Netspeak: Linguistic Properties and Aspects of Online Communication in Postponed Time

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Abstract:

In the context of English as a global language, and Netspeak as a new electronic medium of communication, the present paper examines the linguistic properties and distinctive features of online communication in postponed time, bearing in mind that synchronicity is one of the dimensions upon which electronic communication can be categorised. This corpus-based study, for which data were collected from several Internet sites, places particular focus on the features of English used in asynchronous settings. The analysis, based on the model proposed by David Crystal (2001), portrays a number of highly distinctive features of Netspeak, proving an immense impact of thethis type of commucniation in terms of graphology (emoticons, punctuation) and the lexicon (blending, compounding), these being areas where it is relatively easy to introduce both innovation (nonce formation and other ludic Netspeak extensions) and deviation (abbreviations, acronyms).

Keywords: Netspeak, Internet, asynchronus settings, distinctive linguistic features, synchronicity

Introduction

The paper examines the linguistic characterictics and distinctive features of online communication in postponed time, in the context of English as a global language, and Netspeak as a new electronic medium of communication. Considered to be a relatively largely unexplored area, the brand new medium of communication labelled Netspeak is closely related to the Internet, whose dominant effect in everyday lives, on the other hand, is fast growing. The paper further examines and describes some distinctive features of Netspeak, primarily on the lexical and orthographic levels, highlighting its innovative nature given that,

according to Crystal (2001: 91), the most general features of Netspeak distinctiveness are currently found chiefly in graphology and the lexicon, these being the levels of language where it is relatively easy to introduce both innovation and deviation.

The Internet[1] has undoubtedly appeared almost from nowhere to take a rather important role in our lives. Computers have undoubtedly changed the way people communicate with one another. An increasing number of people throughout the world heavily rely on the World Wide Web as the primary source of information on various enquiries. Electronic communication, also referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a vastly popular means of communication. Online chatting has, in the recent years, become extremely popular.

Crystal (2001) argues that Netspeak is a radically new linguistic medium. The nature of the impact which the Internet is making on the English language has not been thoroughly investigated since the emergence of the Internet. It is only in the most recent years that this area has become popular.

A starting point in my deliberations is the approach taken by Crystal (2001), who argues that 'Netspeak' is actually a radically new linguistic medium. According to Crystal (2001: 24), the fact that the Internet is an electronic, global, and interactive medium is crucial for the kind of language used on the Internet. The term *Netspeak* serves as an alternative to terms such as *Netlish*, *Weblish*, *Internet language*, *cyberspeak*, *electronic language*, *computer-mediated communication*, etc. Both *Netlish* and *Weblish* can be said to have been simply derived from English, 'electronic discourse' highlights the interactive nature of Internet dialogues, while 'computer-mediated communication' focuses on the medium itself. As a term, *Netspeak* joins the club of to-be famous '-speaks' such as *Newspeak, Oldspeak, Doublespeak*, *Royalspeak*

[1] Capitalised 'I' in the word Internet shows the significance of the new medium.

and *Blairspeak*, while as a name, *Netspeak* is believed to be functional enough, as long as it is borne in mind that '-speak' here actually involves both writing and speaking, as well as the receptive elements of listening and reading.

Figures 1 and 2 below provide an overview of the top ten language in the Internet (as at 30 June 2015), and the total number of Internet users, estimated at some 3.2 billion. Other significant factors include the fact the total number of native English speakers in the world is about 340 million, and that English is spoken as a second language by almost 510 million people around the world (according to *Ethnologue*, 2015, 18th edition), all of whom make their contributions to the Internet in their own language as well as in English.

However, English is said to have the richest technical vocabulary of any language (largely because native and non-native speakers alike use it to communicate technical ideas).

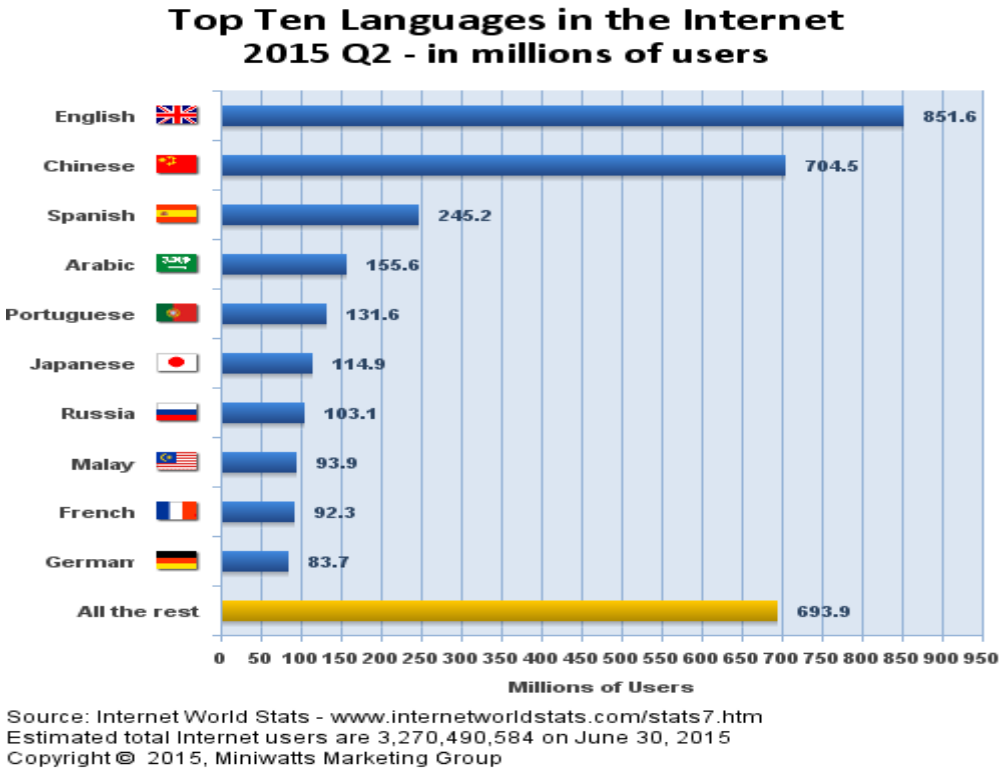

Figure 1. Top Ten Languages in the Internet

As it can be observed from the figures provided above, the current language distribution of the languages on the Web is as follows:

1. English 26.0%
2. Chinese 21.5%
3. Spanish 7.5%
4. Arabic 4.8%
5. Portuguese 4.0%
6. Japanese 3.5%
7. Russian 3.2%
8. Malay 2.9%
9. French 2.8%
10. German 2.6%

All the rest: 21.2%

Top Ten Languages Used in the Web - June 30, 2015
(Number of Internet Users by Language)

TOP TEN LANGUAGES IN THE INTERNET	Internet Users by Language	Internet Penetration (% Population)	Users Growth in Internet (2000 - 2015)	Internet Users % of World Total (Participation)	World Population for this Language (2015 Estimate)
English	851,623,892	60.9 %	505.0 %	26.0 %	1,398,277,986
Chinese	704,484,396	50.4 %	2,080.9 %	21.5 %	1,398,335,970
Spanish	245,150,733	55.5 %	1,248.4 %	7.5 %	441,778,696
Arabic	155,595,439	41.5 %	6,091.9 %	4.8 %	375,241,253
Portuguese	131,615,190	50.0 %	1,637.3 %	4.0 %	263,260,385
Japanese	114,963,827	90.6 %	144.2 %	3.5 %	126,919,659
Russian	103,147,691	70.5 %	3,227.3 %	3.2 %	146,267,288
Malay	93,915,747	32.7 %	1,539.0 %	2.9 %	286,937,168
French	92,265,199	23.9 %	669.0 %	2.8 %	385,389,434
German	83,738,911	87.8 %	204.3 %	2.6 %	95,324,471
TOP 10 LANGUAGES	2,576,501,025	52.4 %	768.2 %	78.8 %	4,917,732,310
Rest of the Languages	693,989,559	29.6 %	980.6 %	21.2 %	2,342,888,808
WORLD TOTAL	3,270,490,584	45.0 %	806.0 %	100.0 %	7,260,621,118

