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A Few Notes on the Nature of English Chat Communication

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Abstract

The chat communication provides once unimaginable possibilities of connection between people who are distant thousands of miles from each other. The objective of the paper is to describe, analyze, and explain the nature of this new form of communication by pointing out to its crucial features which make it hybrid of both spoken discourse and written texts.

Keywords: chat; spoken and written discourse.

Introduction

Modern technologies of the present enable us to communicate effectively by means of electronic gadgets, such as personal computers, mobile phones, tablets, ipads, etc. The Internet provides profound ways to communicate by means of e-mail messages, creating your own webpages, blogging, or using existing chatrooms of various kinds. Chat is a service which enables dynamic *written* and/or *visual/audio-visual* communication of two or more participants (interlocutors, users) via electronic social network(s). Users of a particular chatroom must have an access to the Internet and must be properly registered and logged in using a nick(name) which is generally considered a great advantage as it provides a high scale of anonymity. Other users are also hidden behind their nick(name)s. This approach makes communication among users all around the globe possible. Our research is focused on the analysis of the nature of the three selected chats (www.icq.com, www.quakenet.org, and www.yahoo.com) which are said to be the most popular chats nowadays.

Classification of chat

There are many linguistics investigating a brand-new branch of linguistics as the Internet communication is, e.g. Crystal (2001, 2004, 2010, 2011), Demiščáková (2001), Herring (2001), Kulánková and Čamek (2010), Mahdi (2012), Shea (2004), or Štulajterová (2014) just to name a few. Chats are viewed and classified from various aspects depending on the pre-selected criteria. D. Crystal as one of the first linguists describing this new phenomenon distinguishes *asynchronous* from *synchronous* chats. Synchronous communication takes place simultaneously in a real time ('here and now') between two or more interlocutors. This kind of communication is based on a turn-taking. Asynchronous communication is an option to react anytime (e.g. after a month or even later) due to the fact that it is used in long-time debates, in discussion forums, feedbacks, etc. when their users can react anytime they want to. Another criterion is based on an axis *private – public* depending on the number of users seen by others (private chats occurs between two users and others cannot see nor share their communication, while public chat is available for all registered and logged users).

Research objective

Our research is focused on synchronous chats open to the effective communication among enormous number of users. The aim is to find out whether chat shares more features with written

or spoken discourse and how are these expressed in particular. The question is what the difference is between discourse and text (if any) or whether the terms may be used synonymously. Discourse is usually understood in terms of context-dependent communicative events, while text is often viewed as the written record of a communicative event conveying a complete message. Certainly texts may comprise a single word, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, or the whole publications [1]. However, the essential difference between written and spoken discourse may be expressed by means of binary oppositions, such as written (text/discourse) versus oral discourse, formal vs. informal, public vs. private, prepared/arranged vs. spontaneous, monologue vs. dialogue. Written texts are perceived in terms of their visual orthographic form and logical structure of clauses, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc. as those create the formal part of a text. Orthoepic (phonetic) form is neglected excluding, e.g. dramatic reading or poetry. Thus chatter cannot primarily use pronunciation, intonation, tempo or accent significant in spoken discourse. However, the change of written form can substitute this handicap, e.g. by using initials, italics, emoticons, interjections, dots, question/exclamation marks or other punctuation marks, changing the font size, etc. – these are important as they create and modify the whole context of electronic communication. E.g. the following sentence ‘You’re a genius.’ must be understood literally without any further context. However, ‘You’re a *genius*.’ turns its literal meaning into irony (opposite meaning). However, the main feature of a written text is its preparedness/arrangement from the formal and semantic viewpoints. Public texts are usually all formal and official, however, chat does not confirm this premise. On contrary, this communication is not well-arranged (at least it is not expected to be), intentional or unintentional misspellings, informal lexis, short sentences, unfinished thoughts, etc. are often present – it is very often stylistically marked. One can assert that chat has more features of informal private oral communication than ‘typical’ written texts. Certainly, written texts may be private and highly informal, however, not in public space. Written texts have been considered monologous until emerge of the Internet and chatrooms based primarily on dialogues. Discourse in general may be described by attributes, such as oral, private, spontaneous/not arranged, and dialogue which is true for chat communication as well.

