

Relexicalization in the Internet Relay Chat

Hey can u gimme a lift 2 the party 2nite



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The Internet Relay Chat (IRC), created in 1988, was one of the first forms of synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) where people could “chat” in real time by typing their contributions. Since then, it has been growing rapidly in popularity with the Internet’s general rise. This can be seen with the recent explosion of online manuals and guides, as well as extensive web-based listings of IRC channels on a great number of sites.

Initially, research into Computer-Mediated Communication focused more around work-aspects like organizational functioning, hierarchical relationships, efficiency, and so on. More recently, however, there has been considerable recognition for its playful, expressive, emotional language.¹

Identity in the online community is created entirely through the use of language and typography onscreen due to which the physical existence is nullified. Relationships are formed between participants in real-time without the prejudicial restrictions that would normally be derived by physical presence, such as age, gender, race, skin colour, body language, facial expressions, figure, clothes, and so on. Interlocutors in this medium can only retrieve information about each other from the text itself. Furthermore, this of course may not be an entirely accurate representation of the truth as the medium provides anonymity. Most notably the ability of chatters to graphically express emotions (lurking, emoticons) and simulate speech-phonology (through phonetic spelling) certainly gives the potential for linguistically created tension to exist.

There is also a clear striving to develop a prestige language variety which determines the speaker’s “place in the sun” in the cyberspace thus being a most important extra-linguistic factor stimulating a lot of changes in the speech of the interlocutors. The changes are determined grammatically, through ellipsis, punctuation, etc and lexically, through relexicalization and phrasal covert norms. The missing dynamics of the in-person interactive process, as well as heightened control over the timing and content of utterances means there is a greater sensitivity to how patterns of “speaking” are received. This creates a situation whereby contrary to regular Webchat users (Webies), the new ones (Newbies) will tend to overuse the conventions to which they are becoming accustomed in order to try to accommodate to their audience in the face of Webies.

Participants use all types of syntactically reduced forms to keep face and combat

the limiting conditions of the medium itself. Relexicalization, i.e. the use of acronyms, symbols, word-clippings, shortcuts is therefore for purely practical reasons – they reduce the time and effort necessary to communicate. Users therefore tend to produce utterances of an average of six words. Respect is given to those who can communicate the most information, whether direct or implied, in the shortest amount of time. The mainstream lexis is reformed into hybrid, heteroglossic, exclusively narrow, covert norms, (**relexicalization** as defined by M.A.K. Halliday and **overlexicalization** as defined by C.C. Werry), good examples of which are acronyms simulating laughter: *lol* (*laughing out loud* is used to express general laugh), *lmao* (*laughing my arse off* is reserved for something very amusing), *rotflol* (*rolling on the floor laughing out loud* is used for something wildly crazy and very amusing), and others like *omg* (*oh my god*), *gtg* (*got to go*), *BTW* (*by the way*) and so on. Chatters capitalize the initial letters to predict much everyday conversation from the context or to save time. Shortcuts like *ic* (*I see*), *col8r* (*Call later* or *I'll call later*.) are also widely used.

Having a look at the above examples and not-even going deep into the Computer-Mediated Communication, traditional linguists will immediately agree that Internet Relay Chat is an **antilanguage** (Halliday 1978) and not the speech of an immense community (sometimes called **antisociety**) that employs different language varieties for purely practical reasons (Stevenson 2005).² Many people may not like this kind of language and they may be quite right, but the fact is that the mode of technology imparts something of its nature to public experience and whether we like it or not, the extra-linguistic reality is causing intra-linguistic modifications in the English language thus dictating its new rules and norms to it.

Thus, the most dominant feature of relexicalization on the Internet Relay Chat is the use of acronyms and shortcuts. The main role of these devices is to abbreviate and economize speech. It is important to reduce the number of key-strokes to an absolute minimum – if you can use an acronym that will be understood by your intended audience, it is preferable to do so. It is true that in most cases, there is a practical use for these terms – to save time, but in others, as mentioned above, they are being used to gain respect by conforming to the nonconformist image of the Internet Relay Chat through maximum abuse of codified structures. Shortcuts also have the function of excluding many novices who really could have no idea of the meanings, giving those “in the know” greater power. Demonstrating this knowledge surely must partly be a means of raising social status in cyberspace.³

In some channels instances of acronymization and shortcutting are more frequent and acronym use has reached a cult-level. In such cases sometimes it is virtually impossible to uncover the heavy shortenings and only a small group of *ppl* (net slang word for *people*) would know the meanings. In the potentially infinite universe of Online Language variety, it would be naïve to suggest that there is no place for antilanguage and that it does not exist at all. There are really text-based virtual realities with exclusively antilinguistic tendencies. Acronymization is usually taken to an extreme by principally younger boys and girls that tend to raise their personal status. Though questioned on the use of their antilanguage, many such communicators gave the response that it is “a

communicative force or verbal art” (Stevenson 2005). Under these circumstances, even without trying to be an extremely strict proponent of the English language, we can say that this type of communication is too far from what we mean by verbal art and that this is exactly the case of antilanguage.