Figure 2. Number of Internet Users by Language

In other words, interpreting the data above, there are 851.6 English speaking people using the Internet, this represents 26.0% of all the Internet users in the world. The number of English Speaking Internet Users has grown 505.0 % in the last fifteen years (2000-2015).

Crystal (2001: 2f) states that the Internet is an association of computer networks with common standards which enable messages to be sent from any central computer (also known as *host*) on one network to any host on any other. It was first developed in the 1960s in the USA as an experimental network which quickly grew to include military, federal, regional, university, business, and personal users. Nowadays, the Internet is the world's largest computer network, with more than 100 million hosts connected by the year 2000. The Internet provides an increasing range of services and enables vast numbers of people to be in touch with each other all over the world through electronic mail (*e-mail*), discussion groups, chat rooms etc. There is a wide range of services available, starting from following daily news, looking at advertisements of any sort, via electronic shopping, to spending your time in the virtual world, chatting with people on the opposite side of the planet. A new term has been coined to represent the notion of everything available on the Internet – *cyberspace*, the space that could be best described as all-in-one; the television, the telephone, the telegraph etc.

The present study looks at the ways in which the nature of the electronic medium and the global use of the Internet are having an impact on the English language. Crystal argues (2001: 5) that the electronic medium presents us with a channel which at the same time facilitates and constraints the human ability to communicate in ways rather different from any other situations. This paper will give a brief introduction to chatgroups and the language of chatgroups. More specifically, it will focus on some of its major innovative features found in online chatgroup communication in postponed time (asynchronous).

The Study, the Corpus and the Methodology

The study is based on Netspeak as a brand new electronic medium of communication. It examines the linguistic properties and distinctive features of online communication in postponed time (the language used in online forums or discussion boards) and highlights particular functionally distinct elements that constitute an online forum thread. Finally, the study describes the distinctive features primarily on the lexical and orthographic levels, highlighting its innovative nature.

The data for the study were collected from naturally occuring sources (the Internet). As this study is a part of the author's broader study on Netspeak, data collection for this study was done within a project including fellows from the English Department and a number of senior students majoring in English. The data were collected from the messageboard available on www.escnation.com. The data were relatively easy to collect as they were available in a large number of public venues, not requiring any special permission to be used (free access to various Internet sites). A number of samples were identified, downloaded into personal computer and an analysis of linguistic elements was made.

This is deemed particularly important as it allows the researcher to have access to the electronic discourse, and consequently copying the text by marking it with a mouse and then copying. The copied text was then pasted in a Microsoft Word document and saved into own computer (for frequency counts to be made).

The corpus included a total of 60 chat samples collected from the online communication in postponed time on the message board, comprising a total of 8,3250 words.

Chatgroups

Chatgroups are organised at particular Internet sites in the so-called ‘rooms’ in which computer users with an interest in a particular topic or topics can freely participate thus contributing to ongoing discussions on particular topics. These are continuous discussions, and Crystal divides them into two situations relating to chatgroups, depending on whether the interaction between computer users takes place in real time (synchronous) or in postponed time (asynchronous). Considering that synchronicity is one of the dimensions upon which electronic communication can be categorised (Baron, 2008: 11), the present paper examines the linguistic properties and distinctive feattures of online communication in postponed time, as stated earlier.

Furthermore, Freiermuth (2001) adds that the physiological mechanisms of online chatting are identical to those required for keyboard skills; dexterity, speed and precision are assets. Naturally, online chatting is different from writing, as it mandates a keyboard, a monitor, online access and client-server software. He further argues that, to have online chatting one must have all of these as prerequisite – they cannot be substituted for nor eliminated if interaction is to occur.