Research theoretical background

The nature of the Internet communication becomes a specific phenomenon typical for combining features of written and spoken discourse. Those features seem to co-operate and/or be in a conflict from time to time. Authors comparing written texts to spoken discourse are usually focusing on differences between these two language forms (e.g. Carter and Nunan, Crystal and Davy, Findra, Halliday, Mistrík, Pavlík, or Štulajterová). It is obvious that written texts are more than just a kind of talk written down [1]. According to M.A.K. Halliday writing appeared in human society as a result of changes which created new communicative needs and those needs could not be fulfilled by the spoken language anymore [2], especially in times when there was a need for permanent records of trade, goods, numbers, etc. Functions and contexts of new form of language were different from the spoken medium. Nowadays in the information (computer, digital) age written language is no longer used for storing information only – written language becomes the comfortable means of communication between people who live in other settlements, countries or continents. At the present the differences between the two forms of language (i.e. betw. spoken and written) are not exact – this may result in the fact that some written texts resemble more spoken discourse and some cases of spoken language may look like written texts [1].

R. Pavlík asserts essential features typical of spoken and written discourse as presented below [3]:

Table: Spoken discourse vs written texts

Spoken discourse (SD)	Written texts (WT)
realized in sounds	realized in letters
usu. takes place in real time	graphic record of past, present, or future events
has no generally recognizable sentence-delimiting marks	the sentence is the fundamental structural unit
heavily context-dependent	is relatively independent of context

is usually very interactive	their interactivity is limited
the feedback is immediate	the feedback is delayed or none
little revising and editing	extensive revising and editing
is usu. syntactically and lexically simple	is usu. syntactically and lexically complex
often employs non-standard or informal language means	often employs standard language means
often exhibits dysfluency and error	usu. free of dysfluency and error
represents a series of processes and actions	usu. describe states and objects
is flowing, processlike, oriented towards events – with meanings related serially	is dense, structured, crystalline oriented towards things, productlike – with meanings related as components

