Online Communication in a Second Language

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Online Communication in a Second Language

Social Interaction, Language Use, and Learning Japanese

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1 Introduction

Second language (L2) use and acquisition in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), such as blogs, social networking, email, and chat, is an increasingly important field. One often-cited yet underexplored benefit of tools such as these is that CMC may provide a vehicle for students to not only have contact with native speakers (NSs) of their target language, but to also learn language outside of the classroom. In particular, little research has been completed on the use of languages other than English in authentic intercultural online settings, outside of teacher- or researcher-led activity.

This book describes a multi-method, longitudinal study of L2 learners' social CMC use, in which over 2000 instances of Australian learners' naturally occurring interaction with their Japanese contacts via blogs, email, video, chat, mobile phone, video games, and social networking were collected, in addition to in-depth interviews with the learners and their informal online contacts. Although the main languages under consideration are Japanese and English, the findings presented should be applicable more widely to other language contexts.

Throughout, the book aims to not only increase our understanding of CMC interaction in an L2, but the nature of language in CMC in general. The volume serves to challenge traditional categorisations of 'synchronous' and 'asynchronous' CMC mediums, assumptions about the 'placelessness' of online domains, and previous characterisations of online conversations as 'haphazard' and 'unstructured', providing an alternate, sophisticated view of CMC interaction which highlights identity, the skilful management of communication, and user agency in interaction with technology.

Online Social Interaction, Language Use, and Language Learning

This book has two interlinked goals. Firstly, from a sociolinguistic standpoint, despite the well-established importance of interaction in the target

language (Krashen, 1982; Long, 1983, 1996; Swain, 1985) it appears that there have been very few studies of CMC examining naturally occurring 'authentic interaction'. The present study therefore aims to increase our understanding of intercultural social interaction in L2 CMC, in terms of what language learners do, how, and why, and also to explore the nature of language and communication in CMC in general, and in intercultural CMC in particular.

Secondly, from a pedagogic viewpoint, an understanding of the types of interaction learners take part in outside of the classroom will necessarily have educational implications. As Coulthard (1985) states, a detailed description of the skills of the 'competent non-native speaker' is vital for the effective teaching and learning of additional languages. While Knobel and Lankshear (2004) rightly claim that simply because a practice like blogging is widely engaged in outside of the class does not mean that it should be addressed within class, Matsumoto-Sturt (2003) and Stockwell and Levy (2001) argue that teachers cannot afford to ignore providing students with the basic skills and strategies they will need to deal with Internet use outside of the classroom.

Although these two foci are obviously linked, there has been very little convergence between sociolinguistic and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) approaches to the study of CMC. The present study endeavours to examine how learners utilise CMC socially in their L2, and related opportunities for language learning, within a social realist framework (Sealey & Carter, 2004) by addressing the following questions:

(1) How do learners establish and maintain relationships in which they use a second language online?
(2) What is the nature of learners' CMC, and in what combinations are they using CMC in their second language?
(3) How does the use of CMC in conjunction with other resources provide opportunities for second language acquisition?

Before exploring these issues in detail, this chapter will provide an introduction to the 'language of CMC' and previous research in the area from both a sociolinguistic and SLA perspective. Informed by this state-of-the-art review, the theoretical framework employed in the present volume, Sealey and Carter's (2004) social realist approach, and the methodology of the study, will be introduced.

The 'Language of CMC'

In the introduction to *Computer Mediated Discourse*, Herring (1996b) identifies three key areas for research: the 'language of CMC'; the interplay of

technological, social, and contextual factors; and, the role of linguistic variability. Throughout the 'Internet era' of the 1990s and beyond, much research on online communication focused on describing the 'language of CMC', much of which has been criticised as technologically deterministic, in the sense that it viewed online language use as largely determined by the CMC medium utilised.

A large body of work on CMC has drawn a sharp distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication, and makes comparisons between individual CMC tools and with 'traditional' spoken and written language (Baron, 1998, 2000, 2001; Bordia, 1997; Callot & Belmore, 1996; Crystal, 2001a, 2001b, 2004b; Dimmick *et al.*, 2000; du Bartell, 1995; Ferrara *et al.*, 1991; Lantz, 2001; Mar, 2000; Neuage, 2004; O'Neil & Martin, 2003; Yates, 1996). In this tradition, online Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) were likened to 'pin-up boards' and chat and Instant Messengers (IM) described as 'conversations in writing'.

Many researchers assert that CMC has features that are distinct from either spoken or written communication, and various labels to describe the 'language of CMC' have been coined, including 'Interactive Written Discourse' (Ferrara *et al.*, 1991), 'Electronic Language' (Callot & Belmore, 1996), and of course, Crystal's 'Netspeak' (2001b). More recently, Crystal (2011) has noted the emergence of terms such as 'Electronically Mediated Communication' and 'Digitally Mediated Communication' to incorporate mobile phone and other forms of CMC which do not require a traditional computer.