Asynchronous situations: online communication in postponed time

The interaction between users is stored in a particular format, and made available to other users on their request. Users can hence catch up with the discussion in the postponed time, adding their comments to any given topic, and are not limited by time. According to Crystal

(2001: 11), one of the popular features of 1980s computer-mediated communication are the bulletin boards, which can nowadays be found in the form of discussion forums of various sorts. Another example is the mailing list, to which users subscribe bearing in mind that all messages sent in to the list will reach everyone subscribed to the list.

Here is an example of communication in asynchronous Internet situations (from the messageboard available at www.escnation.com):

Figure 3: Chatgroup communication in postponed time

How things work in postponed online interaction

As it may be observed from this example, a number of chatters are on the same message board, engaging in the same conversation but not at exactly the same time.

- The operation mechanism of a group can be summarised as follows:
- Group members send (*post*) their contributions (*posts, messages, articles, opinions, comments, etc.)*
- The system makes all the messages available to all group members
- Messages can be saved, archived, as well as catalogued
- Groups are managed either by an individual, referred to as the *moderator (editor, list-owner, host, postmaster, etc.)* or a small team.
- Messages are circulated at a relatively high speed (not more than 30 or 60 seconds)
- Group members post their replies to topics of their own interests
- Other group members may then post their replies to the replies produced by some other group members

An unlimited number of Internet users, subscribed to a particular Internet site (with the permission to use the messageboard or not), have access to the messageboard. Messageboards on various sites are normally organised in a rather practical way, where messages are sorted out by date, and individual users can freely contribute to any given topic with their own comments.

Some distinctive lexical features of Netspeak in online communication in postponed time

As has been stated earlier, the term *Netspeak* is an alternative to many other terms that can be found in use, such as; *Netlish, Weblish, Internet language, cyberspeak, electronic discourse, computer-mediated communication* etc. Its name suggests speaking, but we must remember that it actually involves writing primarily.

Here is an illustration of how electronically produced language affects spoken language (Crystal, 2001):

a. It's my turn to download now. (i.e. I've heard all your gossip, now hear mine)

c. She's multitasking. (said of someone doing two things at once)

d. Let's go offline for a few minutes (i.e. let's talk in private)

f. I'll ping you later. (i.e. get in touch to see if you're around)

h. He started flaming me for no reason at all. (i.e. shouting at me)

i. I got a pile of spam in the post today. (i.e. junk-mail)

j. He's living in hypertext. (i.e. he's got a lot to hide)

It is evident that it is not possible to say how many of these developments will become a permanent feature of the language. Language change can never be predicted, but only recognised once it has happened. Crystal (2001: 22) concludes that a certain notion of Netspeak has begun to evolve which is rapidly becoming a part of popular linguistic consciousness, and evoking strong language attitudes. Hence the importance of determining its main linguistic properties and aspects.

Netspeak can, therefore, be considered an eclectic resource,[2] but is arguably more than just an aggregate of spoken and written features. While Crystal (2001: 48) finds it "a new species of communication," Baron (in Crystal, 2001: 48) calls it, metaphorically, "an emerging language centaur – part speech, part writing." Crystal goes on to further develop the metaphor to include "speech + writing + electronically mediated properties." In fact, Crystal calls Netspeak a genuine "third medium," comprising several properties of both speech and writing, combined with the properties electronic texts display.

[2] Davis and Brewer (in Crystal, 2001: 47): Writing in the elctronic medium, people adopt conventions or oral and written discourse to their own, individual communicative needs)

According to Crystal (2001: 81), one of the most obvious features of Netspeak is the lexicon that belongs to the internet. The lexicon is encountered whenever someone enters one of the Internet situations. Terms traditionally found in technology and computer science, such as *cable, disk, bit, binary*, and *computer* are not part of this lexicon, as they form part of the jargon of science and technology, extending well beyond the Internet. On the other hand, there is a large number of words and phrases that have emerged in the realm of Internet-restricted situations and activities in which all major lexical processes in English take place.

Distinctive Features of Netspeak: the Findings and the Results

The analysis of the corpus, based on Crystal's model (2001), hihghlighted almost all of the highly distinctive features of Netspeak and asynchronous communication. Only five features were not observed in the corpus: AmE vs. BrE spelling; Prepositional phrases; Participles; Prefixes; Suffixes.

On the other hand, a total of 45 distinctive features were observed in the corpus, as follows (all are given here alphabetically, most are simply listed, those in bold are exemplified in the brackets, whilst others are elaborated on separately in the paragraphs and sections to follow): Abbreviation and acronyms, Absence of lengthy quotation, Anaphoric cross-reference between messages, Attributive adjectives, **Blends** (bottop, netizen, netiquette, cybercide, bugzilla, etc.), Compounds, Conjoining/coordination, **Contractions** (he’s happy misha…looks like we’ll be stuck with the ukrainian frenchie; we wont, cos i dont really speak it…i understand it), **Emotive punctuation** (hey!!!!, whadda f...!?!?!), Frequency of *it*, used to introduce a personal comment, **Frequent perverse spellings and typographical errors** (outta, seemz, cee ya), General feedback reactions found as opening sentences, Grammatical variation, Identification of message-types generated by the software, **Ignorance of**

capitalisation (Vasilis7: if i am what?, Raul-espWiGrBF: i said are u here?are u?), Innovation, Linking words by hyphens into higher elements (phrases and clauses), **Lower-case letters** (do you have a citizens advice bureau there?), Members accommodating other members, thus sharing linguistic character, M**essages in capitals are 'shouting'** (u 2 will I KNOW U WILL… speak to each other in UA), **Nick-initiated lineation** (<Superstar>), Non-standard concord between subject and verb, **Non-standard spelling** (gamez, yup, nope, phreak, kool, etc.), **Omission of a copular verb** (i fine), Other ludic Netspeak extensions, Overwhelming use of the pronoun *I*, Particular format of a chatgroup message body, Personal pronoun references, Presence of nonce-formations, Providing opportunity for equal participation , **Punctuation** (while Israel was giving votes it sais Urovision in the background**!???!!??), Reliance on private verbs** (e.g. *think, feel, know*), Replacement of a word-element by a similar sounding item, **Several sources of visual distinctiveness** (emoticons, rebus-like abbreviations, colloquial elisions), Short messages, Special fonts and styles, Substitution of one case form with another, The peer-group factor, **The use of nicknames** (Y_not_Chat, Pompompom, groggy, EuCROVision_Man, PaddyD, etc.), Topics embedded into other topics, Use of nicknames, Use of non-standard formations, jargon and slang, Word class conversion.

Neologisms

Concerning the emergence of neologisms, a number of patterns have been observed in terms of prefixation, and suffixation, as well as compounding. The following provides an overview of some recently observed trends, broken down by several categories:

- Compounds

It is characteristic of Netspeak that in combining two words to make a new compound word, one element is found repeatedly, as in the following examples:

- *mouse*: *mouseclick, mousepad, mouseover,*
  - *but also phrasal verbs: mouse across, mouse over,*
- *click: click-and-buy, one-click, leftclick, rightclick, double-click*
- *ware: shareware, groupware, freeware, firmware, wetware*
- *web: webcam, webcast, webmail, webmaster, webster, webzine, webliography*
- *net: netlag, netdead, netnews, hypernet, Usenet, Netspeak*
- *bug: bugtracker, bug fix, bug bash, BugNet*

- *Prefixes*

  A special set of items is found in use as prefixes or combining forms:

  - *cyber-*: *cyberspace, cyberculture, cyberlawyer, cybersex, cyber rights*
  - *hyper-*: *hypertext, hyperlink, hyperfiction, hyperzine*
  - *e-: e-voting, e-list, e-shop, e-security, e-books, e-managers*

- *Blends*

Blends, where part of one word is joined to part of another, are instantiated in examples like:

netiquette, netizen, infonet, cybercide, datagram, Infobahn, Internaut, bugzilla

Blends are typically found in Netspeak as two words of a phrase with parts of both, ordinarily the first part of the first and the last part of the other. In comparison to clippings and acronyms, blends can be said to start out as simple abbreviations, but given their appearance which is more word-alike, they become new words, like in the following example taken from asynchronous chat:

Belgium 15.. (posteby by tonyvision on 2015-04-18 8:37:24 pm)

- flop top or average? Who came up with this flop top thing?

- **Bottop**!! [R] – TomofLondon ☺ *2015-04-18 8:39:52 pm*

Innovations

Several types of lexical innovations have been observed, too, as follows. The replacement of a word-element by a similar sounding item, as in:

- ecruiting: electronic recruiting
- etailing: electronic retailing

looks like a special type of blending, heavily relying on subtraction. Further, we note productive use of word-class conversion, normally from noun to verb, as in:

to mouse, to clipboard, to geek out, to 404

Lexical innovation through unusual spelling

Nicknames that are universally accepted (and are the norm, to a certain extent) can be spelled in a wonderful and/or weird way, making them special, which at the same time results in a refreshing of the vocabulary stock. Some examples of nicknames taken from Crystal (2001: 161) include the following:

sleepless, shydude, pilot, Dutchguy, irish, cloudkid, oldbear, bfiancee, Pentium, pcman, froggy, tulip, BMW, cheese, Godot, BeaMeup, Elvis, Stalin, sexpot, buttspasm, HITLER, HAMAS,

Nicknames from the corpus this study is based on, as collected from www.escnation.com include:

- Nicks taken from the corpus this study is based on, as collected from www.esctoday.com: TomTom!, Xplolode EuCROVision_Man, EuroFan, Groggy,

Impreza, Ivan_macedonian, Le-Royaume-Uni, Nikki, Norwegian, Pompompom, Superstar, Lalalala, mijumaru, Y_not_Chat, Yiorgos, MindCrush, Sognu in Rewind, xrate,

Furthermore, these nicknames fall into several categories (taken from the corpus):

- Empty: Y_not_Chat, bex, frtk
- Sonic: Lalalala, Pompompom, TomTom!, Xplolode
- Ludic: Impreza, Groggy, ChreesDoubleyou, MindCrush
- Typographically playful: Xplolode, PaddyD, Le-Royaume-Uni, EuCROVision_Man, etc.

The same respelling tendency frequently produces nonce-formations: grouping words together into a compound (e.g. *what a unifreakinversitynerd*), or linking a number of words by hyphens (e.g. *dead-slow-and-stop computer*), which may qualify as a conversion from phrasal bases. These are illustrated in the following asynchronous chat sample:

- As serious a question as I'm ever likely to ask – **boogwewillallshine** – *2015-04-25 6:19:26 pm*
    - MacBos for certain, Turkey most likely, AlbArm maybe, Cyp rather not [R] – **Stefan-LST Trip to Athens** – *2015-04-25 6:56: 11pm*
    - macedonia and bosnia…[R] **Niall@work**! – *2015-04-25 6:56:11 pm*

Abbreviations and Acronyms

Netspeak is also quite famous for its variety of abbreviations. Acronyms are quite frequently used. The acronyms found in various Internet situations are no longer restricted to words or

short phrases, argues Crystal (2001: 86), and they can be sentence-length: *GTG* (got to go), *WDYS* (What did you say?). Individual words are reduced to several letters: *PLS* (please), *THX* (thanks). Hudson (2000: 242) defines acronyming as "a sort of clipping in which a phrase is replaced by a word based upon the first letters of its words." Bauer (1983: 237) essentially agrees with that definition by saying that:

> An acronym is a word coined by taking the initial letters of the words in a title or phrase and using them as a new word, for example *Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* gives *SALT*.

However, it is not necessarily the case that every abbreviation counts as an acronym: to be an acronym the new word must not be pronounced as a series of letters, but as a new word. Bauer (1983: 237) gives the following example here: if Value Added Tax is called /vi: ei ti:/, that is an abbreviation, but if it is called /v**æ**t/, it has become an acronym. It may be noted in the following example that the use of abbreviations is accompanied with rather emotive punctuation, as well as emoticons, clearly showing three Netspeak features employed in a very short chat sample alone.

- **BTW**…the parrot won :) [R] – Tin Tin -*2015-09-09 11:01:40 pm*
    - **LOOOL**!!!! And presenter? – Frank – *2015-09-09 11:01: 52 pm*

The Use of Emoticons

The corpus for this study included a total of 421 emoticons, as shown in Table 1 below. Here is an excerpt from a chat sample from the corpus, illustrating the use of **emoticons**:

- Shame she sang it so terribly ☹ [R] – SamB – *20:58:28*
- OMGWTF? It's the Slovenian flag! [R] – Dagfinn – *20:58:38*
    - Gotta love it **:D** [R] – Sild – *21:00:23*
    - Yes, it is the flag ☺ reflecting on the song title...'Home is Here' or 'this is where home is' [R] – JohnS – *21:03:20*
- Noooooooooo **: (** ☹ [R] – sellout – *20:58:46*
- I knew it that this long dress will end up to a disaster **: S** [R] – Marios – *20:59:06*

Source of Internet data	Number of words	Number of emoticons
www.escnation.com	**8,3250**	**421 (5.1%)**

Table 1. The Use of Emoticons

The Use of Abbreviations

In the following examples, it may be noted that the use of **abbreviations** is accompanied with rather emotive **punctuation**, as well as emoticons, clearly showing three Netspeak features employed in a very short chat sample alone. Table 2 below shos the total number of abbreviations found in the corpus.

- **BTW**…the parrot won :) [R] – Tin Tin -*2015-04-09 11:01:40 pm*
    - **LOOOL**!!!! And presenter? – Frank – *2015-04-09 11:01: 52 pm*

Source of Internet data	Number of words	Number of abbreviations
www.escnation.com	**8,325**	**127 (1.5%)**

Table 2. The Use of Abbreviations

Concluding Remarks

The data for this study were collected from naturally occurring sources available from the Internet site chosen as the corpus for this paper. All data examined in this work were obtained from the www.escnation.com message board, and were then further analysed, bearing mind at all times the model used by David Crystal (2001), and starting with most of his suppositions and claims.

In addition to my overall conclusion that online communication in postponed time (asynchronous) clearly displays a vast number of distinctive features, here are some of my other major observations and conclusions:

Vocabulary: Chatters increase variety through the use of creative and highly innovative language forms; Chatters are limited by their environment; Chatters almost always prefer colloquial to literary language; Chatters freely reduce multi-word sentences and sequences of response utterances to a sequence of initial letters: *bbfn* (bye bye for now).

Grammar: Chatters frequently use comment clauses, introduced with it. Chatters use the pronoun *I* without much hesitation, while other pronouns are not as frequent. Chatters tend not to use copular verbs, with registered cases of no subject-verb agreement.

Spelling: Chatters tend to use less words, and modify spelling as to meet their needs, thus producing non-standard or perverse spellings. Chatters seem to be aware of the information value of consonants as opposed to vowels, judging by such vowel-less items as *txt* (text), and tmrw (tomorrow). Most chatters comply with the lower-case letters rule; cases of messages in capitals were registered where chatters were either frustrated over something or wished to underline their points.

Punctuation: Chatters tend to use emoticons quite frequently as a way to express their feelings and attitudes. Chatters use emoticons freely and without much hesitation.

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