The Grammar of Internet Language

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It would not be amiss to say that the *Internet* is an electronic medium which facilitates and constrains our ability to communicate in ways that are different from those found in other semiotic situations. Although the *Internet* enables people to interact electronically with as much ease as they do in person, what is obvious when engaging in any of the Internet's functions is its linguistic character. "Internet culture is still largely a text-based affair," points out David Crystal[1]. That is why it is the task of the linguist to analyse the role of *language* in the Internet as well as the effect of the Internet on *language*.

More specifically, the linguist must answer questions such as the following:

- In what aspects is the way in which we use *language* on the Internet different from our "previous" linguistic behaviour?

- Does the Internet as a whole constitute a homogeneous linguistic medium, a collection of different dialects, or an aggregation of idiosyncratic usages?

Describing *Internet* language as a language variety involves analysing a series of features which are usually present in any form of written language. According to Crystal (2004), many stylistic approaches recognise five main types of features for *written* language:

1. GRAPHIC FEATURES, such as layout or page design, typography, spacing, captions, headlines, columns, illustrations, colour.

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[1] David Crystal (2004). *Language & the Internet*. CUP

2. ORTHOGRAPHIC or GRAPHOLOGICAL FEATURES determined by the writing system of each individual language; these include a specific alphabet, conventions on the use of capital letters, spelling, punctuation, and emphasis (signalled by italics, boldface, etc.)

3. GRAMMATICAL FEATURES determined by the grammar of each individual language; these include morphological features such as *tense*, *agreement* and *case* inflections and cliticisation patterns; and syntactic features such as sentence structure, word order and restrictions on the scope of negation and quantification.

4. LEXICAL FEATURES regarding the use of vocabulary and idioms in connection with meaning and register.

5. DISCOURSE FEATURES such as the structural organisation of text (i.e. "discourse functions"), paragraph structure, logical progression of ideas, coherence, and relevance.

However, the characterisation of a language variety such as the so-called "internet language" does not amount just to its formal and stylistic features. Rather, it ultimately involves a characterisation of *discourse* in a broader sense, namely the characterisation of linguistic discourse within the scope of a cultural context in which such language variety is allowed to emerge: a cultural environment which is different from, for example, those which fostered the emergence of the narrative genre as the predominant one, including here not only literary forms, but also the discourse of science.

Following this line of thought, we can claim that the cultural condition known as *Modernity*, which corresponds to a historical period (XVIIth–XXth centuries) in which written language gradually became widespread –and eventually hegemonic insofar as it gave solid foundations to modern institutions– in Western societies, was partly characterised by a very particular use of written language.

The onset of Modernity in the European continent roughly coincides with the emergence of modern European languages. Eventually, when philosophical and literary texts begin to be written in new vernacular languages, there arises the need to coin new words and to normalise spelling and grammar in those languages. Writers borrow heavily from classical languages in order to make up for the lack of specific vocabulary in the new languages, and dictionaries and grammars begin to be produced and published. Thus, institutionalisation of written

language by the printing of religious, philosophical, scientific and literary texts takes place, and accompanies the ensuing growth of literacy and formal education in society.[2]

Contrary to the prevalence of Medieval dogma and superstition, humanism and secularism lead, during Modernity, to a conception of the universe which is characterised by an explanation of facts based upon a cause-consequence relation and by the search of truth through empiricism and experience rather than through reliance on faith or intuitive belief. This epistemological trend is correlative with the birth of the *novel* as the typical Modern literary genre. As a form of expression of Modern *individualism,* which stems from the new forms of urbanisation, mercantilism and the concentration of capital, together with the personal relationship with God imposed by the Protestant Reformation, the novel places an individual character in a particular setting and follows its progress in time and space, linking the relevant events in terms of causes and their consequences.[3]

The sequence of events which composes the Modern narrative necessarily culminates in the attainment of *progress*, both at an individual as well as a social level. According to Habermas (1981), one "project" of Modernity has been the fostering of progress by incorporating principles of rationality and hierarchy into public and artistic life. Lyotard (1979) understands Modernity as a cultural condition characterised by constant change in the pursuit of progress.[4]

We can say that Modernity and *Postmodernity* are cultural environments largely characterised by the way in which the form and function of written language is defined. During Modernity, knowledge acquires the form of a narrative in which natural and sociohistoric phenomena are logical consequences of their causes. In other words, Modern discourse is structured upon *entailment*, that is, the progression of Modern narrative is built upon a sequential cause-consequence relationship. Moreover, Modern discourse is *linear* in the sense that concepts and propositions relate to one another by way of syntagmatic relationships. Conversely, as we shall see below, Postmodern discourse is structured in a *faceted* fashion, that is, concepts relate

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[2] The institutionalisation of written language went hand in hand with the development of formal education in society, as a result of the advancement of the ideas put forward by the philosophical movement known as *Enlightenment*. The fundamental aim of *Enlightenment* is the establishment of human sovereignty over material reality, over nature. The realisation of this aim requires the ability to cognitively and practically manipulate the material environment in accordance with our will. Formal education of all members of society was paramount in fulfilling these aims.

