study. They include cleft structure, dislocation, vocative, run-on sentence, existential "there," double negation, unembedded dependent clauses and repetition. These features are regarded a sign of colloquial style as a result of familiarity with daily use in spoken communication.

This study also confirms the existence of discourse features in the synchronous chat room. Exchange and adjacency pairs of the chat room are comparable to those of a speech communication. However, turn-taking is not exactly the same. That is, the overlapping of the utterances, which are used in speaking, is not found. This peculiar turn-taking may be influenced by the characteristics of the medium itself; the turn-taking in the study seems to be controlled by the host of the room. In addition, it is found that the length of the turn depends on the size of the chat room and the importance of the chat speaker. When the chat room is crowded, the turn tends to be short. The important person can be given or hold the turn longer than the others. In addition, the response of a single chatter may be split. It may consist of a verbalization of minimal responses, such as "mmm," "hmm" and "erm". This turn with minimal responses helps the chat speaker keep holding the floor. A similar view is proposed by Hentschel (1998)

and Puterman (1994). They suggest that this phenomenon not only breaks down the silence of communication but also allows participants to recognize an ongoing response and therefore prevents them from taking the chat speaker's turn. However, Puterman point out that the chatters, who rarely communicate in the chat room, are often unaware of using the minimal responses. This is because these inexperienced chatters unconsciously produce them in their real-life conversations.

An entirely different keystroke as well as playful and creative techniques by means of written utterances have been developed in order to carry unreal non-verbal cues in the chat room. Emotional words and action description are the outstanding ones. In this study, among other types of emoticons, smiling faces are the most preferable. This is probably because they are well known among the chat community. The way these icons are used is like a letter conclusion; that is, they appear at the end of the utterance to express their friendliness. Reid (1991) and Leaning (1998) suggest the importance of emoticons. To Reid, these icons may affect successful communication in the chat room because they are a mark of "inside status". Besides, not only are they considered a mark of "inside status," but also important to the construction of the chat community; without these textual cues, a chat community would be impossible to establish. Similarly, Leaning (1998), who studied identity and meaning in the chat room, adds that emoticons add depth to communication. Using them, chat participants can condense complex meaning within the short time.

Typing mistakes, the characteristic mostly found in writing, is fairly often found in the synchronous chat room. Based on the typed text, the chat room requires typing skill. Accelerating typing to produce a smooth flow of communication may accidentally cause some mistakes. In the study, these mistakes include missing letters and finger slipping. But, with the context and shared background knowledge, misunderstanding does not occur. Many researchers express their positive attitudes towards this phenomenon. To Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright and Rosenbaum-Tamari (1995), typing errors are considered "word play" in the chat room. Normally, chatters will not pay attention to these mistakes unless they provide the possibility of misunderstanding (Wohlk, 1996).

In this study, features of spoken and written languages are found from small linguistic units to larger ones. As a seemingly poor and rudimentary means of communication, the chat room has to bring out many strategies, making its language distinctly unique. However, this electronic language appears to be very much closer to spoken language than written language. This may be because it is produced "on the fly," like spoken language. When one learns to use this new language, one may try to develop it in a very creative way. With frequent use, this new language becomes more standardized in this virtual community and eventually produces a new register of the English language. Anyway, it could be observed that these speech-like features of the chat room language are widely and creatively found in the earlier written texts, such as comic strips, personal letter or even written dialogues in literary work, especially when the writer want to convey the characters' real pronunciation.

Suggestions for Further Studies

This research focuses on the characteristics of the English language used in the Internet chat room. It provides understanding of how the Internet, as a modern device for communication, has introduced a new dimension of the English language in which the dichotomy of written and spoken languages are blurred. Comparative studies on the language used in the chat room and that used in the traditional forms of synchronous communication, such as telephone conversation, are also interesting. Being limited by immediacy and informality of a situation, language in the chat room and telephone conversation may be similar in some aspects, but some differences may be found at the same time since by these two communicative devices, people are allowed to engage in conversation differently. A study of the significant similarities and differences in the language used should be continued.

At the present time, communicative technologies based on the Internet are rapidly progressing. There is a possibility of sending on-line messages in the form of computer graphic and even live audio. In this way, communication in the

Internet chat room no longer means only keyboards, typing speed and typed utterances, but microphones, real voice and digitized pictures. Language produced by these innovative forms can probably become another area of a research in linguistics and communication.

Examination of language used in asynchronous communication, such as electronic mail, newsgroup, or web board, should be paid much attention. In asynchronous communication, people interact non-visually with one another at different times. Consequently, the written utterances are possibly well-planned or edited and carefully-organized. Thus, it might be useful to see whether the linguistic features of spoken language are found or not, and in what way they are expressed.