Creativity and Internet communication

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Introduction and definitions

Internet communication has disrupted traditional definitions and conceptualisations of language in some interesting ways, not least around ideas about speech and writing that have circulated in linguistics for many years. Researching the language of new communication tools has meant questioning linguistic orthodoxies and, as a result, thinking more creatively about how language should be described. It has also meant understanding much more about the nature of language as a commodity. In new communication contexts, language is bought and sold, and as a result there are powerful corporate interests working to represent language in particular ways. Linguists are therefore in a position in which they need to critique the terms with which they are working for two distinctively different reasons: first, in order to challenge problematic linguistic conventions that no longer fit; and second, to resist descriptions and accounts that are driven by commercial investments.

At the most basic level, researchers have had to respond to these problems by deciding for themselves what to call the language that they are researching. Consider ‘chat’, which, in pre-Internet days, referred to informal spoken language: in a search of the Collins Cobuild Corpus in 2005, the term ‘chat’ featured frequently in descriptions of informal speech contexts, accompanied by ‘with’ and the personal names of individuals. This contrasted markedly with the collocations of the term ‘discussion’, which related much more to topics and content: ‘discussion of’, compared with ‘chat with’ or ‘chat to’ (Goddard, 2005).

Given the ‘semantic prosody’ (Sinclair, 1991) of ‘chat’ as language used in close interpersonal exchanges, it is not surprising that the early producers of new communication tools found this term useful to label a form of writing that might at first seem alien to consumers: interactive writing, composed in real time, using keyboard symbols – termed ‘interactive written discourse’ (IWD) by Ferrara, Brunner, and Whittemore (1991). As computers moved from restricted use as part of military defence systems to become personal accessories (it is easy to forget that within computing, ‘PC’ originally meant ‘personal computer’), the general public had to be persuaded that these new machines were user-friendly. What better message to give, then, than the idea that they could be used for informal communication of the kind normally reserved for use between friends and family, in relaxed or even intimate settings? In advertising fields, the idea of attributing emotional appeal to technical products is well known:
High tech/high touch is a formula . . . to describe the way we have responded to technology. What happens is that whenever a new technology is introduced into society, there must be a counterbalancing human response – that is, high touch – or the technology is rejected. The more high tech, the more high touch.

(Naisbitt, 1982: 39, emphasis original)

It is problematic if linguists and other researchers of new communication tools use the same labels as those used in the marketplace, because written, computer-based ‘chat’ does not necessarily share much common ground with spoken language. Ideas about speech and writing are elaborated further in this chapter, but the perils of confusion are clear: individual Internet users who think of their keyboard or touchscreen as a simple ‘chat’ tool can face dire consequences if they have a permanently embedded idea of their audience as an intimate circle of friends. Exactly the same problem attaches to Twitter, which is a million miles from the innocent chirping of birds. Since linguists know only too well that language has the power to construct realities for its users, they have a particular responsibility to reveal its representational values.

Historical perspectives

When computer-mediated communication (CMC) first emerged, it did not fit easily into the frameworks current within linguistics to describe speech and writing. Of course, descriptions of speech and writing could simply have been ignored. But this was problematic for two reasons. First, the new tools themselves were being given the names of genres that were currently in existence, precisely because producers of the tools wanted them to seem familiar; so terms such as ‘chat’ and ‘mail’ brought a sense for users that they would be on safe ground. If advertisers wanted to be creative and suggest innovation, they might also reference another known genre and describe the new communication tool as a hybrid form: for example, in one early campaign, British telecom referred to email as ‘the new way to write a phone call’, while in another, the German phone company Mannesmann exhorted consumers to ‘turn on the phone and watch the news’. These advertising hooks looked startlingly rule-breaking at the time because they challenged ideas about the relationship between established genres and channels of communication.

The second reason for retaining connections with concepts of spoken and written language was so that researchers could understand how users were transferring the skills of communication that they already had and creatively adapting them to new environments. New technologies have reconfigured the conventional way of thinking about language acquisition as a developmental aspect of young lives: we are all now permanently in a state of language acquisition as we move from one technology to the next. Assessing the skills displayed by learners also required – and continues to require – an understanding by educators of exactly what the demands of different communication environments are. An early example of potential confusion in this respect is reported in Goddard (2005): the head of learning and teaching at a university said that a chat tool, which was a real-time, writing-only space, would enable students who performed ‘better orally than in writing’ to be successful.

