Chapter 5
Language Economy in Computer–Mediated Communication: Learner Autonomy in a Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents an analysis of economised language in textchat data from non-native English-speaking students in an MA programme in English Linguistics. Previous research by the author demonstrated that forms clipped or otherwise reduced from their full version can be considered evidence that an Internet community of practice has formed. The author argues here that this implies that the learners are exhibiting autonomy, and he also demonstrates that the same can be concluded for the ellipsis. The functions of the ellipsis are identified, which demonstrates that students are interacting, and therefore, are at least in the process of forming a social learning community.

INTRODUCTION
In this chapter, we discuss the economisation of the English language in computer-mediated communication from the perspective of learner autonomy. How language is used in Internet communication has been and still is the subject of much research. Many examples have been discussed where written language appears to become more like spoken language, such as in Instant Messaging and textchat. This is not surprising since this written language functions very much like speech, and Internet users are, therefore, under pressure to economise their language in order to speed up communication.

The particular economisation processes we are focusing on here are reduced forms and ellipsis. Typical examples of ellipsis in English are illustrated in (1):

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In (1a), we see an example of VP-ellipsis, where the second conjunct has been reduced from the rabbit chased the dog too. The other example in (1b) involves a fragmentary answer to a question. Only the specific information requested in the question, namely the location, is given in the form of a Preposition Phrase over there. The other economisation process of reduced form refers to forms that are reduced from the full standard signifier. These include cases like clippings, acronyms, abbreviations and homophones like r instead of are where the full form is reduced in size phonetically or orthographically, but we also include forms reduced in formality but usually not in size, such as writing yeah or yep instead of yes.

We will analyse text chat data from learners of English as a second language. The learners (28 in total) are all students on a distance MA programme in English Linguistics at a university in Sweden. The data comes from their discussions on various topics within linguistics either in student-only pre-seminar groups or larger seminar discussions with one of the teachers. These students are novice or near-novice Internet users, even in their native languages—one is a speaker of Bangla, and the rest Vietnamese. Thus, they have not been very much exposed to the conventions of computer-mediated communication in general, and of such communication in English in particular. As a result, their linguistic behaviour is of great interest to see how language use develops. They are almost all teachers of English at universities and colleges, and required an average IELTS score of 6.5 to be admitted onto the programme. The two teachers are native speakers of American and British English, respectively. The course where the data was taken from was an introduction to core linguistic topics, such as phonetics and morphology, and sociolinguistics. Students had divided themselves into four groups, and for each session these groups arranged a pre-seminar where they alone, without the teachers being present, discussed the material, which consisted of readings on the relevant topics and data analysis. These discussions took place through Skype text chat. The chatlogs from these pre-seminars were sent to the teachers and these guided the discussion in the seminars. All students have been made anonymous in the presentation of the data, and are referred to as, e.g. Student 15. The timecheck given before the student number in each example is the timelog registered for each contribution by the Skype text chat function. Typographical errors have been preserved.

Why were these particular items chosen for analysis? Previous research by the author (White, 2011b) on reduced forms demonstrates that the native English speakers have little, if any, influence on the students in their adopting of particular reduced forms, and that there is strong evidence that the students are forming a community of practice. We also see evidence here that ellipsis shares the features associated with interaction. Due to the strong social dimension to learning acknowledged since Vygotsky (1978), see Bax (2011) for more recent discussion of this idea, we will argue here that the students, by using these features in their language use, are showing a great deal of autonomy in their development of English.

We will begin by discussing the author’s research on reduced forms, and the related concept of community of practice. There we see to what extent native or non-native speakers determine discourse conventions. In the final section of the background, the phenomenon of ellipsis is considered. Then we move on to our data analysis and discussion. The same data set the author analysed regarding reduced forms is analysed, this time focusing on ellipsis. We present the functions of ellipsis in the dataset. Whether the students are exhibiting autonomy in a community of practice by economising their language is the question dealt with in the final analysis section. We end by considering some future directions for research in this area.