Chapter 5
Insights from an MSN Corpus

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I look closely at one type of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Microsoft Network (MSN) instant messaging. MSN instant communication is quite popular among the youth in most parts of the world. In Hong Kong, it has fast replaced I-seek-you (ICQ) and QQ (in mainland China) as one of the primary instant communication tools among the youth.

In this chapter I will be looking particularly at the linguistic features of this kind of communication. More specifically, Hong Kong being a trilingual and biliterate society, one would want to see how participants juggle these languages within the medium of the MSN instant messaging and what linguistic features are thus produced. As is usual with most chapters our observations are based on a case study. So first I

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present this study in the next section. A distinctive feature of this chapter from some others is that I present and describe a comprehensive corpus as an example of an actual CMC exchanges. This will give us insights into the actual communication sessions of young people who use MSN in Hong Kong.

**CASE STUDY: LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF MSN COMMUNICATION**

Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated areas in the world, and it is also one of the most wired cities in the world. There is thus the potential for a very active environment of CMC activities. According to a survey done by Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2007), 90.4% of students in Hong Kong, including 81.1% of secondary students and 95.4% of tertiary students, use the internet service to communicate with other people. This case study (mainly based on Yee, 2008) will particularly look at the linguistic features produced by tertiary-level students in Hong Kong in the course of these text-based computer-mediated communication practices.

The case study is organized as follows. First I introduce this scenario of prevalent use of MSN and the nature of MSN itself. Next I look at what studies have been done in the area, especially in relation to Hong Kong. Following this I describe the methodology used to collect and analyze the data before presenting the linguistic features identified from the data with focus on the linguistic features specific to Hong Kong contexts.

**What is MSN?**

MSN (The Microsoft Network) is a free instant messaging service allowing Internet users to communicate via personalized text messages with friends, family members, and business colleagues in real time. The first version of MSN was released by Microsoft in 1995 for mainly home users whose computers were compatible with the Microsoft Windows 95 operating system. It was renamed Windows Live Messenger (WLM) in February 2006. In Hong Kong, the use of MSN has significantly decreased the use of ICQ because the functions and varieties of MSN outweigh those of ICQ. In the latest version of MSN Messenger 8.5, various functions like video conferences, audio conversations, online games and exchange of video clips, music files and photos are allowed through MSN. There are also over 10,000 emotion icons such as pictures, symbols, and cartoons for users to choose from. It seems that we gradually thus moved from a purely text-based CMC to include video-based...
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