However, linguistic studies of speech and writing have themselves been entangled in some complex history of their own. In terms of formal description, speech has been much less researched than writing, partly because of the lack of availability of portable, cheap recording equipment. As a result, structural descriptions of language that may have suited writing do not work for speech at all (see Carter, 1997).
Carter also points out that culturally, speech and writing have often been valued differently, with literacy – particularly the specialist form of literacy associated with literary works and with conventional notions of creativity – being seen as a highly developed, rare skill and a hallmark of an educated person. Goddard (1996: 5, emphasis original) notes that, in contrast, spoken language – particularly in the form of everyday encounters – has not been seen as a very skilful or creative activity:

We have difficulty thinking that everyday talk is metaphorical because this idea goes against the received wisdom we have about talk, which is that it is somehow straightforward and serviceable – a bit like Marks and Sparks underwear, hard-wearing but not particularly sexy, getting us through life without major mishap . . . so we certainly don’t see everyday talk as being the home of figures of speech (even though we call them figures of speech) like metaphor.

An associated difficulty in linguistic treatments of speech and writing has been the long tradition of taking a binary approach, classifying these modes as either discrete systems with no relationship between the two, or as oppositional, suggesting that what one had, the other lacked (so if writing was ‘creative’, then speaking was not). Street (1988) notes how this classic concept of ‘the great divide’ between speech and writing has been embedded in many research papers over the years; and maintains that its replacement during the 1980s by the notion of a speech-writing ‘continuum’ simply amounts to a renaming of the divide, rather than a different approach.

The idea of the ‘great divide’ has resulted in some tangible problems of description, because it tends to treat speech and writing as monolithic entities:

Speech is typically time-bound, spontaneous, face-to-face, socially interactive, loosely structured, immediately revisable, and prosodically rich. Writing is typically space-bound, contrived, visually decontextualised, factually communicative, elaborately structured, repeatedly revisable, and graphically rich.

(Crystal, 2001: 28)

In fact, this account works only if the model for speech is face-to-face, casual conversation taking place within a shared physical context, and if the model for writing is ‘essayist literacy’ (Tannen, 1982), a lone practitioner committing words to paper for an audience removed in time and space.

If such notions of binary contrast were seen as problematic before the development of new CMC genres, their application to electronic discourse, particularly to real-time writing, rendered them largely redundant. In operating both visually and synchronously, IWD is simultaneously space-bound and time-bound, spontaneous and editable. In considering the ‘face-to-face’ aspect of communication, IWD in its earlier forms involved ‘presence’, if not face visibility. In any case, the idea of presence has a variable definition across different academic subject areas, with some scholars in CMC research regarding the concept not simply as physical visibility or even geographical location, but as various degrees or aspects of force or effect – in other words, as impressions of agency. Stone (1995: 93), for example, suggested that ‘narrow bandwidth’ communication (that is, CMC in its then form) could produce a more intensive experience of engagement – a more heightened sense of ‘presence’ – than the ‘wide bandwidth’ variety (that is, face-to-face interaction): ‘The effect of narrowing bandwidth is to engage more of the participants’ interpretive faculties . . . Frequently in narrow-bandwidth
communication the interpretive faculties of one participant or another are powerfully, even obsessively, engaged.’

In comparison with other academic disciplines, it seems that linguistics was rather slow to recognise computer-based communication (CMC) as offering scope for research. Said Herring (1996: 3): ‘Although text-based CMC is constructed almost exclusively from linguistic signs, linguists have been slow to consider computer-mediated language a legitimate object of enquiry.’ This could be because, as has been suggested already, rigid systems of linguistic classification offered little support for the description of new fluid types of communication. Carter (1999: 195), talking of the creativity of everyday speakers, maintains that the history of twentieth-century linguistics has not equipped it to deal with real language use at all, let alone forms of new communication: ‘[T]he preoccupation of much modern linguistics with invented data, sentence-level grammar and a narrowly truth-condition-determined semantics does not allow any direct engagement with such data and its associated issues.’

Herring’s (1996) explanation for the tardiness of linguists is slightly different. She suggests that this may have been because, when networks were first designed in the 1960s, their primary purpose was to transfer information between computers, so no one conceptualised the machines as conduits for human communication. The idea of ‘language’ was then seen more as an issue for programmers than for ordinary users. However, some academics working in other disciplines did characterise language, without necessarily aiming to do so, in their early commentaries on Internet communication. The first accounts of the potential of the Internet for new types of communication tended to be somewhat utopian. The idea of a new era in which communication would be free of attitudinal encumbrances such as accent prejudice, and gender and racial stereotyping – since such factors are often thought to be linked with acoustic and visual embodiments of difference – was articulated in statements such as Donna Haraway’s (1990) ‘A manifesto for cyborgs’. This idea suggested a default model of language as face-to-face speech – or a model of writing that was somehow free of ‘attitudinal encumbrances’.