[3] The literary genres that characterise Modernity are the essay and the novel, both of which are logically structured upon *entailment* (i.e. logical consequence). The novel describes, in the form of a sequential story, the experience of individual characters facing their destiny, society, nature, death, etc., propelled by their need to overcome adversity and attain some kind of *progress*.

[4] Lyotard (1979) analyses the notion of knowledge in postmodern society as the end of 'grand narratives' or metanarratives, which he considers a quintessential feature of Modernity. *La condition postmoderne* introduced the term 'postmodernism' into philosophy, with the following quotation: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives".

to one another by way of paradigmatic relationships, forming sets of choices defined in terms of similarities and differences.

Late Modernity in the Western world is further characterised by the implementation of the Welfare State and by generalised literacy, as the major accomplishment of the XVIII-century project of Enlightenment. Consequently, during this period (particularly in the XIX and XX centuries), the written language of literate societies does not constitute a transcription of oral language. On the contrary, given the metaliguistic knowledge brought about by literacy, written language provides a model for oral language, to such an extent that the oral idiolect of a literate adult in the Modern era will normally follow the blueprints of written language and written discourse.

Foreshadowing the decline of Modernity, early XXth century avant-garde movements (e.g. *Dadaism, Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Absurd,* etc.), as well as late XXth century alternative movements (e.g. *Psychedelia*), challenge the rational organisation of thought and language. Postmodernity represents the culmination of a linear process where constant change is justified by the pursuit of progress. During Postmodernity, constant change has become the status quo and the notion of progress is, therefore, obsolete. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein's critique of the possibility of absolute and total knowledge, Lyotard (1979) argues that, with the arrival of Postmodernity, the various metanarratives of progress such as positivist science, Marxism, and structuralism are defunct as methods of achieving progress.

In Postmodern times, the spreading of television and the advent of the "digital revolution" foster the decline of educational institutions and of literacy in its *Modern* sense. As a result, written language in its formal registers loses its former prestige and stops being a model for oral language. The written language of the Internet resembles in many cases (non-literate) oral language in a way that written language, in general, did not during Modern times.

The second phase of Postmodernity is defined by "digitality" –the increasing power of personal and digital means of communication, which has altered the cultural condition of the civilised world dramatically. The globalisation of institutions and of electronic communication systems has introduced a transformation of time and space which modifies both personal and sociocultural "experience". According to Baudrillard (1984), the effect of Postmodernity is the implosion of all limits, the blurring of distinctions –e.g. between past and present, between appearance and reality. Understanding Postmodernity allows us to understand the

changes in the world system, in national societies, and in individuals themselves. Whereas Modernity explored the tension between distinction and unity, Postmodernity rejects any reference to totality. Digital production of information allows individuals to manipulate virtually every aspect of the media environment. Thus, Postmodernity does not only account for the mutations in the individual's cognitive and rational minds, it also accounts for the individual's action, for the social and political agents and institutions against problems which were in the past the domain of experts and which are now attributed to everyone.

<div align="center">❧ ❧</div>

It is possible to identify four broad Internet using situations, which are sufficiently different to mean that the language they contain is likely to be significantly distinctive: (a) the *World Wide Web;* (b) *electronic mail (e-mail);* (c) *chatgroups;* and (d) *virtual worlds.* The latter, also known as *MMOW* (i.e. massively multiplayer online worlds), are computer-based simulated environments populated by many users who simultaneously and independently explore the *virtual world*, participate in its activities, and communicate with others. In virtual worlds, users create a personal avatar and access a computer-simulated world which presents perceptual stimuli to the user, who in turn can manipulate elements of the modeled world and thus experience a degree of presence. Avatars can be textual, 2- or 3-dimensional graphical representations, or live video avatars with auditory and touch sensations. Virtual worlds offer users the possibility of interacting through text (i.e. in chat windows), and sometimes through speech (i.e. dialogues and voice messages), therefore the distinctive linguistic features of the medium are no different from those found in *chatgroups.*

The *World-Wide-Web*

The language of the world-wide-web has been heavily influenced by the *faceted* nature of the access to and the distribution of information in Postmodern times. In the world-wide-web faceted system, entities do not form part of a narrative; they are defined by their intrinsic characteristics and their relative relevance to an alphabetical subject index used for navigation and search. The world-wide-web –a "genre" of Postmodern times–, then, describes discrete entities related to one another only within a faceted classification system, in which there is no setup, no conflict, and no resolution.

A faceted classification system allows the assignment of multiple classifications to an object, enabling the classifications to be ordered in multiple ways, rather than in a single, pre-determined, taxonomic order (for example, *a collection of books* might be classified using an *author* facet, a *subject* facet, a *date* facet, etc.). Faceted classification is used in faceted search systems which enable users to navigate information along multiple paths corresponding to different orderings of the facets. This contrasts with traditional taxonomies in which the hierarchy of categories is fixed and unchanging.