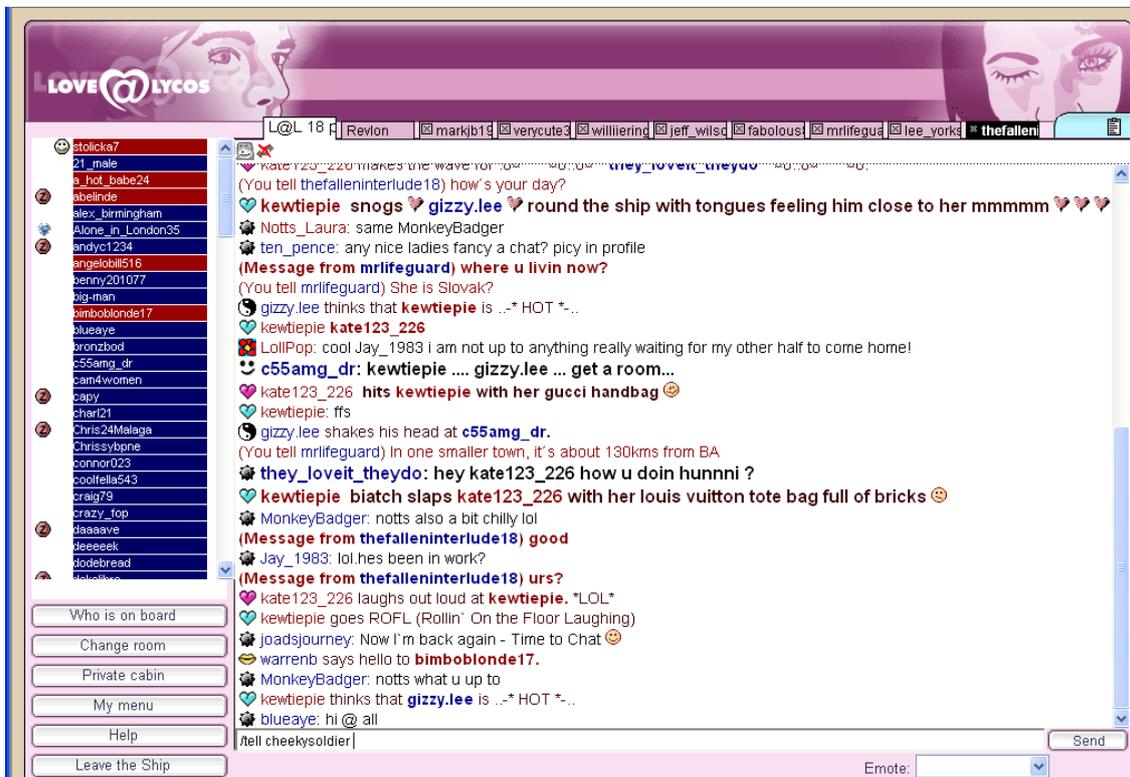
Research analysis

However, one can see that features typical of what is traditionally called spoken discourse and written text may be easily challenged from the point of view of electronic communication, especially chat communication provided on various social networks. We have observed the chat communication on the most popular servers, such as www.icq.com, www.quakenet.org, and www.yahoo.com from April to December 2014. The research corpus covers approximately a hundred norm pages downloaded from various *chatrooms* (e.g. 50 Something, Looking for Love, or Teens). It has been noticed that the aforementioned features of spoken and written language (see the table above) are mixed in the Internet communication provided by various chat services (see Picture 1 and 2):

- it is a kind of dynamic virtual (not face-to-face) communication (with the exception of Skype for instance);
- the communication between interlocutors (see Picture 1) is realized in letters and other signs (e.g. capitalization, italics, punctuation, emoticons and other symbols);
- the communication between chat users/interlocutors is both time-bound and space-bound, i. e. it occurs in real time (it is usually synchronous as opposed to the e-mail communication which is usually asynchronous);
- dialogue-based point of chat (referring to free and/or open discussion);
- the previous feature results in almost immediate feedback, however, a sort of time-lag between production and reception may vary according many aspects that users cannot influence, e. g. the Internet connection;
- interactivity is also present by means of hypertext links which are traditionally recognized and presented in blue underlined text and help users to move from one web page to another [4];
- interlocutors are distant from each other (the addressee is distant from the addressed);
- the use of sentence as the basic unit, or other structures, for instance paragraphs, but also repetition and comment clauses [5];
- in general lack of any visual contact between users with the exceptions, e. g. Skype;
- the mixture of standard and non-standard language means, e.g. familiar expressions or vulgar lexis;
- errors (e.g. misspellings), one typed, can be deleted, but errors once sent cannot be corrected anymore;
- novel, non-traditional, creative and playful qualities brought to language means (neologic abbreviations, and clips and blends as well as various hybrid expressions are being introduced);
- economy of expression in usage of various abbreviated forms, such as initialisms (e.g. CU meaning *see you* or JK *just kidding*), acronyms (e.g. BTW – *by the way*, LOL – *laughing out loud* or *lots of love*) and their hybrids usually combined with numerals (e.g. F9 meaning *fine*), blends (e.g. *blog*), and clips (e.g. *the net*, *the web*) – the economy covers morphemes, words, expressions (e.g. BOT – *back on topic*, nvm – *Never mind.*), and even the whole sentences, usually those with the highest frequency of repetition (e.g. cul8r/CUL8R stands for *See you later*. DIKU means *Do I know you?*, ruf2t means *Are you free to talk?*);