Herring’s (1996) collection of research papers, which is often seen as a benchmark in being the first significant scholarly treatment of language use in CMC, also included some utopian ideas about how language might work in new communication contexts. For example, van Gelder (1990: 130) claims that, since race, physical appearance, and language accent are non-existent in CMC interactions, ‘a more egalitarian situation is created’, in which ‘the most important criterion by which we judge each other in CMC conversations is one’s mind rather than appearance, race, accent, etc.’. And Ma (1996: 177) expresses the idea of electronic spaces as a cultural no-man’s land: ‘Those from different cultures engaging in computer-mediated conversations do not occupy a common physical space, so they are not bounded by any particular set of cultural rules.’ Ma (1996: 179) sees CMC as a kind of meeting of minds in free-floating space: ‘The focusing-on-mind computer mediated conversations should provide a better opportunity for information exchange between participants from different cultures.’ These statements imply a model of language in which physically embodied non-verbal communication carries most of the meaning and, again, in which language is a simple information conduit.

Not all of the articles in Herring’s (1996) collection had this same model of language, however. Rather than seeing CMC as a context that potentially reduces the idea of social difference, Hall (1996) argues that CMC actually increases the level at which individuals construct their social selves. In this case, she is talking about gender: ‘Rather than neutralizing gender, the electronic medium encourages its intensification. In the absence of the
physical, network users exaggerate societal notions of femininity and masculinity in an attempt to gender themselves’ (Hall, 1996: 167). Hall’s work on ‘cyberfeminism’ indicates that CMC leads not to ‘cyborgs’, but to ‘goddesses and ogres’.

From a contemporary perspective, Ma’s (1996) idea of the Internet as a culturally neutral space in which disembodied minds simply exchange information seems to have more in common with utopian science fiction than with everyday experience. On the other hand, Hall’s (1996) description of social scripting seems very familiar.

Early ideas that the Internet would lead to a more democratic society because the ‘mental’ would no longer be limited by the ‘physical’ positioned both language and the Internet itself as having no materiality. Ironically, it is the very materiality of the Internet – allowing a real feeling of presence across vast distances and helping users to experience each other’s cultures via multimedia tools – that, if anything, has been the more powerful democratiser.

Another distinctive strand of early work on Internet communication focused on the way in which users could be seen as inhabiting a new creative space that appeared to be conducive to play and performance. Laurel (1993) and Turkle (1995) both explored notions of CMC in metaphorical terms: Laurel, via the metaphor of the theatre; and Turkle, via the screen. A special issue of the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* in 1995 was devoted to play, including the staging of a party event via the use of real-time writing and a performance of a text-only version of *Hamlet*. At this pre-broadband time, the idea of dialogic writing seemed like a venture into an unknown world that was fragile and precious. Note, though, that these early forays were staged set pieces, including a Shakespeare play, rather than everyday communication in any sense.

### Critical issues and topics

The Web 2.0 expansion of online participation that we have seen in recent times, supported by the ‘always on’ potential of broadband, has had interactivity at its core, rather than only the reading of published content. We are now not ‘online’ or ‘offline’ in any simple way; rather, digital communication and systems are so embedded in our lives that there is scarcely a single activity that we undertake that does not involve mediation by them. New communication tools that were once divided into ‘asynchronous’ (in which participants did not have to be online together, such as email) and ‘synchronous’ (in which they did, such as IWD) have increasingly converged, so that more and more contexts are dialogic, with users aware of the activity of their interlocutor.

Descriptions of CMC language that characterised it as a single entity – Crystal (2001), for example, describes it as ‘netspeak’ – have given way to more detailed accounts of the constraints of the particular CMC tool in its context of use. The idea of ‘constraints’ as factors shaping any act of communication derives from the work of Erving Goffman (1981), who divided ‘ritual constraints’ (factors associated with the culture of the speakers) from ‘system constraints’ (what the medium of communication affords and limits). Herring (2001) notes that early research tended to produce overgeneralisations, seeing linguistic features as a part of the medium rather than as a choice made by the users. The result of such generalisations was to stereotype forms of CMC discourse, for example seeing IWD as ‘anonymous’ and ‘impersonal’ because it was not face-to-face (Herring, 2001: 613).

