Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

With the emergence of the digital age, technology is playing a more and more significant role in communication. One potential communication technology is the Internet. The term "Internet" generally refers to the international computer network connecting millions of people. Since it has no center and therefore no hierarchy, the Internet is often considered the most democratic medium of communication (Wohlk, 1996). Today, the Internet is progressing at a fantastic pace. The dramatic growth in number of Internet hosts as well as Internet users provides important evidence of this. There were approximately 147.3 million Internet hosts in the year 2002 (Internet Software Consortium, 2002). In addition, the number of Internet users was 544.2 million by the end of February 2002 (ComputerScope Ltd., 2002a), and by 2005 it is expected to reach 943 million (ComputerScope Ltd., 2002b). The Internet has thus become an influential device, constructing a new type of communication network.

Text-based communication on the Internet is called Computer-Mediated Communication (henceforth CMC). CMC can be generally divided into two important types : asynchronous and synchronous. In asynchronous communication, people can interact with one another at different times, whereas synchronous communication involves real-time interaction. By these types of CMC, it appears that people worldwide are allowed not only to transmit, store and retrieve messages (Greller and Barnes, 1993) but also to communicate more flexibly (December, 1993). They can thus transcend limitations of time and space. The world then turns into a village, and a boundless "global village[1]" may finally take place.

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[1] The global village is the place where people worldwide can communicate with one another as if they lived in the same village. This communicative concept was developed by Marshall McLuhan, the famous Canadian communication theorist (Doherty, 1995).

One of the most important ways that people take part in synchronous communication is to "chat" (Murphy and Collins, 1997). They may chat on a variety of topics by typing or rather writing utterances, which will then appear on the participant's computer screen. By this way, the chat room can simply provide a global domain of discussion among diverse people. In addition, there are various Internet web sites offering both commercial and free chat-room services. American Online (http://www.aol.com) and Prodigy (http://www. prodigy.com) are examples of commercial chat-room web sites accessible only to their subscribers, whereas many chat systems found on the Internet are free, such as Yahoo (http://www.yahoo.com), Excite (http://www.excite.com) and Infoseek (http://www. info seek.com). In addition, structures of the different chat rooms vary; it may be one to one, one to a group, or an open group dialogue. No matter how various the structures are, the chat room of these web sites usually takes place under the same rules; that is, chatters have to reply to any utterances in a courteous manner (Worcestor, 1999).

Since communication in the chat room is anonymous, a nickname, known in short as a "nick," is needed to identify participants. Since it is usually found at the beginning of the chat, the nickname is regarded as a first sign of individuality. However, the chat program does not allow two participants to adopt the same nickname simultaneously. If the nickname is used by another chatter, a person has to choose an alternative (Reid, 1991). Many researchers point out the importance of the on-line nickname. In several cases, the nickname serves as a first impression to show certain sociological features or positive social values that chatters want to present (Bays, 1998). To Suler (1997), it can make the chat room less chaotic, despite the lack of visual cues identifying participants. Moreover, the nickname may imply the group each person belongs to, serves as a mask to hide an explicit identity by allowing people to be another (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright and Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997) and also attract attention (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright and Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1995). It should be noted that the nickname can be easily changed at any time, even every few seconds; however, chatters prefer to retain

one nickname for a long period since a stable one is a means of making friends (Bechar-Isaeli, 1995).

Communication in the Internet chat room modifies considerably the traditional notions of spoken language and written language. Spoken and written languages have previously been considered clearly separate. As a synchronous communication, spoken language is produced and consumed at the same time, whereas in the asynchronous communication of written language, there is a temporal difference between its production and reception. T.S. Elliot (quoted in Hughes, 1996 : 5) remarked this dichotomy of written and spoken languages as follows:

> ...an identical spoken and written language would be practically intolerable. If we spoke as we write we should find no one to listen: and if we wrote as we speak, we should find no one to read. The spoken and written language must not be too near together.

This quotation above supports the separation and the difference of written and spoken languages. However, the chat room has already blurred such traditional notions. Every time Internet connections take place and the chat room begins, written messages can be simply produced with the characteristics of spoken language. Some researchers ascribe this to the immediacy and the primary purpose of the chat room, which is to socialize (Noblia, 1998). This influence of computers on language change is noted by Halliday (1989 : 81-82):

> With modern technology, the distinction (between writing and speech) is being blurred. ... [W]ith computers, much of our reading matter is now fed to us in the form of moving text, line following line up the screen with only two or three lines visible at a time...

Horowiz and Samuels (1987, quoted in Troest, 1998) also observes that

> Computer permits the produce of a new kind of written language. Although it has not been extensively researched, the way which written language is produced by computer operations may dramatically change not only the nature of writing as a process, but also the nature of language as an object.

Computer technology has altered the nature of written language and produces a new form. By computer, written language could not be regarded as an object since it is no longer static and persistent over a period of time. Instead, similar to speech, it becomes dynamic and also has continuous movements.

Many researchers who have long been interested in the relationship between language and technology pay much attention to Internet-based communication. Some argue whether the language in this type of communication should be categorized as written or as spoken language, whereas others think that it represents a newly different dimension and category. Among these researchers, Coate (1992) and Young (1994) share a similar viewpoint. They agree that the electronic language exhibits characteristics of spoken language because of the instant responses, a sense of distinct presence in time, and the freedom to move freely in a text. Besides, certain specialized features, such as abbreviation, graphic representation of non-verbal cues and phonological spellings, are also created to serve many functions. They not only help speed up communication and eventually allow for a smoother flow of conversation (Backer, 1997; Puterman, 1994) but also color written messages (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright and Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997). Moreover, these features may be regarded as a status marker, identifying chatters as a member of this new environment. A person who ignores them is definitely residing at a lower status in the chat room (Puterman, 1994). Hence, from these linguistic and communication viewpoints, this electronic language is worth studying.

Globally, there are several web sites providing chat-room services. One of them is Yahoo, which has been selected as a representative web site in the study. Under this free chat system, chat transcripts are classified according to 6 main chat rooms : (1) movies and television, (2) music, (3) news, finance and sports, (4) health and family, (5) living, and (6) teen, respectively. Language used in the teen chat room, in which there are only celebrities and teenagers chatting to each other, is very distinctive; that is, teenagers not only exhibit exclusive use of innovative forms of language (Holmes, 1994 : 184-185) but are the most frequent user of non-

standard forms (Chamber, 1995 : 170-171). Thus, it may be useful to investigate and describe the language characteristics used in this category.

Objectives

1. To investigate and describe the characteristics of the English language used in the Internet chat room

2. To analyze the functions of certain linguistic features of this type of English

Significance of the Study

The study will give a better understanding of a new dimension of language -- a hybrid of written language and spoken language -- and it might be of interest to those who are studying other aspects of communication on the Internet.

Limitations of the Study

The study deals with the characteristics and certain specialized functions of the English language found in the Internet chat-room transcripts of Yahoo web site during 1998-1999. Language features (phonological, lexical, syntactic, discourse, non-verbal) and certain features unique to CMC, more specifically to the Internet chat room, are the focuses. The phenomenon of the masking of age and gender identities is not considered in this study.

Definition of Terms

Internet chat room :   The web site allowing participants to synchronously engage in written conversations

Verbal language :   The phenomena of vocal and written communication among human beings

Non-verbal language :   The elements that represent people's actions or attributes other than words. In this research, it is

limited only to eye contact, facial expression and gesture.

Research Methodology

The research procedure of this study includes the following stages: 1) Determining population, 2) Selecting sample and 3) Data analysis

1. Determining Population

Yahoo web site (www.yahoo.com) records chat transcripts from various web sites. It is also considered a top-ranked web site (**Top-Ranked Web Site**, 2000) and the world's most popular website (ComputerScope Ltd. 2001). Thus, this free chat system has been selected as a representative web site in this research. Chat transcripts of the 21 web sites recorded by Yahoo from 1998 to 1999 are as follows:

1) CNNSI.com web site (http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com)
2) D.A.R.E web site (http://www.dare-america.com)
3) Earth Day Network web site (http://wwwearthday.com)
4) Foxsports web site (http://www.foxsports.com)
5) Hollywood.com web site (http://www.hollywood.com)
6) MLS web site (http://www.mlsnet.com)
7) ModernBride.com web site (http://www.modernbride.com)
8) React.com web site (http://www.react.com)
9) Roughcut.com web site (http://www.roughcut)
10) Seventeen web site (http://www.seventeen.com)
11) Soap Opera Digest web site (http://www.soapdigest.com)
12) Sonicnet.com web site (http://www.sonicnet.com)
13) SPE web site (http://www.spe.sony.com)
14) TBS Superstation web site (http://tbssuperstation.com)
15) Teenhollywood.com web site (http://www.teen hollywood.com)
16) The Health Network.com web site (http://www.Thehealthnet work.com)
17) Time.com web site (http://www.time.com)
18) TV Guide web site (http://www.tvguide.com)
19) Washingtonpost.com web site (http://www.washingtonpost.com)
20) Yahoo web site (htttp://www.chat.yahoo.com)
21) ZDNet web site (http://zdnet.com)

All chat transcripts of the 21 web sites in Yahoo were purposively selected to ensure that many characteristics of language used in the Internet chat room are covered.

2. Selecting Sample

As previously mentioned, chat transcripts of Yahoo are classified according to 6 chat rooms provided : (1) movies and TV, (2) music, (3) news, finance and sports, (4) health and family, (5) living, and (6) teen. Language used in the teen chat room is purposively selected in the study because teenagers are the most frequent users of innovative (Finegan, 1994 : 373 ; Holmes, 1994 : 184-187) and non-standard forms of language; they prefer using slang since it acts as a significant marker of group membership and as a solidarity marker (Chambers, 1995 : 170-171 ; Holmes, 1994 : 183). The total number of chat transcripts in the teen chat room is presented in the table below.

Table 1 Number of Chat Transcripts Studied

Year	Total
1998	24
1999	123
Total	147

All 147 chat transcripts are studied in this research.

3. Data Analysis

Language used in the 147 chat transcripts will be investigated and described in terms of the following linguistics features : phonological, lexical, syntactic, discourse and non-verbal features, and certain features unique to the chat room. The results of the analysis are then discussed and conclusions are drawn.

It should be remarked that in this study, the word "sic" enclosed by square brackets is used to indicate an error in spelling or usage as it appears in the original

chat transcript. Some spelling mistakes, which may cause misunderstanding, will be eventually edited.