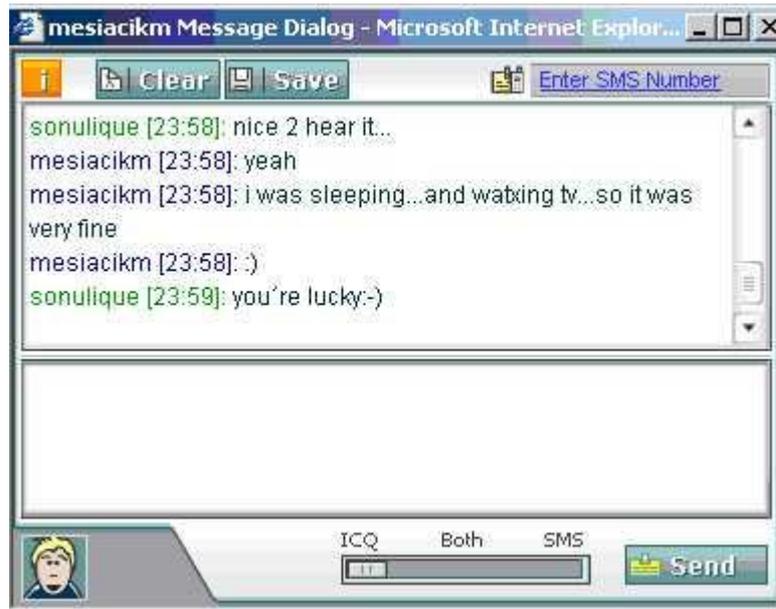
- chat communication occurs primarily among people in productive age, i.e. among the members of young and middle-age generation between 18 and 49 (nearly 94 per cent of all chat users if we are to believe statistical data from www.bogtreff.com about their users) and the average age of chat users is 30 [6];
- enormous popularity of chatrooms – in the course of our research observation there were thousands registered chat users – popularity has been growing onwards;
- presence of extralinguistic factors influencing communication (access to technology enabling the connection, distance betw. interlocutors, laugh, facial expressions, etc.);
- anonymity of interlocutors (see picture 1) on one hand and a kind of illusion of ‘close’ (nearly personal) contact on the other due to choice of the familiar (non-standard) language (e.g. usage of such expressions as if in a personal dialogue – *you see/know*, the use of ellipses, etc. [7]) and extra-linguistic means;
- in terms of the communicative situation, i.e. there is the tension between public (Picture 1) and private (Picture 2), spoken and written, monologue and dialogue [7] that one can observe;
- the language style is not homogenous in chats (it varies from publicistic to colloquial to various forms of invitations, applications or questionnaires using administrative style, etc.)
- from stylistic point of view one can observe the tension on the axis formal – informal, neutral – marked, positively expressive (familiar words) – negatively expressive (vulgar or obscene words);
- neutral language means prevail over stylistically marked ones – linguists agree on this (for instance Crystal or Findra), but this fact has been proved by our research as well (over 94 % of all language means have been classified as neutral, and the rest, 5,5 %, has turned out to be marked/coloured [5]);
- however, one of typical features of the language used in chat communication is its colloquial quality penetrating neutral forms of language [8];
- specific relation between the deep structure (contents) and surface structure (formal arrangement) of the particular communication on the chat.

Picture 1: Chat communication [6]



The chat communication may occur among unlimited number of interlocutors (see Picture 1 taken from yahoo) who are usually listed on the left part of the monitor marked, in this particular case, in accordance with their gender (red colour – females, blue refers to male chatters). Users can see only nicknames of other interlocutors who have been chatting with you. The line at the bottom provides the space for your message which is sent in the moment of click on 'enter' key or 'send' on the right. However, two interlocutors may conduct 'private' communication by sending messages to each other without awareness of other chatters (see Picture 2). They just click on the nick of a person they want to communicate this way and tick *private message*. The advantage is a particular illusion of privacy (there is no actual privacy on the Internet).