Herring (2004) also notes a change in CMC research from an earlier idea of cyberspace as a new, extraordinary, and unknown frontier, towards more of a sense of CMC as utilitarian, everyday communication: the title of her 2004 paper, ‘Slouching towards the ordinary’, suggests a second wave of scrutiny that is more grounded in its expectations. It also suggests
a fall from grace and loss of innocence, in its intertextual reference to Yeats’ poem, ‘The Second Coming’.

One of the issues that arises in identifying an example of language as ‘creative’ in the CMC context is that there have been seismic shifts in what Goffman (1981) would have termed *system constraints*. This means that language producers’ starting points can be very different, in terms of the raw materials with which they have to work. There are also, of course, many disputations about what the term ‘creative’ means, as well as about what the function of any piece of creativity actually is: this book offers many different perspectives on both these issues.

Assessments of creativity need to be made with reference to the context in which users are, which means a careful delineation of the characteristics not only of the medium, but also of the participants. Koestler’s (1976: 644) broad definition of creativity – one that is often quoted and applied – links creativity with the idea of breaking and realigning existing frameworks: ‘The creative act does not create something out of nothing, like the God of the Old Testament; it combines, reshuffles and relates already existing but hitherto separate ideas, facts, frames of perception, associative contexts.’ An assessment of creativity against this benchmark needs to include some awareness of participants’ starting points and also the resources that are available to them.

This twin focus is exemplified in Goddard (2005), which study researched the language strategies used by participants new to a simple, writing-only IWD context. Some 36,000 words of IWD data were collected over the course of an academic term (twelve weeks) during 1999–2000. Participants were also interviewed about their language choices once the IWD data collection had finished.

It is interesting now to look back to a point at which ‘being online’ was a largely unknown or rarely experienced context, which was the case for the participants in this study. They were beginning undergraduates using an IWD tool in order to discuss language topics. In what would now be considered a very stripped-down, somewhat arid environment in which not even emoticons were available, participants found ways in which to create three-dimensional worlds from words. Some data samples from this study are given in the following text. (Note that all data samples are written here as they appeared originally. Where the lines are written consecutively, they appeared consecutively in the data. Where there is a space between lines, they have been taken from different parts of the data.)

Technologies have changed and developed, and although some aspects of the behaviour illustrated have become normalised in our everyday digital exchanges, there are other examples that shed light on what we do every time we are presented with a new environment. The study highlights the role of creative play in exploring new communication contexts, as well as the importance of creativity for interpersonal connection, for the expression of individual identity, and for group cohesion. All of these areas are still key topics in language and Internet communication, as well as in the wider field of language and communication in general.

Creative language play enabled participants to explore the reconfigured nature of the spatio-temporal dimensions inherent in their new environment. In the playful line below, Ryan registers that fact that, in this new space, the text has replaced him. But where is he?

RyanS>>.

The speed of writing required in the new context led to many errors – but did they count as errors in this new world, or as a creative new way of looking at language? Either way, errors were a fertile source of language play and interpersonal involvement. Below,
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Alex – who, interestingly, was dyslexic and, despite her initial anxiety, loved this new environment – responds to Andrew’s criticism of her initial mistake of running two words together by creating a whole sentence written as one word:

Alex>>I would considerate
Andrew>>conseiderit is not oneword
Alex>>ItsanewmoneysavingschemefromMcDonalds

The participants below explore the effect that the linearity of writing has on opening routines in multiparty contexts. In speech, opening routines can achieve economy via orchestrated simultaneity, but interactive writing does not offer this affordance. Ryan’s creative reduction of ‘hi there’ to ‘hi’, to ‘h’, to ‘….’, and ending with ‘zzzzzz’, performs a sense of comical fatigue in transferring this routine from the rapidity of speech to the laboriousness of writing. The potentially endless nature of this cycle (repeated many times playfully in closing routines in the data) has been termed ‘broken record’ (Gillen & Goddard, 2000):

Laura>>hey. sorry i am late, this is group nine isn’t it?
Ryan>>hi there
Laura>>hello
RyanS>>welcome
Rebecca>>hello laura
Ryan>>hi
Laura>>hello
Ryan>>hello laura
Laura>>hello
Rebecca>>hi
Ryan>>h
Laura>>hello
Ryan>>.....
Rebecca>>h
Laura>>hello
Ryan>>zzzzzz

Participants showed a range of linguistic strategies to metaphorise the new spaces in which they found themselves. Spaces were quickly textualised via metaphorical deictics of ‘in–out’ and ‘here–there’, which then blended seamlessly with ideas about outer space and the spirit world:

‘is there anyone in here?’
‘is anyone coming in?’
‘anyone there?’
‘is there anybody out there?’
‘Hello spirits is their any one out there?’ [sic]

Distinctive registers were used to create voices invoking various institutional contexts and spaces, such as a bar brawl:

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Participants had to judge how prosodic aspects familiar to them in speech might be represented in writing. For example, in the following interaction, Natalie and Simon are trying to capture the prosodics of variants of ‘yeah’:

Natalie>>yeak
Natalie>>sorry yea
Simon>>why yeah
Natalie>>i dont mean it like yeah man i mean it like yeay
Simon>>what is the difference
Natalie>>it’s happier and less cheesy
Simon>>and that is worthy of a yehah

The following list shows frequency of the variants above within the context of other examples in the data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yaaa</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yea</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeah</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeahbut</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeahhh</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeak</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeh</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yehah</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yep</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeay</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yess</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In formulating the ‘response cries’ (Goffman, 1981: 121), participants had to be creative in their spelling choices, because sometimes the item had (and still has) no standardised written form. Such interjections as those below fall outside the scope of phonology, which focuses only on sound – but neither are they seen as lexical items, so they do not feature in dictionaries. In his own exploration of response cries, which he describes as ‘blurted vocalisations’,
Goffman (1981) notes how these forms sometimes pass between speech and writing in subtle ways. For example, we can make a disapproving ‘tsk tsk’ noise, but because we also write ‘tut-tut’, we can say that too. However, saying ‘tut-tut’ can be a much more knowing and complex expression of attitude, suggesting that the activity in question is normally subject to opprobrium, but that this attitude is not necessarily shared by the speaker:

- oops
- uh-oh!
- arhhhh!!!!
- duh
- eek
- wey hey!/woo hoo!
- WOOOOOPEEEEE!!!!!
- Ta da!

With our more frequent digital interactions, some of these spellings seem to have been on the move. For example, ‘yeay’ can also be seen as ‘yay’, expressing delight at an achievement, and ‘oops’ can appear as ‘whoops’, or even ‘woops’; a current British advertising campaign for a cosmetic product uses ‘Ta Dah!’

Representations of laughter also demonstrated some subtleties of meaning, as can be seen from the following list. When participants were interviewed, they were able to describe quite precisely how they intended different items to be ‘heard’. For example, while the first two examples were seen as straightforward laughter, ‘heh heh’ was described as a chuckle and ‘tee hee’, as sniggering laughter. Bracketed laughter and ‘har har’ indicated a judgement that the humour was predictable, while the final example was one student’s attempt to, as she put it, ‘laugh uncontrollably’. She added, philosophically, ‘I realised that you can’t laugh uncontrollably in writing, because you’re controlling your writing’:

- ha ha ha
- he he he
- heh heh
- tee hee
- I’m in Manchester and from Manchester (ha ha)
- oh har har
- hee hee hee ha ha ha hooooo hoo

Representations of ‘yes’, of laughter, and of response cries can all be seen in contemporary language use on social media sites and in everyday exchanges of email. It is interesting that items that might initially have been thought of as existing only in a real-time context can now be seen in other contexts too. For example, the idea of response cries has traditionally been that they were a spontaneous expression of emotion triggered by an event or stimulus in the local environment. Goffman’s (1981) classic example is of someone tripping over a paving stone and expostulating, as a result. But Goffman makes the point that the cry occurs only when the person has recovered, not while the mishap is actually in motion. He speculates that its function is a face-saving one: showing any bystanders that normal action is resumed. The cry performs a momentary, but temporary, loss of control. So perhaps these little pieces of behaviour were always ready-primed for symbolic functions in social interactions? If someone sends another person a ‘duh’ or an ‘oops’, because he or she did something wrong in a
previous email, that person is inviting his or her reader to be an audience to the mini-drama that ran in the sender’s own head when he or she discovered the mistake. But the sender is also saying that he or she has recovered – and that it is back to business as usual.

The aspects of prosody and paralanguage illustrated below can also been seen in many examples of contemporary use in different digital contexts – capitals for volume, duplicated letters for speed and length of utterance, repeated dots (not always three-dot ellipses) to represent a pause for thought or (as in the final example) perhaps adding an element of ‘vocal fry’ (Wolk, Abdelli-Beruh, & Slavin, 2012) to the breathy phonation:

To Nadia MEOW saucer of milk table 7!!!
NO NO NO NO NO!!!!
Ssssslllllllooooowww
don’t go pleaseeeeeeleeeeeee
He needs someone to love him cause hes so.........lonely
Andy mine oohhhhhhhhhh b.........aby

While some of the response cries could be seen as connecting intertextually with the language of comics, some of the examples echo the established conventions of literary representations, for example in novelistic dialogue.

