

Some Key Elements for the Understanding of Language Use in Online-Based Interactions among young Algerians

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Abstract :

The present study aims at presenting some key elements for the understanding of ONLINE language use. To begin looking at ONLINE communication and language, one must look first at the umbrella which envelops all online-based interactions. In the world of Internet and mobile telephony, communication between humans is typical to an emerging type of communication called computer-mediated communication (CMC).

This research paper is an introduction to investigation on Internet communication in Algeria. The aim here is to provide an overview on computer-mediated communication. It opens with a discussion in which I will introduce CMC in relation to its language; It will be followed by a general overview on CMC different modes. Discussing CMC will hopefully be relevant to research on internet interactions among young Algerians.

Introduction

This research will provide an overview on computer-mediated communication: a typical type of human communication undertaken through online-based interactions mainly the Internet and mobile telephony. It opens with a discussion in which I will introduce CMC in relation to its language. It will be followed by a general overview on CMC different modes.

Language on line

As technology has evolved, new devices have often been named by familiar words and concepts. The telephone was originally designed as a “harmonic telegraph”. What today we call movies were first known as “talking pictures”. As the functions of computers expanded from storing data, creating documents, and enabling people to communicate through networking, again there was a need for new nomenclature. In the early days, a number of terms began appearing in the nascent literature to denote language appearing online: “Interactive Written Discourse”, “e-mail style”, or “electronic language”. A few years ago, David Crystal (2001) introduced the word “Netspeak”, denoting the linguistic features characterizing the range of Internet based language¹.

In the 1980’s the term “Computer-Mediated Communication”, more commonly known as CMC , emerged to encompass a range of online platforms, including email, listservs, chat, or instant messaging.

“CMC is a communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers “
(Herring, 1996:01)

However, with the development of mobile devices such as the Blackberry and mobile phones, which are not really computers, many researchers began speaking of information communication technologies (ICTs), alluding to the machines themselves (computers, mobile phones) rather than to the information they conveyed. What we now needed was an umbrella term for various types of language transmitted via the gamut of ICTs. Some scholars supported the idea that the term CMC can become something of a stretch, others begun speaking of Electronically-Mediated Communication or (EMC). However, in this work, I have chosen to follow the *old tradition* and use the term CMC when referring to all ICTs including mobile phone services.

Previous research on CMC

Since the birth of CMC, researchers have been interested in its effect on human communication. While many of CMC studies have been conducted in the fields of social psychology and communication (Kiesler *et al.*, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Rice & love, 1987; among others), an increasing number of scholars were inquiring into CMC from linguistic perspectives.

CMC has been considered as one of the fastest growing areas within the field of sociolinguistics, and a range of studies in the past few years which have been carried out are varied in their focus and approaches. Many earlier studies compared CMC with non-computer based forms of communication in an attempt to categorise the language as more oral or more written in its quality (e.g., Condon & Cech, 1996). Beauvois (1992, 1995), Kern (1995), Pellettieri (2000), Sotillo (2000), and Warschauer (1995), for example, studied the complex language production in CMC and compared it to face-to-face conversation. Literature on CMC is also present in research on language maintenance (e.g., Clyne, 1994; Clyne & Grey, 2004)

where researchers highlight the role of CMC in cultivating positive attitudes towards community languages and providing language input.

However, the research literature in English on CMC has focused almost exclusively on emergent practices in English, neglecting developments within populations communicating online in other languages. Some notable exceptions are studies of Code-Switching Among Expatriate South Asians on Usenet (Paolillo,1996) ; Language Choice Among Young Egyptian Professionals Using Various Forms of CMC (Warschauer, El Said&Zohry,2002) ; Self-Presentation in Email in Greek (Georgakopoulou,1997) ; The Negotiation of Identity and Power an a Japanese Asynchronous Discussion Forum (Matsuda,2002) ; and Use and Adaptation of Written Language to The Conditions of Computer-Mediated Communication (Hard of Segerstad, 2002). However, such studies have been relatively infrequent, they are unpublished works (academic dissertations) and their findings have never been brought together and compared.