Conceived by S. R. Ranganathan in the 1930s, facet analysis is an analytico-synthetic approach to subject classification and indexing. It was developed after 1950 by the UK Classification Research Group, as a tool for the organisation of document collections in technical, scientific and social scientific fields, where it was highly effective in the storage and retrieval of compound and complex subjects.

The 'classical' facet analysis (S. R. Ranganathan, 1930's) is...

- a means of organising the concepts in a subject domain
- involves grouping concepts on the basis of shared characteristics
- uses standard categories as 'receptacles' for concepts

Facet Analytical Theory contrasts with earlier views of knowledge as an integral whole which is broken down into smaller and smaller units, in that it deals with individual terms or concepts which are clustered into categories to create a 'bottom-up' map of knowledge. The resultant structure is logical and predictable, and therefore highly effective in storage and retrieval. Facet analysis is used primarily to create classifications for the physical arrangement of documents (or document surrogates).

A facet comprises clearly defined, mutually exclusive[5], and collectively exhaustive[6] aspects, properties or characteristics of a class or specific subject. Over recent years, facet analysis has become pervasive. Today there are few formal knowledge organisation systems that do not display some elements of faceted structure. There is an evident faceted approach to product information in most commercial websites.
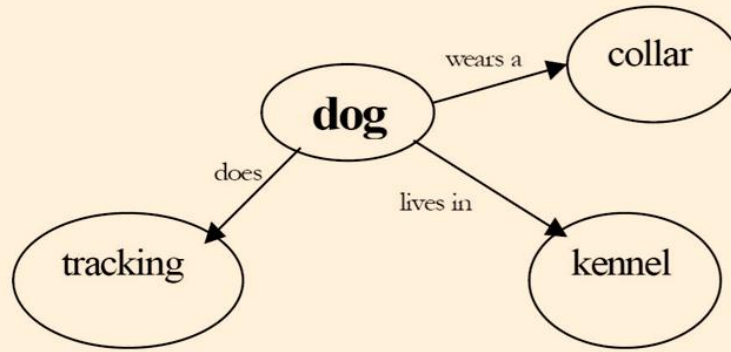
Classification categories in facet analysis

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[5] MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE: In probability theory and logic, given a set of events, if one event occurs, the rest cannot occur.
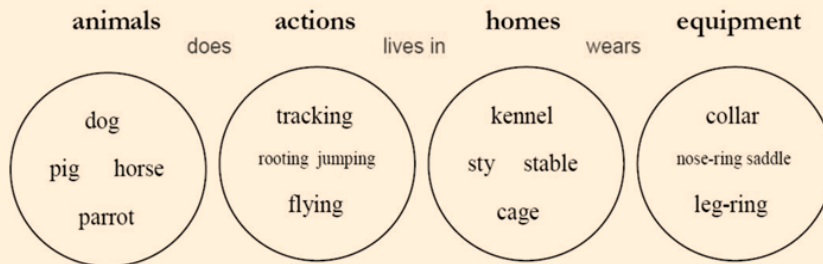[6] COLLECTIVELY EXHAUSTIVE: In probability theory and logic, given a set of events, at least one of the events must occur; e.g. if we roll a 6-sided die, the outcomes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 are *collectively exhaustive*, i.e. they encompass the entire range of possible outcomes.

| • thing | • kind | • part | • property | • material | • process | • operation |
| • patient | • product | • by-product | • agent | • space | • time |

Ontology with concepts and relationships:

dog wears a collar

dog does tracking

dog lives in kennel

Faceted approach with categorized concepts:

animals	actions	homes	equipment
does	lives in	wears	

animals: dog, pig, horse, parrot

actions: tracking, rooting, jumping, flying

homes: kennel, sty, stable, cage

equipment: collar, nose-ring, saddle, leg-ring

Concepts grouped in categories

| women | men | juniors BR | baby & kids | shoes | handbags & accessories | beauty | gifts | sale |

women's shoes | salon shoes | juniors' BR shoes | men's shoes | kids' shoes | brands

SEARCH: [   ] [In All Categories] [GO▶] | Advanced Search | Shop by Brand

Our gift to you. **FREE SHIPPING** on orders of $100 or more. Click for Code

◄ shoes
◄ kids' shoes

view all

girls

Infant (0-12 Months)
Toddler (1-4 Years Old)
Little Kid (4-8 Years Old)
  • View All
  • Athletic
  • Boots
  • Casual
  • Dress
  • Mules & Clogs
  • Sandals
  • Slippers
Big Kid (8-12 Years Old)

boys

Infant (0-12 Months)
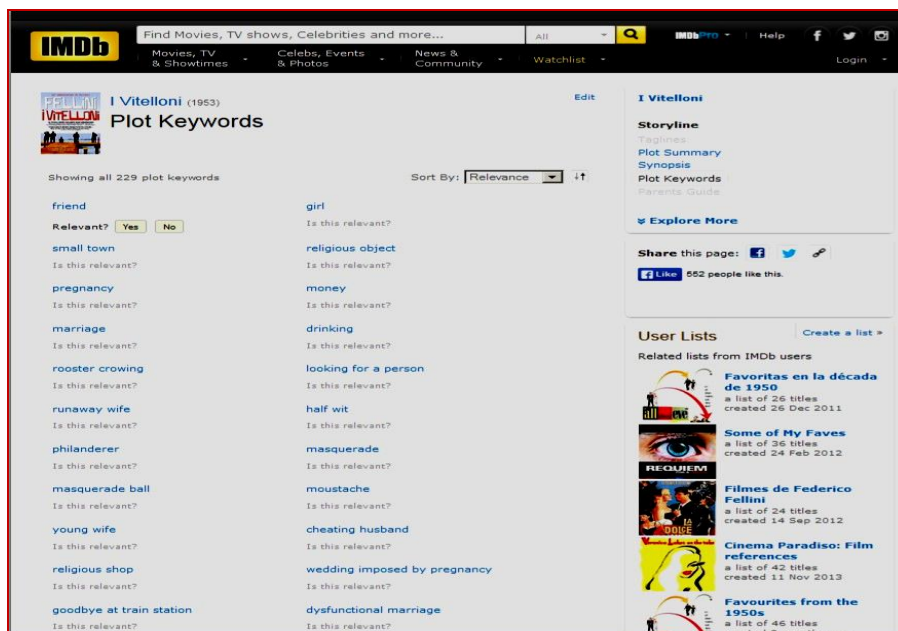
Find it fast!

My Size: [All Sizes] [All Widths] In Color: [All Colors]

Sort category by: What's New | Price | Brand | Bestsellers

Show: **21 per page** | 99 per page

Page: **1** 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12   NEXT ▶

The latter figure corresponds to a web page on Federico Fellini's film *I Vitelloni* (1953) (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046521/keywords), where the *object* (i.e. the film) is assigned multiple classifications regarding its plot or general subject matter, thus enabling the classifications to be ordered in multiple ways, each one headed by a "keyword". In the transcription below, coloured and otherwise highlighted keywords indicate possible groupings of different keywords under a more generic heading. It is interesting to remark that, even though keywords could be grouped together under a superordinate label, each hyponym should constitute a separate "facet". This shows that, in faceted classification systems, categories are not hierarchically organised.

sort by: **Plot Keywords** // Showing all 229 plot keywords

1950s - Is this relevant?
actor - Is this relevant?
actress - Is this relevant?
Adriatic sea - Is this relevant?
adultery - Is this relevant?
angel statue - Is this relevant?
anguish - Is this relevant?
anniversary - Is this relevant?
arrest - Is this relevant?
aspiring writer - Is this relevant?
aunt/nephew relationship - Is this relevant?
baby - Is this relevant?
backstage - Is this relevant?
band - Is this relevant?
beach - Is this relevant?
beating - Is this relevant?
beauty contest - Is this relevant?
beauty queen - Is this relevant?
bicycle - Is this relevant?
boardwalk - Is this relevant?
boat - Is this relevant?
borrowing money - Is this relevant?

boy - Is this relevant?
broke - Is this relevant?
<mark>brother/sister relationship</mark> - Is this relevant?
cafe - Is this relevant?
camera - Is this relevant?
candle - Is this relevant?
car breakdown - Is this relevant?
card playing - Is this relevant?
carnival - Is this relevant?
catholic - Is this relevant?
catholic church - Is this relevant?
cheating husband - Is this relevant?
children - Is this relevant?
chorus girl - Is this relevant?
cigarette smoking - Is this relevant?
climbing a tree - Is this relevant?
coming of age - Is this relevant?
confetti - Is this relevant?
convent - Is this relevant?
costume - Is this relevant?
courtyard - Is this relevant?
coward - Is this relevant?
cross dressing - Is this relevant?
crowing rooster - Is this relevant?
crying - Is this relevant?
<mark>dance</mark> - Is this relevant?
<mark>dancer</mark> - Is this relevant?
<mark>dancing</mark> - Is this relevant?
<mark>dancing in the street</mark> - Is this relevant?
death of mother - Is this relevant?
disgrace - Is this relevant?
dock - Is this relevant?
doctor - Is this relevant?
dog - Is this relevant?
dreamer - Is this relevant?
drink - Is this relevant?
drinking - Is this relevant?
drummer - Is this relevant?
drums - Is this relevant?
drunkenness - Is this relevant?
<mark>dysfunctional marriage</mark> - Is this relevant?
eating - Is this relevant?
<mark>employer/employee relationship</mark> - Is this relevant?
<mark>extramarital affair</mark> - Is this relevant?
face mask - Is this relevant?
face slap - Is this relevant?
fainting - Is this relevant?
<mark>family relationships</mark> - Is this relevant?
farewell - Is this relevant?
fate - Is this relevant?
<mark>father/daughter relationship</mark> - Is this relevant?
<mark>father/son relationship</mark> - Is this relevant?
<mark>father-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship</mark> - Is this relevant?
fear - Is this relevant?
fired from the job - Is this relevant?
fisherman - Is this relevant?
fishing - Is this relevant?
flowers - Is this relevant?
flying machine - Is this relevant?
food - Is this relevant?
friend - Is this relevant?
friendship - Is this relevant?
frustration - Is this relevant?
garden - Is this relevant?
generation - Is this relevant?
girl - Is this relevant?
goatee - Is this relevant?