The creative manipulation of IWD seen in these examples are not great pieces of literature or staged events of the type described in the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication special issue on play in 1995. The participants were certainly highly skilled language users, but their language choices reflected both their explorations of the new environment into which they had been invited and their explorations of each other. They were new to university and, as beginning undergraduates, new to each other too – although, as the term went on, they did meet face-to-face, in other lectures on their programme. On many occasions, creative language use was a way in which individuals could invite others to connect with them: it was a way of announcing themselves as sociable and ready to be a conversational partner or group member. It also invited others to make aesthetic judgements of their performances, involving a degree of risk-taking: others might not approve, or may not even understand the language as play, or may not think it creative at all. But where creative effort is made, there is often overt appreciation too:

Andrew>>Hi Lucy, I thought the chat had got your tongue, excuse the pun
RyanS>>nice
Sorcha>>god andrew what have you started
Andrew>>I’m no god, but thanks for the compliment
Sorcha>>heh heh

There are also examples of some highly complex group performances in which there is more fun to be had in adding to the play than in commenting on it. The following example shows not only creative play with patterns of sound and symbol, but also intertextual references to shared cultural knowledge (The Wizard of Oz, The Blair Witch Project, a song by Prodigy). These are not random references; rather, they all involve threatening figures or ideas, appropriate perhaps to people experiencing a strange new medium in which others are invisible and may therefore be up to no good:
Nadia>>Andie can you stop your twitching please
Glyn>>your name has been added to the list you will not see another sunrise Andrew
RyanS>>the blair twitch project
Alex>>So your a tweetcher then Andy
RyanS>>smack my twitch up
RyanJ>>the wicked twitch of the west
RyanJ>>or wirral

(Note that ‘twitching’, as in bird-watching, had occurred in previous dialogues in connection with ideas about ‘blokeish’ behaviour, as had references to stalking and undercover warfare.)

The idea of how people establish and maintain Internet communities, and how participants negotiate their identities (including their gender identities) and interpret the language choices of others: these are all topics that continue to be significant, despite the very real differences in the creative resources that are available for participants to use. Some communities are simply about creative language play itself, with users experiencing pleasure in creating humorous and witty texts for others to enjoy, and for the appreciation of others’ skill in doing the same. This phenomenon is exemplified by the huge success of sites such as Lolcats (http://icanhas.cheezburger.com) or Doge (see Hern, 2014). However, it is important to realise that, even on such sites, value is attached to individual efforts to conform with ‘rules’ for language use, making the examples more or less likely to be ‘upvoted’ as good creative outputs.

Public discourses about the language skills involved in Internet communication represent another important area for research. Web 2.0 is driven by the idea of creative self-publishing and much is made of the need for people, particularly the young, to be able to manage themselves in new communication environments. However, new technologies are often demonised in the popular media and held responsible for declining rates of literacy, or the acquisition of the ‘wrong’ type of literacy (see Goddard & Geesin, 2011, for examples of such media coverage). At the same time as the British government pronounces on the importance of the new creative industries and youth entrepreneurship, digital texts are not allowed to feature on GCSE national examination papers for English, and pen-and-paper tests are still overwhelmingly the norm in all assessments.

But employability skills in the real world increasingly involve Internet communication, often in ‘English as lingua franca’ (ELF) contexts in which users need to make judgements about appropriate language choices and how far they can be creatively informal. Are the kinds of representations of informal, everyday language items outlined earlier – for example variants of ‘yes’ or of laughter, response cries, or the use of expressive punctuation – easily understood? Is there a kind of ‘online ELF’ that supersedes more localised Englishes? And, if so, whose norms are being applied? In the example below, a British student, Dave, attempts to ‘correct’ Helene, a Swedish student, who, along with Dave, is part of a collaborative project linking together university students in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia (see Goddard, 2003, 2011). This example suggests that some of the forms of language use that are developing in new communication environments might involve some interesting challenges to native speaker norms:

Dave>>by the way, It might be best to say ‘okay’ rather than okey
Helene>>okey!
Dave>>sorry and all that!!!
Helene>>okey!:)
Current contributions and research

As should be evident from this volume, the study of creativity does not represent a single or unified field. Although this is a strength, in that it can be viewed from many different perspectives, it is also a disadvantage, because connections between disciplines are therefore hard to make. Even the divisions in this volume suggest predetermined boundaries that need to be challenged. For example, from a formalistic perspective, it is hard to see any difference between ‘literary’ creativity and the types of creativity illustrated in the examples of IWD quoted in this chapter. (These examples are not an isolated occurrence of particular features: see Goddard, 2003, for a discussion of ‘literariness’ with reference to IWD produced in communication between British and Swedish students.)