Research on the linguistic structure of CMC language

Most CMC researchers have studied CMC language and focused on the relationship between the linguistic structure of CMC and non-standard properties. According to Herring (2001), most non-standard features in English CMC are deliberate choices made by users to Economize on typing effort Mimic spoken language features Express themselves creatively.

According to Herring (2001), users employ strategies (for e.g., abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons) that reduce the time needed to write messages, that substitute for the lack of paralinguistic and nonverbal cues, or that compensate for the limited number of characters in the case of SMS communication.

According to Yates and Orlikowski (1993), the mimicking of spoken language features in CMC leads to an unconventional orthography, such as textual indication of emphasis (e.g., “If an implementation DOES support vectors...”), informal words typically used in speech (e.g., “groove”, “stuff”), and conversational cadences usually combined with word choice and punctuation in order to stimulate oral communication, as in “Hmm, I see....”

As for the creative use of language, Herring identifies a category of informal, expressive lexical elements, such as *emi-li* (“email” referred to humorously, due to its resemblance to the proper noun Emile). These lexical items are common and convey a recreational, creative, ironic, or informal attitude (Herring, 2001).

Background Concepts

1. CMC Modes

With the development of ICTs, written messages could be transmitted through CMC. But how are the messages conveyed?

CMC can be divided up along two dimensions. One is Synchronicity: Does communication happen in real time (synchronous), or do senders send their messages to recipients to open at their convenience (asynchronous)? The other dimension is audience scope: is the communication intended for a single person (one-to-one) or for a larger audience (one-to-many)?

Here is a summary of CMC modes

Asynchronous

One-to-one	Email
	SMS

One-to-many Newsgroups, Listservs, Blogs, My Space, Facebook, You Tube

Compute
MUDs,
Lif

Table 1: CMC Modes

For clarity and because the focus of this research is on CMC written communication, I have organized the overview of CMC modes according to the four-way schema of asynchronous versus synchronous, and one-to-one versus one-to-many omitting discussion on CMC audio and video exchanges

!..Synchronous versus Asynchronous CMC

In contrast to face-to- face interaction which occurs under same-time/same-place conditions (1), CMC supports asynchronous (different-time/different-place (4)) and synchronous (same-time/different-place (2)) interactions (see figure 1).

	Same place	Different place
Same Time	1	2
Different Time	3	4

Figure 1: Types of CMC Interaction

(Source: Ngwenya, Annand & Wang, 2004: 323)

However, although it is common to speak of asynchronous and synchronous communication in CMC, there are certain shortcomings associated with such straightforward categorizationⁱⁱ. The position of the boundary between synchronous and asynchronous CMC has not yet been answered. Crystal (2001) stipulates that forms of text-based CMC, usually considered to be asynchronous (email, SMS), need to be reassessed. For example, users of SMS can engage in interactions consisting

of multiple exchanges within a very short space of time. He explains further that also synchronous CMC is not fully synchronous in the way spoken face-to-face interaction is: There is always the lag of typing and sending the message. He observes that chatrooms and the like are too constrained by their response times and the slow speed of typing to be considered as a good analogy of speech. Baron (2008) confirms Crystal's observations. She argues that:

"In actuality, they [synchronous versus asynchronous] fall along a continuum. In a sense, the only real synchronous communication is that in which one person can interrupt another-the prototypes being telephone conversations or face-to-face speech"
(Baron, 2008:15)

In fact, there is evidently a cline, not a dichotomy between synchronous and asynchronous communication.

In the coming section, I will introduce only four types of CMC because they are among the most used forms of CMC among young Algeriansⁱⁱⁱ. I will discuss the one-to-one asynchronous CMC (email), the one-to-one synchronous CMC (IM), the one-to-many synchronous CMC (chat), and end the one-to-one asynchronous CMC : Short Message Service (SMS)

5.2.1. Email: One-to-One Asynchronous CMC

Without question, email became the most popular^{iv} application provided, once the Internet was in place. The technology is now an indispensable part of modern work and play, love and war.

In principle, email is a one-to-one asynchronous medium. However, neither of these characteristics is always true. Senders and recipients are free to send messages as things fit them. Ali may email Mohamed but send copies (declared as blind

copies) at the same time to Souad, Leila, and Omar. In turn Mohamed may take email from Ali and forward it to Fatima. The idea of synchronicity is also to be questioned. Computers servers and signal transport speeds have improved enormously. Lag time^v may be as short as a second or two, making email essentially synchronous, if a user chooses to use it that way.

Messages sent through email services can be a text, a binary file or pictures. It is possible to imagine a lot of situations where sending an email is very useful. A student can get his papers corrected by a professor from another country just by sending him/her an email. Another good example is that of the large number of surveys done in the frame of scientific projects and which are put on the net and answered through emails.

An e-mail message, as manifested on the computer screen, consists of three components: *the message header*-contains information about the message, like sender, addressee, subject, date, etc-; *the body of the message* that the user types or inserts into the message window; and *the attachment*- could be a simple text, images, multimedia files, etc.

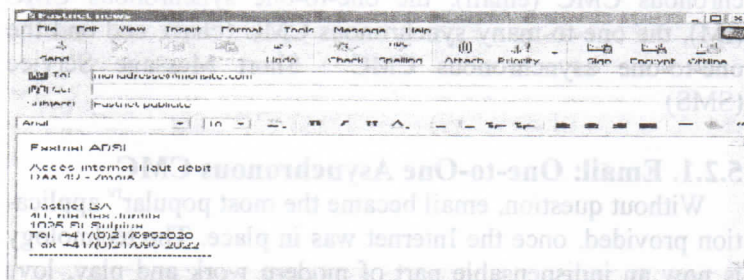


Figure 2 : Example of Email Communication
(Source : Google Images)

In reviewing literature, much has been written about email, but not as much as the one produced on other CMC modes mainly IM and chat. According to Baron (2008:16): "We have very little tangible data beyond anecdotes"^{vi}. Baron (2008) stipulates that research on email is constrained by the unavailability of tangible data. Researchers are often hesitant to ask strangers for copies of their email correspondence, perhaps for fear people will say no. As a result, the majority of empirical studies of CMC have been one-to-many public forums such as chat, where the researcher can pull off public transcripts from the Internet.

By now, email has become sufficiently domesticated in Algeria. Its style and content are diverse as the people using it.

5.2.2. IM: One-to-One Synchronous CMC

In principle, Instant messaging (IM) is a form of CMC that, like email, is prototypically utilized between a single sender and a single recipient. The essential difference between email and IM is synchronicity: email is asynchronous and IM is synchronous. I might send someone an email at midnight and not expect a reply until a decent hour the next morning. With IM, I only message someone when I know he/she is online. At least, that is how, in principle, the two systems of CMC one-to-one communication work.

In the late 1990s, IM became a widespread phenomenon in the world, thanks in large part to Mirabilis Ltd's ICQ ("I seek you") and to the technology and marketing efforts of America Online (especially AIM-AOL Instant Messenger). Other contemporary players in the IM market include Yahoo! Messenger, MSN Messenger, and Google Talk. Increasingly, today's IM systems provide audio and video options as well.

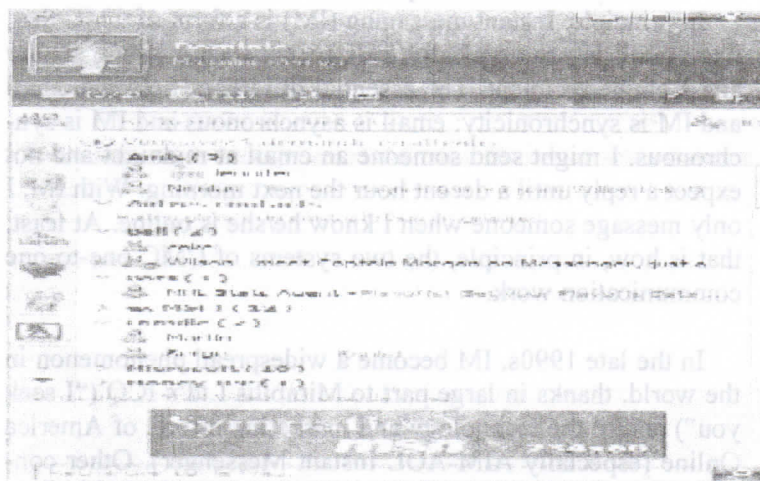
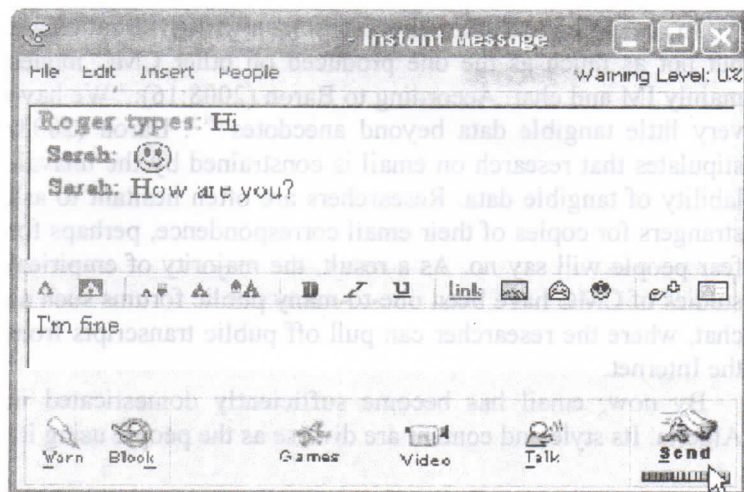


Figure 3 : Example of Instant Messaging Communication
(Source :Google Images)

Most of IM platforms offer far more than just opportunities for carrying on synchronous conversations. Typical profiles, buddy lists, away messages, and the ability to block particular people on your list.

Profiles are personal information forms, in which users can store contact information (physical address, mobile phone numbers, email addresses); date of birth and home town; favourite bands or quotations; and so forth.

Buddy lists are devices for defining the circle of friends. Essentially, they are list of the IM screen names (the IM equivalent of email addresses) of those people to whom the user share information about his/her comings and goings. Your buddies know when you are logged on to IM and when you are offline.

Buddies also have access to so-called away messages, which people post to announce that although they are still logged on to IM, they will not be checking messages because they have moved away from their computer-to- get something to eat, go to the bathroom, or attend class.

What if the IM's user does not want particular people on his/her buddy list to contact him/her? The solution is to remove these individuals from the list. A temporary fix is to block a specific person.

By such opportunities, instant messaging of various forms has succeeded to captivate teenage and young adults' audiences (Lenhart et al.2001). It was predicted by the International Data Corporation that

"The corporate IM will grow from 5.5 million users worldwide in 2000 to 180 million in 2004. By that time, the number of messages sent will approach 2 trillion annually"

(*Info World*, October25, 2000)

5.2.3. Chat: One-to-Many Synchronous CMC

A chat room, Chat Relay Chat (IRC)^{vii}, or simply chat is the best known venue of CMC. It is created to converse. Generically, chat is a synchronous platform for holding textual^{viii} conversations with multiple participants in any of ten thousand of Internet chat rooms, each dedicated to a particular topic. While conversation takes place in real time, users can scroll

back through the archive to respond to earlier conversations.