goodbye at train station - Is this relevant?
gramophone - Is this relevant?
grandfather/grandson relationship - Is this relevant?
grandmother/granddaughter relationship - Is this relevant?
group of friends - Is this relevant?
half wit - Is this relevant?
hangover - Is this relevant?
helmet - Is this relevant?
homosexual - Is this relevant?
hoodlum - Is this relevant?
horse and carriage - Is this relevant?
husband/wife relationship - Is this relevant?
idler - Is this relevant?
immaturity - Is this relevant?
infidelity - Is this relevant?
irresponsibility - Is this relevant?
jealousy - Is this relevant?
jeep - Is this relevant?
kick the can - Is this relevant?
kiss - Is this relevant?
laziness - Is this relevant?
leaving home - Is this relevant?
lecher - Is this relevant?
lightning - Is this relevant?
lipstick on face - Is this relevant?
lire - Is this relevant?
loan - Is this relevant?
looking for a person - Is this relevant?
love - Is this relevant?
machismo - Is this relevant?
male camaraderie - Is this relevant?
mama's boy - Is this relevant?
mambo - Is this relevant?
marriage - Is this relevant?
masquerade - Is this relevant?
masquerade ball - Is this relevant?
mass - Is this relevant?
matches - Is this relevant?
melancholy - Is this relevant?
mentally challenged person - Is this relevant?
monastery - Is this relevant?
money - Relevant?
monk - Is this relevant?
mother/daughter relationship - Is this relevant?
mother/son relationship - Is this relevant?
moustache - Is this relevant?
nanny - Is this relevant?
neighbour - Is this relevant?
neorealism - Is this relevant?
nun - Is this relevant?
obscene gesture - Is this relevant?
orchestra - Is this relevant?
pajamas - Is this relevant?
philanderer - Is this relevant?
photograph - Is this relevant?
photographer - Is this relevant?
pier - Is this relevant?
pipit - Is this relevant?
playing pool - Is this relevant?
playwright - Is this relevant?
poet - Is this relevant?
police - Is this relevant?
police station - Is this relevant?
pool hall - Is this relevant?
pregnancy - Is this relevant?
priest - Is this relevant?

provincial life - Is this relevant?
radio - Is this relevant?
railroad station - Is this relevant?
rain - Is this relevant?
reading a play aloud - Is this relevant?
record player - Is this relevant?
recording - Is this relevant?
reference to Ernest Hemingway - Is this relevant?
reference to Esther Williams - Is this relevant?
reference to Franca Marzi - Is this relevant?
reference to Gary Cooper - Is this relevant?
reference to Ginger Rogers - Is this relevant?
reference to Henrik Ibsen - Is this relevant?
religious object - Is this relevant?
religious shop - Is this relevant?
restaurant - Is this relevant?
Rimini, Italy - Is this relevant?
robbery - Is this relevant?
Rome, Italy - Is this relevant?
rooftop - Is this relevant?
runaway - Is this relevant?
runaway wife - Is this relevant?
sadness - Is this relevant?
school - Is this relevant?
seacoast - Is this relevant?
semi autobiographical - Is this relevant?
sexism - Is this relevant?
sexist - Is this relevant?
sideburns - Is this relevant?
singer - Is this relevant?
singing - Is this relevant?
Sirius the star - Is this relevant?
skirt chaser - Is this relevant?
slacker - Is this relevant?
small town - Is this relevant?
socialist - Is this relevant?
song - Is this relevant?
storm - Is this relevant?
street cleaner - Is this relevant?
suitcase - Is this relevant?
teacher - Is this relevant?
tears - Is this relevant?
teenage boy - Is this relevant?
teenage pregnancy - Is this relevant?
tenor - Is this relevant?
theatre - Is this relevant?
theatre audience - Is this relevant?
theatre production - Is this relevant?
theft - Is this relevant?
thief - Is this relevant?
thirty something - Is this relevant?
toothache - Is this relevant?
tourist - Is this relevant?
train - Is this relevant?
transvestite - Is this relevant?
trenchcoat - Is this relevant?
truck - Is this relevant?
twenty something - Is this relevant?
typewriter - Is this relevant?
unemployment - Is this relevant?
unfaithfulness - Is this relevant?
unwanted pregnancy - Is this relevant?
urination - Is this relevant?
variety show - Is this relevant?
vaudeville - Is this relevant?
voice over narration - Is this relevant?
wager - Is this relevant?