A further complexity in thinking about language and creativity is the fact that linguistic creativity is so closely associated with play. This means that research papers focusing on play in Internet communication may be more likely to offer fruitful insights than those with ‘creativity’ in their title or keywords, since the latter may well be focusing on literary publications or performances – a play, rather than play itself.

Cook’s (2000: 5) definition of what play involves indicates how close the two concepts of play and creativity can be ‘the patterning of linguistic form, the creation of alternative realities, and the social use of both of these for intimacy and conflict’. Unfortunately, research on play is itself fragmented across different disciplines.

Cook (2000) maintains that, while adult imaginative behaviour is cordoned off in ‘the arts’ (or in studies of mental health, depending on how imaginative behaviour is being defined), childish make-believe is to be found in psychology or child language studies. Crystal (1998: 218) calls for a whole new discipline of ‘applied ludic linguistics’, claiming that, as yet, creative language play has not been incorporated into general educational thinking about language learning – particularly the acquisition of literacy.

Obviously, another point of access to studies of Internet communication is in Internet studies, which has become a field in its own right – although, of course, language and creativity will represent only one focus among the many topics that will feature. Relevant publications include: Information, Communication and Society, the journal of the Association of Internet Researchers; the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, from the International Communication Association; M/C, which focuses on media and culture, with each edition revolving around a single term interpreted in different ways; and Language@Internet, a journal that has language in constant focus, if not always creativity.

Language use in Internet communication can encompass a wide range of contexts, from interpersonal exchanges between individuals, through studies of social groups in special interest or learning forums, to organisational aspects of communication in multinational companies. The briefest perusal of Language@Internet will reveal this variety and more, but a good starting point to understand the history and trajectory of language studies is represented by two reports by Herring (2010, 2011).

Main research methods

As different technologies have become available for communication, they have also become available for collecting and researching that communication. Real-time writing can be collected via chatlogs; Skype and other multimodal communication systems can be archived and replayed; emails can be copied and pasted; web pages of all kinds can be preserved via links and screenshots; microblogging tools, such as Twitter, can be used to harvest data
from large numbers of users. Communication tools with specific constraints, such as the 140-character limit of Twitter, can generate creative strategies for economy in a similar way as those seen in former Short Message Service (SMS) usage (Thurlow, 2003).

However, the technology needs to be seen not as the research method, but rather as a result of the method chosen. And the method, of course, is determined by the research focus. This means that the same types of question about method apply here as they do to any other research field. For example, would the study benefit more from a qualitative or quantitative approach? A qualitative, discourse-analytic method might suit research involving the nature of interactivity between participants, while a research focus on the use of a particular word or phrase might benefit more from quantitative evidence. An example of the latter – although not specifically focused on creativity – was research in 2014 by academics at the University of London Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, which monitored all geo-located Tweets in the United Kingdom over a particular period of time for swearing. Some 1.3 million Tweets from smartphones were reviewed and the biggest peak occurred on football’s transfer deadline day, with the most ‘profane’ areas being Redcar and Cleveland, and the least, Kensington and Chelsea (BBC News, 2014).

A further, relatively recent, computer-based method is that of corpus research. Because CMC is collectable, it is also storable in a way that enables it to be searched for specific occurrences, including the frequency of items, but also their habitual environments or collocations. Building one’s corpus from a collection of data can yield interesting results that can be hard to observe manually, particularly in long episodes of IWD. Results can be compared with other corpora that do not include data from CMC sources. Corpora can be very revealing, but it is important to recognise that they reflect only the language of the particular users who have contributed to it.

A mix of methods can be valuable. For example, where the researcher is not part of the community whose language is being researched, asking questions of the producers of the language in question can provide useful insights into different ways of viewing the same language item. For example, a British student participant in Goddard (2003) produced an opening line in an IWD exchange with Swedish students of ‘Hello, England calling’, which to an older researcher suggested might reference World War II or a 1940s BBC radio programme called Forces Favourites. However, when interviewed, the student said that it referred to the Eurovision song contest and was intended as recognition of the success of the Swedish supergroup, Abba. These different interpretations support ideas suggested by Bakhtin (1981) that language is culturally suffused and intertextual, carrying traces of its history of use, but open to new layers of meanings with each reiteration.