However, the most respectable acronyms and shortenings (unlike obscure anograms which are not in fact widely used online) are the ones on reading which one understands what is meant. Most chatrooms certainly do follow their own linguistic netiquette, encompassing virtual play and performance; their conventions are accessible enough to allow newbies to adapt to the stylistically reduced forms with relative ease as any person would when entering a new speech community. There is even an acronym to express the annoyance of the chatters at the overuse of acronyms: *YABA!* = *Yet another bloody acronym!*

Chatters also use the technique of reducing forms through replacing words with numbers and letters that have the same phonological properties. Such shortenings are used with comparable frequency to their full-versioned originals:

To/too → 2
Are you? → ru
Why → y
Are → r
You → u
Oh → o
What → wat, wot
What's → whats
He's → Hes
Thats → that's
Any → ne
Before → b4
Just → j
Computer → c

It is evident from the examples that the use of acronyms and shortcuts is mostly to economize time and speech. This means that the users are socially pressured to type quickly. On occasions it almost becomes a typing race – chatters frantically using every method possible to keep up with conversation, and be noticed:

From chatzone2.log, edited: (the acronyms and shortenings are in bold type)

- How many **msgs** did **u** receive from all the helpful mens in here? **lol**
- **lol** well....**dunno** lol
- **lol**
- **lol** none
- hello all
- **ya** got snow there?

- *Awwwww msgs lol*
- *where r u? no kiddin*
- *Nooooo*
- *Lol*
- *I dont*

The shortness of each term indicates the high pace of channel conversation. This is the result of users competing to fill the next line of chat and keep up with a particular line of conversation or topic line.

Information, appreciation and expressive intonation is usually displayed through stylistically reduced forms and emoticons, all of which require previous acquaintance with the medium to enable comprehension. Only after the parties of this new type of communication become increasingly involved in the virtual community, it becomes more a marker of identity and a way of being noticed. This development is exaggerated further still by the fact that IRC users are relying entirely on the appearance of their language to raise their status. The principal way of achieving this is through linguistic recreation.

Clear evidence of the never-ending search for originality, for the sake of liveliness or humour is the presence of too many relexicons that are, on the whole, synonymous to each other. For example, there are several synonyms to express leaving a chatroom or bringing a personal opinion:

- BBL - be back later*
- BBIAB - be back in a bit*
- EOD - end of discussion*
- EOT - end of transmission*
- GFC - going for coffee*
- CU - see you*
- CUL8R - see you later*
- GTG - got to go*
- HAND - have a nice day*
- TTYL - talk to you later*
- IMO - in my opinion*
- IMCO - in my considered opinion*
- IMHO - in my humble opinion*
- IMSHO - in my not so humble opinion*

Whilst relexicon usage may be commonplace, IRC is subject to situational variation. Chatters tend to refrain from using too many heavy shortenings, for example, when talking to a newbie or to somebody for whom English is not the first language. When a newbie first enters a channel, he is asked by the previous acquaintance to type in full sentences, using all the correct grammatical cues, codified spelling structures and so on. The simulation of real life speech is therefore something he learns from exposure

to the medium. For example, a newbie will write *Does anyone want to talk with a 17 year-old male?* Which later becomes *nel wanna chatto 17/m*.

Thus, much apparent simulation of speech in the IRC comes about from the inherent need to form utterances quickly and, as mentioned above, there is also the extra-linguistic aspect of gaining a certain status in the cyberspace community. Computer Mediated Speech is not only quicker to produce; it is also faster than the written medium by its use of acronyms, shortcuts, emoticons and ellipsis: missing out unnecessary cues, which can be picked up from the context. The latter quality of the spoken medium is therefore replicated online as one of the first ways in which a newbie will try to shorten utterances and save time. So, in terms of syntax, the speech-like qualities of the Internet Relay Chat can be explained logically: they save time when spoken, so they save time when written.

Notes:

1. IRC has become especially popular in this respect amongst the younger generation who has been brought up “computer literate” and is therefore not discouraged by any technicalities associated with it.
2. According to Jon Stevenson technological expertise is stigmatised through pejorative terms like *geek/nerd/techy* in real life, whilst online it is the ultimate status symbol.
3. We should like to focus on the fact that the use of acronyms in the Internet Relay Chat is not only to save time as many students of the Internet language assume. For professional chatters or Webies who are fast enough at typing, using shortcuts doesn't really save much time. Acronimization and shortcutting are online status symbols for them.

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Հոդվածը անդրադառնում է անգլերենի ժամանակակից գործառական-ոճական դրսևորում համարվող ինտերնետային դիսկուրսի որոշ առանձնահատկություններին ընդհանրապես և հիմնականում դեռահասների կողմից գործածվող ինտերնետային Ղրույցի գործառական և գործաբանական յուրահատկություններին մասնավորապես: Ոճական սեղնությունը քննվում է որպես խոսքի լեզվական արտահայտություն, որը հետապնդում է ոչ միայն ժամանակ շահելու նպատակ, այլև համարվում է որոշակի էլեկտրոնային կարգավիճակի ապացույց: