Chapter 17
Chat Discourse

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ABSTRACT
In this chapter, the author characterizes the language that appears in one form of computer mediated communication: real-time casual chats. It is also shown that the new writing that occurs in chats in general, filled with deviations from standard writing, does not merely imply the creation of a new language but is rather the unconscious recreation of pre-existing features both from early writing systems and learning to spell. Chatters even recreate characteristics present in language acquisition. The deviations generally affect the syllable, an intuitive prosodic unit that influences changes in spelling. Chat discourse involves the use of cohesion mechanisms present in other texts, as well as new devices that allow chatters to compensate for the absence of physical clues. Thus, real-time casual chats are a medium in which language is being changed and (re)created.

INTRODUCTION
Nowadays we get more and more information for a much lower price, thanks to the progress of technology. The technological advances of the Information Age have brought about the possibility of communicating through the computer, which creates new challenges concerning language and behaviour.

Computer-mediated communication, based on a written message that circulates through computers, can be synchronous or asynchronous, depending on the time the receiver gets the message: immediately (in real time) or instead minutes, hours or days afterwards.

This chapter will focus on real-time communication in chat programmes since we consider that it involves the necessary conditions for language (re)creation. In fact, real-time communication requires writing fast, without previous planning and posterior
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revision, and with limited editing possibilities, as Veronis & Neef (2006) stress. Moreover, as a large number of people try to communicate simultaneously in multi-participant chats, they have to employ some strategies to make their discourse expressive and attractive to others. Consequently, language is transformed due to the need for economy, on the one hand, and the need to be expressive and convey one’s feelings, on the other. Changes are proudly made to create the sense of belonging to a new group – a virtual community in which people can communicate online and share their interests and beliefs. This can be seen in languages which have an online presence, such as French (cf. Anis, 1998), English (Crystal, 2001/2004), Spanish (Rúa, 2005) and Portuguese (Benedito, 2002).

While some linguists refer to the possible reinvention of writing on the Internet (such as Pedras, 2002), others mention that the features used in this type of communication have already been seen in other types of texts, such as cartoons, advertisements and poetry (Veronis & Neef, 2006): what is new, though, is their simultaneous and worldwide usage.

In this chapter, we intend to characterize the language that appears in public informal chats. It is our purpose to show that the new writing participants use does not merely imply the creation of a new language but is rather the reactivation of pre-existing features. Thus, the objectives of this chapter are:

- To characterize one type of chat discourse and the context in which it appears;
- To confirm if cohesion and coherence devices are used in this type of chat;
- To see what transformations are occurring in chat abbreviations and their relation to the speakers’ knowledge of the syllable;
- To verify the possible recreation of features from early writing systems;
- To check if the deletions of graphemes conform to the unmarked structures present in the early stages of language acquisition;
- To test whether writing in chats can recreate phases of learning how to spell.

BACKGROUND

Computer-Mediated Communication

There has been an explosion of new forms of written communication: SMS, chats, e-mails, forums and blogs. In fact, people in the world have never written so much as nowadays (Anis, 1998; Pedras, 2001; Veronis & Neef, 2006). The language that appears in this type of computer-mediated communication shows a deviation from standard writing (Benedito, 2002; Crystal, 2004; Veronis & Neef, 2006). The extent to which these deviations occur depends on the type of communication. Whereas e-mails can in general follow the spelling rules, chats, which are a synchronous form of communication (i.e., happen in real time), are more easily filled with transgressions.

The deviations in chat discourse are consciously used to form a group identity or a virtual community, linked due to the similarity of interests and not because of geographic proximity (Dias, 2000; Reid, 1991; Silveirinha, 2003).

Chats

Chat programmes enable Internet users to communicate to other netters who are geographically distant via a text message sent through the computer. Sender and addressee must be logged on simultaneously in order to communicate.

There are different kinds of chat. According to Araújo (2004), some types include educational chats, public or private chats or even chats with a guest. Herring (2007) proposes different
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