In Chat, users log on through nicknames and are free to camouflage their real-world personal characteristics (age, gender, background...etc.). Bechar-Israeli (1995) points out that the extent to which nicknames are important parts of the electronic self: nicknames are experienced by CMC users as an extension of the self. Bechar-Israeli (1995) further states that the emergent IRC culture is a culture of linguistic virtuosity on the one hand and of contempt for the rules of the language on the other hand. It is, for him, a culture that provides freedom in abundance to engage in identity games through the use of nicknames.

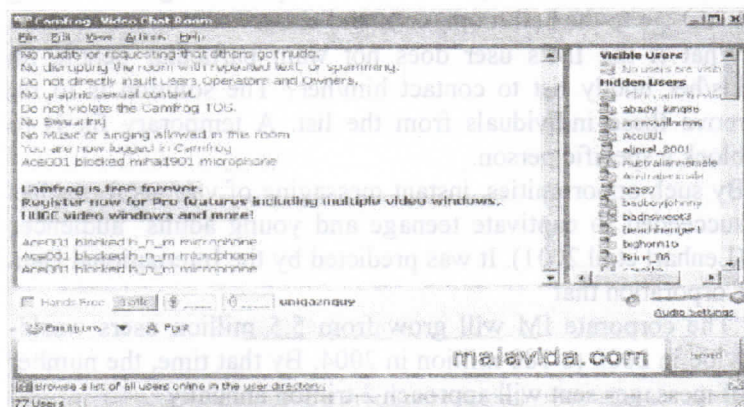


Figure 4 : Example of Chat Communication
(Source : Google Images)

Chat rooms became immensely popular in Algeria because it is a venue which has broken the rules. Thanks to it, young Algerian chatters are afforded the freedom to build different types of social ties (especially, friendship, and love relations) between the two sexes, something they were not allowed to do as they were handicapped by restrictions stemming out of social and religious norms.

Conclusion

Because the aim of this research is to shed the light on language use in online-based interactions, it was important - for the sake of clarity - to define CMC and shed the light on the language CMC users manipulate.

During the process of reviewing literature, I observed that most of CMC researchers have indicated the novelty of the media. CMC is considered to be the revolution of the century that is gaining more and more significance in the lives of many people today. It is, in fact, a revolution not only at the societal level but also the linguistic one. Crystal (2001: x) states that "if the Internet is a revolution, therefore it is likely to be a linguistic revolution".

In many ways, Comparing the language of the different online platforms would be a good avenue of research for the scholarly community in Algeria.

Notes

¹ Interactive Written Discourse": Ferrara, Brunner, and Whitemore, 1991; "e-mail style": Maynor, 1994, "electronic language": Collot and Belmore, 1996; "Netspeak": Crystal, 2001.

² Baron (2008) believes that we cannot speak of synchronous versus asynchronous communication as if the two are polar opposites. The problem of synchronous versus asynchronous CMC is just telling part of the story. The distinction between one-to-one and one-to-many CMC is somewhat problematic. With cases like when SMS is being sent to a larger public (e.g., games or announcements made by telecommunication companies) researchers are misled.

³ Referring to an informal survey I undertook with my informants -young Algerians - on their frequent use of the different types of CMC, the following estimations have been retrieved : 1) SMS ; 2) IM ; 3) Email ; 4) chat

⁴ Email communication was the most popular application because of its multiple advantages. A favorable position was mostly due to the fact that emails can be sent round the world and received in seconds and to its possibility to be consulted at any time and place.

⁵ Lag time refers to the period of time separating exchanges; in this case email exchanges.

⁶ Baron (2008:237) writes in note 8 to chapter one that One of the exceptions [works published on email] is Kalman et al. (2006).

⁷ Chat, as we now know it, was born in 1988. In that year, Jarkko Oikarinen, a student at the University of Oulu in Finland, wrote a program that came to be known as Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which was intended as an improvement on UNIX talk.

⁸ Chat generates a public linguistic record, which is -up to now- attracting the interest of linguists and Internet Researchers who are eager to understand the nature of these 'conversational-texts'.

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