Circulation of *INFORMATION* during Modern and Postmodern times

period	Modernity	Postmodernity
mode	linear narratives	facets
relation	cause-consequence	analogy (hyperlink)
organisation	temporal sequence	simultaneity/overlapping
articulation	syntagmatic relations	paradigmatic options

Electronic mail (e-mail)

E-mail can be defined as the use of computer systems to transfer messages between private mailboxes. In comparison with the world-wide-web*,* e-mail takes up only a relatively small domain of Internet 'space'. However, e-mail far exceeds the *Web* in terms of the number of daily individual transactions made.

E-mail can occur in connection with a large diversity of contexts, they are more frequently exchanged as part of family contacts, friend contacts, colleague contacts, long-standing business associate contacts, new business associate contacts, and spam from organisations with attachments (indistinguishable from a Web page in their linguistic character). E-mail messages can be further characterised by their formal features, however, as they vary greatly in length and style, they make up an aggregation of idiosyncratic usages. The chief issue when analysing e-mail messages is to determine the linguistic coherence of the situation.

The analyst can further verify whether the requirements of immediate and rapid e-messaging promote the use of certain linguistic features which transcend the many variations in audience and purpose which characterise e-mail messages. It is possible to generalise, on statistical grounds, about the language of e-mail in terms of certain recurrent formal features, although many users definitely contradict these generalisations.

During the early years of the Internet (roughly 1995-2003), most e-mail messages resembled formal or informal letters both in length and style, but as the practice of cell-phone messaging became widespread, e-mails grew briefer and began to show similar linguistic features, such as

absence of graphological variety, absence of punctuation marks, poor intrasentential recursion resulting in absence of subordination, absence of coordination, absence of logical connectors between juxtaposed clauses, absence of disjuncts –i.e. expression of the speaker's cognitive or volitional *modal* attitude which often introduce sentences or clauses–, and absence of conjuncts –i.e. intersentential logical connectors expressing either copulative, alternative, adversative or illative coordination of ideas.

Chat

Chat is the flow of continuous discussions on a particular topic, organised in virtual rooms at particular Internet sites, in which computer users interested in the topic can participate. Chatgroups and one-to-one online-chatting conversations can also be found on many social networks, such as *Facebook, Google,* or virtual worlds. They also share many characteristics with instant messaging applications for mobile phones and tablets –of which *WhatsApp* is the most famous at the moment.

Chatgroup types include, on the one hand, asynchronous or postponed-time interaction and, on the other, synchronous or real-time interaction. In the first mode, interactions are stored in some format and made available to users upon demand, so that they can catch up with the discussion or add to it at any time –even after an appreciable period has passed. This practice offers enough time for users to compose elaborate texts, as the example below demonstrates.

jen_jen [joined: 29 January 2008 | posts: 13621 | location: on the road to somewhere | posted: Saturday, 22 November 2014 11:48 am] I haven't known who to vote for for several years now. The parties seem increasingly grey with not much to choose from, mainly because most of them come from the same schools/background/ethos... it's all grey, grey, grey with no feeling of conviction or ability to deliver on their promises... although the promises are so vague they shouldn't have much difficulty delivering something... ho hum. The posting above is based on the poster's own opinions and odd sense of humour. No malice or offence is intended. No liability will be accepted if the reader does not like it. 😃

In the synchronous mode of interaction, a user enters a chatroom and joins an ongoing conversation in real time, sending 'named' contributions which are inserted into a permanently scrolling screen along with the contributions from other participants. In real-time interaction users must type very quickly, and, arguably, many distinctive graphological and morphosyntactic features of the language used in chatrooms result from the inability of most users to 'touch type' –i.e. to type with all fingers and by looking into the monitor. The general tendency among chatroom users to 'search type' –i.e. to type by looking into the keyboard– determines many of the characteristic features of this mode of communication.

Lack of punctuation and graphological distinctions and lexical omission in internet chatrooms does not, therefore, stem from a design on the part of users to create or implement an innovative language style. It is to do with the overlapping of several conditions, such as the speed at which the screen scrolls, the inability of users to touch type, and, ultimately, the need to transcribe expressions which are typical of oral language by using a code which is poorly mastered as a result of deficient training at school. The latter condition can be regarded as a consequence of the transition from a Modern use of written language to a Postmodern use of written language, a condition which goes hand in hand with the loss of prestige of the way written language was used during Modernity by and large.

The most striking grammatical feature of the language of chatgroups and chat conversations is the omission of referential and expletive subjects. For example:

- <NN> must go now,,,tired [i.e. *I must go now; I'm tired.*]
- <NN> sorry im slow…not feeling good today [i.e. *I'm sorry [because] I'm slow; I'm not feeling good today.*]
- <NN> havent made up my mind yet [i.e. *I haven't made up my mind yet.*]
- <NN> donno [i.e. *I don't know.*]
- <NN> never ever heard of it! [i.e. *I have never ever heard of it!*]

The distribution of non-overt subjects in special registers of English is unlike that of the non-overt subject in so-called *pro*-drop languages,[7] and does not justify a *pro*-drop analysis for the English data. Haegeman and Guéron (1999) compare the range of availability of covert subjects in Italian with the occurrence of covert subjects in sample texts of special registers in British English, and their findings are quite conclusive: the fact that verbal conjugations in Romance languages offer a distinctive suffix for each grammatical person, makes the overt realisation of pronominal subjects redundant. This phenomenon is pervasive in Romance languages, i.e. it occurs in all kinds of sentences and embedded clauses regardless of whether they are declarative (affirmative or negative) or interrogative, whether they are root or embedded, and whether they are introduced by a marked topic of any kind. Conversely, in English, the conjugated forms of verbs are for the most part invariable, forcing the presence of pronominal subjects to make clear which grammatical person the verb agrees with. However, in certain informal registers of English, users tend to omit the pronominal subject in finite sentences on condition that the construction be exclusively a declarative root

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[7] The verbal system of *pro*-drop languages (e.g. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese) provides distinctive inflectional morphology for each *grammatical person*, thus permitting the dropping of unstressed (i.e. non contrastive) pronominal subjects in finite clauses of all kinds.

sentence without a fronted (i.e. topicalised or focalised) constituent. In the passage below – taken from a personal diary– the first person subject is consistently omitted, but all the sentences in which this happens are declarative root clauses lacking a marked topic:

> A very sensible day yesterday. **Saw** no one. **Took** the bus to Southwark Bridge. **Walked** along Thames Street; **saw** a flight of steps down to the river... **Found** the strand of the Thames, under the warehouses... **Thought** of the refugees from Barcelona walking 40 miles, one with a baby in a parcel... **Made** a circuit: **discovered** St Olave's Hart Street. [*Diaries of Virginia Woolf,* 1936, quoted by Haegeman & Guéron 1999]

Second and third person subjects and non-referential 'expletive' subjects can also be covert in this kind of text:

> The poor little boy won't say what's the matter. He takes no interest in anything. **Won't** turn and wave to her… **drudges** on at Latin. [*Diaries of Virginia Woolf,* 1936]
>
> Katharine Goodson came up to say they would be late. **Kissed** me. **Asked** after me and everybody. [*Diaries of Elizabeth Smart,* 1945, quoted by Haegeman & Guéron 1999]
>
> *[I]* **Can't** understand you newspaper chaps. *[You]* **Fill** up the papers with all kinds of stuff nobody wants to read, and often **miss** what's right under your noses. [*Julian Symons,* 1967, quoted by Haegeman & Guéron 1999]
>
> **Rained** in the night, wind, rain and hail. [*Diaries of Elizabeth Smart,* 1945, quoted by Haegeman & Guéron 1999]
>
> **Turns** out you can't do that in Texas. **Might be** an accident up ahead. [*Schmerling,* 1973, quoted by Haegeman & Guéron 1999]
>
> **Won't be** too difficult to reconstruct his argument. **Isn't** much we can do about it. **Aren't** enough left to worry about. [*Thrasher,* 1977, quoted by Haegeman & Guéron 1999]

Thus, according to Haegeman and Guéron, unlike Romance languages, English does not admit covert subjects in root questions (e.g. *Ought to resign?; *Can do this in time?; *And what could do? *Now who is?), in embedded clauses (e.g. *I think must read Dante of a morning.; *I must work, as told Sally G.; *I don't think need lie quaking at night. [*Diaries of Virginia Woolf,* 1936]), in root clauses with a topicalised argument (e.g. *This book, don't want.), in root clauses with topicalised predicate (e.g. *Ruthless, isn't.), and in root clauses with a focalised negative or restrictive constituent (e.g. *Seldom have been more completely miserable than I was about 6:30 last night.; *Never have worked so hard at any book.; *Nor do wish even to write about it here.; *No sooner did reach the top, than a tremendous explosion was heard.; *Not until she had talked to her boss, did figure out where she would travel to.).

It is noteworthy that in English chatgroup language the occurrence of covert subjects somewhat exceeds the previous limitations: instances of covert subject can be found in *yes/no* root questions, but not in *wh*-questions. But covert subjects in embedded clauses or in root clauses with focalised or topicalised constituents would still be seen as marked choices, if not fully ungrammatical and, therefore, uninterpretable. In the following chat samples, while some

participants –e.g. FredBoy– produce *yes/no* root questions with covert subjects (by the way, notice that whenever this happens, the auxiliary is also covert), others –e.g. Sosuke Aizen– produce regular *yes/no* root questions; in the second sample, which is British, there are many instances of covert expletive subjects.