Some common features of digital writing in English and Japanese include multiple punctuation and eccentric spelling (読みたいですぅ〜〜〜！！！, I want to read iit ～ ～～ !!!), capitalization (I'M REALLY ANGRY), emphasis (I'm really *angry*), written-out laughter (ふふふ, hahaha), descriptions of actions ((笑), <laughs>), emoticons (^_^, :-)), abbreviations (lol), rebus writing (4649, CU), and non-linguistic symbols (見ようと思ってます♪, I'm thinking of looking at it♪) (Y. Nishimura, 2007: 169). These features fulfil two main functions: to express prosody or emotion, such as the use of capital letters to add emphatic force or music notes to decorate/denote tone of voice, or to shorten messages, such as the rebus writing CU (see you) or 4649 (*yo-ro-shi-ku*, pleased to meet you, based on the phonetic values of the numbers in Japanese), which originated in pager or cell phone use (Miyake, 2001). Some well-known varieties include '1337' ('leet' or 'elite')-speak, a numbers or symbols for letters substitution system based on English, used mainly by online gamers (Carooso, 2004), and '*gyaru moji*' ('girl-characters'), a Japanese symbol substitution system created by young girls using mobile phones (Hada, 2006).

Reports on CMC language in the popular media link such features of 'CMC language' to 'declining standards' of language, 'poor academic achievement', and 'social breakdown' (Onishi, 2008; Ōtawa, 2007; Strong, 2007; E. Takahashi, 2007). Murray (2000) also summarises previous research as having found that CMC exhibits 'simplified' registers. However, Herring poses the question that if CMC is 'fragmented, agrammatical, and internally disjointed' (1999: 1), why does its popularity continue to grow? Androutsopoulos too challenges the exoticism of language on the Internet, calling it 'the netspeak myth' (2006a: 420) after Dürscheid (2004). Furthermore, not all CMC users make use of the supposedly 'unique' features of 'netspeak' to the same extent – in fact, Dwyer (2007) found that some students reported a dislike for abbreviated forms.

In attempting to describe the 'language of CMC', many researchers have made use of technological categorisations as a starting point. Variables include: 'message size' (Cherney, 1995), 'communication commands available' (Cherney, 1995), 'degree of anonymity' (Selfe & Meyer, 1991), and 'text versus non-text' (Yates & Graddol, 1996), cited in Herring (2003). Yet Androutsopoulos (2006a) characterises the 'first wave' of linguistic CMC studies as overwhelmingly using the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication as the pivotal point for linguistic description.

Spoken vs written and synchronous vs asynchronous

Asynchronous forms of CMC typically have greater delays between sending and replying than synchronous forms, as they do not require both users to be logged in simultaneously. Past research has found that asynchronous communication may afford language learners some benefits; for example, by removing some of the pressure associated with face-to-face communication or synchronous CMC (Inagaki, 2006; Itakura & Nakajima, 2001). Synchronous communication tools, on the other hand, typically require both users to be logged in at the same time. One important benefit associated with synchronous technology is an increase in language production, both in terms of complexity and length (Darhower, 2002; Kern, 1995).

Despite the prevalence of the synchronous-asynchronous model, the present study takes the view that technology cannot be neatly separated. Even 'synchronous' tools such as chat programs do not operate on 'real time'. Unlike analogue communication (for example, analogue telephones, radio, etc.) both 'synchronous' and 'asynchronous' CMC tools do not receive a constant stream of input; rather, the program 'samples' at regular intervals to see if any new messages have been sent. In this way, technically, there is no difference between, for example, email, generally thought of as asynchronous,

and 'instant' messaging, generally thought of as synchronous. This is especially true when one considers that email clients can be set to automatically check for incoming mail just as frequently as chat applications check for new messages. So-called 'asynchronous' web email applications like Yahoo, Hotmail, or Google Mail (Gmail), and even social networking sites (SNSs) and BBSs also display whether or not a recipient is online, in the same way that 'synchronous' programs do. 'Synchronous' tools like IM allow the sending of 'offline' messages, and hybrid tools like Google Wave and Facebook further blur any distinction. This argument is further expanded upon in Chapter 4, while the example of email, one of the most familiar modes of CMC, is used below to illustrate the inherent tensions in categorisation.

What's an email?

Homer: What's an e-mail?
Lenny: It's a computer thing, like, er, an electric letter.
Carl: Or a quiet phone call.
('The computer war menace shoes', *The Simpsons* ep.12A6, cited in Crystal, 2006: 130)

The quote above, although from a cartoon, bears a striking semblance to many academic descriptions of email, which, for the most part, have translated CMC through previous media (Leung, 2005). Crystal (2006) cites a range of linguistic descriptions, similar to the quote above, including Hale and Scanlon's characterisation of email as 'a cross between a conversation and a letter' (1999: 3). Yet it is not only studies from the 'Internet era' of the 1990s that define email by drawing comparisons with other modes of communication. Morris *et al.* (2002) compare speech and email, while Bertacco and Deponte (2005) later described email as similar to letters. In this way, the 'simple' distinction between spoken-like versus written-like is highly contended. Of the two, email, as a form of 'asynchronous' CMC, is generally claimed as 'written-like' (Baron, 2000; Bertacco & Deponte, 2005; Crystal, 2001b; Danet & Herring, 2007; Herring, 2003, 2004; Ko, 1996; Werry, 1996; Yates, 1996), as Lenny describes in the Simpsons quote above. Crystal even states 'We "write" emails, not "speak" them' (2006: 32), although some conflicting perceptions are presented in Chapter 4. Despite these claims, a number of researchers agree with Carl in the quote above, and make note of the more spoken-like qualities of email.

In an important study of Finnish learners of English and their NS partners, Tella (1992) suggests that email should be characterised as spoken language. However, Tella's own results show that students drafted their emails