Picture 2: Private message window [6]



Some chats provide their users creation of *private chat room* (Picture 2) enabling access approved only by a creator of such a *room* (other users are excluded). However, if chatters write their messages in a public space (not private chat rooms), they never know who is on the other side (who the addressed one is). Thus an addressee becomes highly uncertain. The aforementioned confirms constant tension between public and private qualities of the chat. This tension results in ambivalent and rather 'free' style of expression (e.g. addressing users by their first names or nicknames, absence of titles and degrees, informal lexis, absence of polite hedges, etc.). This reacted in a need of keeping fixed rules communication and behaviour when in cyberspace, today known as the Internet etiquette or *Netiquette*. In her online book by the same name [9] Victoria Shea (2004) introduced ten core rules to be mandatorily kept when online (<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>). Although, majority of users are more or less aware of them, those become very often violated according to Crystal [10]. This may be caused by the fact that chat provides a kind of illusion of equality regardless social status, age, education or some other criteria considered relevant in face-to-face communication.

Although the expected feature of written texts is (pre-) arrangement, this is disputable in case of chat communication due to its high speed causing many errors in form of misspellings, ellipses, omissions and other defects (lexical, morphemic, and syntactic). This can be demonstrated on the following example: *raychael_blue: hi im 18 female my pic is on profile if ne1 wnts to chat to me xxx* [6]. It is obvious that a user nicknamed *raychael_blue* simplifies her message by violating basic grammatical rules (spelling, syntax, sentence punctuation, upper case) and uses creative clips (*pic, wnts*) in order to make her communication brief and clear and effective (i.e. she is very economical with her writing saving her time and energy). Certainly, texting is not a new

phenomenon restricted to the young generation only. Abbreviations (acronyms, initialisms, blends, clips, etc.) help more than hinder language standards [4, 11].

We can conclude that chat and written texts do not share many common features and qualities. On contrary, it is obvious that chat communication shares features typical of spoken discourse. Certainly, chat is not 'spoken' or 'oral' in a true meaning of speech, however, it attempts to imitate spoken form of language by using signs and symbols, such as emoticons (usually smilies, e.g. ☺) or others imitating smilies, e.g. :-). In general, spoken language has interactional function, while written form of language is considered to have transactional function [11]. However, from our analysis it is obvious that this does not work for chat communication. In other words, publically written texts are expected to be formal and highly official, however, the analysis of chat proved just the opposite tendency. Chat participants dislike formal language and prefer non-standard informal and familiar expressions. If they happen to 'say': *'Excuse me, Mr X Y, I'd like to inform you that I disagree, because I don't consider it appropriate'*, one can be sure of irony of such message aiming to mock the addressee [6]. Another significant factor to be mentioned is the open and public quality of chat communication as users have not ever met in person. However, generalisations of this kind are disputable in individual cases.

Last but not least – chat is no monologue. Written text is expected to occur in a form of monologue which is not true either as this type of communication is typical for feedbacks of various kinds, thus imitating a face-to-face communication in person. Monologue thus remains only in a potential level. The speed and fluency of communication create a particular time pressure on individual interlocutors who tend to write back to all participants registered in their chat room. Dialogue (although only on a virtual level) is what is chatting about – chat is meant to be a dialogue between two users at least and the other participant may join them, e.g.:

savetao5: i am having a problem i need to talk to some one

c.natalie: hello savetao5, whats the problm

savetao5: my boyfriend that is was woth for a year is cheating on me

vikkyzangel: i am sort of having the same problem [6].

This makes us to come back to the question whether chat shares more features with spoken discourse or written text.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be asserted that chat shares more features with spoken than written language. It can be considered public and private depending on the individual wishes of chatters. However, it is highly interactive requiring dynamic (fast and effective) feedback(s) in form of a dialogue with other participants. All interlocutors are under time pressure and this fact effects style of communication as far as it causes high frequency of errors on all language levels. This makes messages look spontaneous (i.e. unprepared/unarranged), informal, even non-standard. In attempt to answer the question about the nature of chat, it can be asserted that chat has become a new communicative phenomenon of previous 15 years typical of its dynamic development and growing popularity among generation in productive age. The chatters seek effective and economical communication with other interlocutors and hybrid qualities of chat sharing features of both spoken and written language enable them to do so.

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