Sosuke Aizen: Joined the room
FredBoy: hey Aizen
FredBoy: how are you doing?
FredBoy: ready for the bbq later that day with friends?
Sosuke Aizen: Yeah if not I'll have it at home c:
Sosuke Aizen: Are you ready for warplugsnacht?
FredBoy: yeah I decided to spend it at home
FredBoy: I had enouth party the last weeks and well next two weeks there will be at least one party as well
Sosuke Aizen: Yeah and at home you'll save some cash ...
FredBoy: true besides the other option would be a friend to build up a Maypole in front of the house of his gf

San Francisco synchronous chat (June 2015).

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davids511: no
fiestyangel: well it's the truth honey no point getting all worked up unless you benifit from it aswell lmao
Dyemystalker: lol
fiestyangel: hmmm david no your not
Lord Flash: hot and sweaty? I'll toast that
davids511: i am.. wee time
fiestyangel: bloody freezing at the min brrrr
Dyemystalker: yeah same here
Dyemystalker: sunny outside
Dyemystalker: but cold inside
fiestyangel: same here hun :(
Dyemystalker: no heat in that sun
Carol: so cold my hands are blue
fiestyangel: nope not today i've got tingly bits i'm so cold
Dyemystalker: billys entire heid is blue... like a smurf!
fiestyangel: n i mean my toes n fingers lol

UK synchronous chat (April 2015)

Dyemystalker: billy!!!!!!!!!!!!
billy: working yourself up into a frothy mess
Dyemystalker: latte fanny lol
billy: aye?
Dyemystalker: be nice
billy: do you remember when teachers had coffee breath at school?
billy: funny that was
Dyemystalker: tbf didnt get that close to any of my teachers
Dyemystalker: so i could smell their breath lol
davids511: good answer
honeyd: spinning classes booked for everyday next week am gona be walking like john wayne haha
Dyemystalker: wot kinda teachers did u have billy?
Dyemystalker: weird ones thats wot lol
billy: when i used to ask for help if i got stuck they'd come over and lean over me
Dyemystalker: oh aye
Dyemystalker: wow
Dyemystalker: close n personal teaching huh
billy: yeah it was so bad with the female ones because there t1ts wouuld be brushing against my head
honeyd: david????
billy: wasn't
fiestyangel: omfg kids got hold of the sun cream and now theyre covered in the bloody stuff
Dyemystalker: haha!

davids511: honey ???
honeyd: do u remember a surrey32 or something that used to come in
Dyemystalker: at least they will be ok out in the sun
billy: ==of never used sun cream==
Dyemystalker: ==explains a lot billy==
fiestyangel: oh yeah there is that dye just wish it wasnt all over there clothes lol
billy: i just have good skin
davids511: f surrey 39?
Dyemystalker: is it in their hair?
honeyd: i dont know maybe i am talking from when i first started coming in here
fiestyangel: yep dye head to toe on the pair of them lol
Dyemystalker: pmsl
davids511: youve been in here longer than me
Dyemystalker: ah well at least they gave themselves good coverage
honeyd: i was just told me and her wer pretty close and i used to be really nasty to ppl with her
Dyemystalker: my eldest once poured blue paint over her head
davids511: you are almost part of the furniture
Dyemystalker: stained her skin....
fiestyangel: omg dye
Dyemystalker: ==had to take her to nursery looking like a smurf==
Dyemystalker: lmao im not kidding either
fiestyangel: pmfsl bet you wasnt impressed
Dyemystalker: ==was just kids paint too==
Dyemystalker: nope carpet everything got it in her room
davids511: you lost me honey
fiestyangel: oh nooo not good
Dyemystalker: ==had to replace the carpet like==
honeyd: dont matter i gotta go b bk in 10 mins
davids511: oh ok lol
Dyemystalker: im gonna hoover soon

<div align="right">UK synchronous chat (April 2015)</div>

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wasdR: 3rd June 2014
==Saw your piece in this video== www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxD_QM…, and I had to find out who painted this work of art. ==Just thought I'd drop by and give you a "hat's off"==, this is amazing. Thank you.

Tolkyes: 3rd June 2014 - Professional Traditional Artist
I'm so pleased you like my work. I wasn't aware that my painting was featured in this video but I'm glad it was. It's good exposure. I was hoping to make YouTubes of my own like this eventually.

<div align="right">UK asynchronous chat (June 2014)</div>

Conclusion

The remarkable changes brought about by the use of new technologies like personal computers and mobile phones in connection with language are to do with the way in which information circulates among individuals in Postmodern times, and with changes in the nature of the relationship between human societies and written language at large. Formal grammars can provide a clear account of the visual and formal characteristics of the new genres, but it is the task of discourse analysts to characterise postmodern written language, given the new contexts, nay the new cultural conditions that have permitted its development and spread.

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