Finally, it is important to recognise that not all methods can simply be transferred from one application to the next. At the start of this chapter, I suggested that Internet communication broke many aspects of the existing paradigms of speech and writing. If therefore follows that if a method devised for researching an aspect of language is derived from existing paradigms, it is unlikely to be transferable. An example of this in practice is the idea at the basis of many former studies of speech and writing that interactivity involved sound – because, at that time, there was no such thing as real-time interactive writing. New forms of communication need some methodological creativity.

**Recommendations for practice**

Internet communication can all too easily be cast adrift from its context in the process of analysis, perhaps because of its very nature of seeming ‘out there’. It needs to be recognised
that the Internet is a context, not an absence of one, and that ethical considerations attach to this arena as to any other place in which human beings communicate. For users, Internet communication has a material existence that lives alongside the other types of communication embedded in daily experience. Producing and receiving Internet communication is a physical activity, even if it is not acoustic (which it may well be, if the tool is multimodal). Typing on a keyboard or touchscreen, perhaps adding attachments, designing a text, seeing it appear, processing others’ communication: all of this is physical activity, set within the other physical parameters of where any user is, what room they are in, what kind of computer they are on, whether they are multitasking, who else is around, and so on. If participants are involved in IWD, then textual processing takes on a very sharp temporal aspect, as well as a spatial one, with language items spilling down the screen and then disappearing from view as the screen scrolls to accommodate others’ contributions. It is likely that participants end up with their lines in a different place from where they intended to insert them, if they are slow at typing messages. Keeping track of conversations can be a complex activity that is nothing like turn taking in spoken language.

I have offered this description because it is easy to take something like a chatlog as a decontextualised and self-sufficient text, and read it as if it were a literary play script, complete with voices of one’s own making. A chatlog is not the same thing as the real interaction, the interaction itself; it is simply the result of the interaction – it is what the users have left behind. It is comparable to a speech transcript, which is a representation of speech, not the speech itself. In both cases, the participants could not foresee what was going to happen at any point in time. Real-time discourse unfolds in time and no one in an interaction really knows how it is going to end. But an analyst is able to look at the whole thing, and indeed often does so. There is nothing wrong with that, of course – but reading backwards and forwards in a text from an analytical point of view produces a different version of the event from that experienced by the participants. And in ‘voicing’ the language of others, an analyst may be adding a creative performance of their own that was not really there in the original.

Future directions

Future directions are certainly going to be interesting, if the past twenty years are anything to go by. It is likely that new communication tools will continue to emerge and to offer new opportunities for creativity, as well as new challenges for research and analysis. Because social awareness tends to lag behind the technical affordances of communication, there will be plenty of public debate about the nature of language use in these new environments.

From a linguistic perspective, there is still much to learn about how we learn – how we take what we know from one context and adapt to new constraints. And there are still many unanswered questions about the hybrid nature of the new forms of language that we are producing. We often see the language referred to as ‘speech-like’ when we are only just learning, from an academic perspective, how speech works. It would be good to see some much better, specific ideas about the ways in which Internet communication can be said to resemble speech, or the ways in which it is nothing like it at all. Then we would be able to say with more clarity how users are deploying their linguistic resources for all of the purposes served by communication – including that of creative language play – in their everyday Internet encounters.
Creativity and Internet communication

Related topics
creativity and digital text; creativity and technology; everyday language creativity; humour and language play; literary stylistics and creativity

Further reading

As the title suggests, this is a guide aimed at students, offering a range of different approaches for students who are interested in researching Internet language use.


This is a slightly older book than the others listed, but its focus is multilingual.


The authors look at aspects of language use in new communication contexts, including evidence of public attitudes and behaviour around new forms of communication.


In this text, the authors take a sociolinguistic approach to new media contexts, covering different types of communication and different languages.


This is an older text, but one that still has useful things to say about the new social practices that surround language use in computer-mediated environments.

Both the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication and Language@Internet include articles about Internet communication involving languages other than English.

Useful websites

This links to a special issue, (2009) 14(4), of the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication devoted to technology and young people.

http://www.lkl.ac.uk/cms/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1

Researchers at London University’s Knowledge Lab have produced many publications that are particularly relevant to educational contexts.

References


Angela Goddard


