Chapter 55
Using CMC in Order to Investigate the Language System

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ABSTRACT

Chats, blogs, mailing lists, personal e-mails or texts that can be found on homepages, in short all kinds of computer-mediated communication, offer a very good opportunity to observe ongoing forms of language change as well as language awareness on the part of the users. The new medium makes it possible to watch the emergence of new rules at the same time as they are being formed, and to observe current processes of linguistic reanalysis by the language users. Observations of this kind are possible on all levels of the language system, with regard to phonetics and the phonological system as well as to morphology, morpho-syntax and syntax. This chapter will give a short résumé of the research that has been done so far in this field and outline the many further possibilities of exploration that have not yet been followed up.

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (in the following: CMC), be it in the form of chats, blogs, mailing lists, personal e-mails or texts that are to be found on homepages, offer a tremendous new opportunity to observe language awareness and language change. One might want to object that the language used in CMC is a hybrid of spoken and written varieties (cf. e. g. Ricardo 2009 for an empirical analysis of stylistic variation in CMC), and might therefore be a variety of its own rights. Even though, however, it still has to rely on the grammatical system of the language used and cannot exist independently from it. It is therefore probably most realistic to assume a steady process of interaction and mutual influence between CMC and other forms of written or spoken communication. In this way, CMC will mirror “real life language” as well as “real life language” will mirror CMC.

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being formed, and to observe ongoing processes of linguistic reanalysis by the language users. This opportunity offers itself on all levels of the language system: Phonetics and the phonological system as well as morphology, morpho-syntax and syntax. The following paper will give a résumé on the research that has been done so far in this field and outline the many further possibilities of exploration that have not been followed yet.

**PHONETICS AND ORTHOGRAPHY**

Phonetics and the underlying phonological system are mirrored in what shall here be called “spontaneous orthography”. What is meant thereby is the way of spelling people use under the informal and often temporarily restricted conditions of CMC. Especially in all forms of chat, writing has to be done quickly, generating not only an abundance of abbreviations, but also leading to negligence of spelling rules. The spontaneous orthography that can be observed in these cases offers an inside into the speakers’ unconscious knowledge of spelling rules, and into ongoing phonetic and phonological developments as well as into socio- and dialectal varieties (cf. e. g. Burri 2003, Siebenhaar 2003).

In the following, two examples shall be given to illustrate (a) phonological awareness and/or ongoing phonological change and (b) unconscious awareness of orthographical rules.

It can be assumed that in most cases, spontaneous spelling mirrors the perception of the sound by the speaker. One most interesting example for this phenomenon is the use of the Pinyin spelling system (cf. Yin 2002 for details of the system) by Chinese internet users. Although native speakers of Mandarin strongly prefer the use of Chinese characters, Pinyin is sometimes used in e-mails or forums in order to avoid technical problems with the Chinese character set. However, most Chinese speakers, although familiar with the spelling system, are not used to writing in Pinyin, since they seldom need in it everyday life. We can therefore safely assume that they are not influenced by any traditional spelling conventions they are used to, or by regularly occurring letter combinations. Instead, they must rely on their perception of the words and spell them, so to speak, from scratch. This seems to be a quite manageable task. Since the correct tone can in most cases be inferred from the context tones are usually not marked. Furthermore, the syllabic structure of modern Chinese is relatively simple, and the number of syllables is very restricted (cf. Duanmu 2000: 51). As a result of these restrictions, only three of the 19 standard Chinese consonants (cf. ibd.: 26) can occur in the coda. They are written -n, -ng and -r respectively. The difference between -n and -ng, i.e. between the the alveolar nasal /n/ and the velar nasal /ŋ/, is phonologically relevant: cf. 宾 bīn ‘guest’ vs. 冰 bīng ‘ice’. However, not all speakers of the language make this distinction. This can be witnessed by the occurrence of utterances like  wo de bāo bāo bīn le (instead of bīng le) [‘my baby is sick’] and many other similar cases that can be found with the help of the Chinese search machine www.baidu.com. Obviously, the phonological difference is either not perceived at all or not perceived as relevant by some language users. The sound chosen here is the logical neutralization of /n/ and /ŋ/, since /n/ can occur in onset and coda alike, while /ŋ/ us restricted to the coda and cannot occur in a prevocalic position. It would be most interesting to investigate this phenomenon further in order to see if this neutralization occurs only with certain words, if it is more typical for speakers from one part of the country than another, or if there is an overall phonological change going on.

Spontaneous spelling, on the other hand, might offer us insights not only into the perception of sounds, but into the perception of spelling rules, as well. Writers with years of experience in spelling their mother tongue have an intuitive grasp of the rules they apply, although most likely most of them are not consciously aware of them. A good example in order to investigate this point can be...