

**INFORMALISATION AND CONVERSATIONALISATION IN ONLINE WRITING:
AN IMPEDIMENT TO INTELLIGIBILITY AND WRITING SKILL?**

by

Chinmoypritam Muduli

*Research Scholar, Department of French at Pondicherry University, India
Email: chinmoypritam@gmail.com*

Abstract: *In the last decade or so, with the advent of the Internet, we are witness to the rise of digital communication or, more precisely, online writing. It has been one of the most remarkable inventions of mankind like its predecessor, the printing press and writing before that. In terms of impact on society, it has changed the face of communication altogether.*

But, recently, many purists view the nonstandard orthography of SMS and online chats as a threat to standard spelling, writing skill, and intelligibility. Reports in the media are full of mixed reactions against this new trend of communication (internet- and mobile-based lingo): opinions differ with some who believe that it is beneficial and assists with social skills, while others believe it is addictive and stupid.

In light of the above, this paper attempts to examine this new phenomenon and the linguistic features that define it as a “prestigious language variety”. In addition, we wish to focus on the notion of informalization and conversalization as it relates to forms and uses of computer- or phone-mediated communication, and to see whether or not they impair writing skills and/or are an impediment to intelligibility in children?

Keywords: *online writing; conversationalization; informalization; language skill; verbal interaction; digital communication.*

Introduction

One person’s short message is another person’s genre. And genres have certain requirements and certain unimagined potential.” (Clark, 2009)

Several linguists and sociologists are of the opinion that, within post-industrialized societies, “a complex range of new social relationships is developing, and that behavior (including linguistic behavior) is changing as a result.” With working conditions worldwide changing to better suit

the needs of the global economy – traditional, hierarchical social structures are becoming fluid and precarious. This has brought about a change in people’s relationship and, consequently, in the uses of language forms and communication. (Goodman & Graddol, 1996, p. 145)

In the last decade or so, with the advent of the Internet, we are witness to the rise of digital communication or, more precisely, online writing.¹ It has been one of the most remarkable inventions of mankind like its predecessor, the printing press and writing before that. In terms of impact on society, it has changed the face of communication altogether. Today, it represents a new form of language and expression – “a creolizing blend” (Thurlow & Brown, 2003) of written and spoken discourse – recognized for its “concise[ness] and pithy,” (Hennessy, 2006, p. 157) speed and spontaneity, and employing numerous strategies of grammar, thus offering readers greater interactivity. The line between formal and informal language is getting blurred and, in place, *minimalism* has become the name of the game.

But many skeptics or purists actually think that online writing or communication cannot be termed as a “communication” in the strictest and/or in the linguistic sense because it is neither associated with speech or (print) writing: the slow response times, “absence of nonsegmental phonology,” (Crystal, 2005, p.1) lack of formality, and its transient and brief feature are examples of differences between online and offline communication. Moreover, they view the nonstandard orthography of online writing as a threat to standard spelling, writing skill, and intelligibility. Reports in the media are full of mixed reactions against this new trend of communication (internet- and mobile-based lingo): opinions differ with some who believe that it is beneficial and assists with social skills, while others believe it is addictive and stupid. So much so that reports claim that good many teachers have shown concerns over the ill-effects of SMS and chat language in academic writing; they feel the students have lost the skill to self-edit and do not respect conventions and register of communication. Others view the practice as a sign of laziness and immaturity on the part of students. However, many linguists are of more favorable opinions and are interested in this new language. (Pawelski, n.d.)

In light of the above, this paper attempts to examine this new phenomenon and the linguistic features that define it as a “prestigious language variety” (Nazaryan & Gridchin, 2006, p. 25). In addition, we wish to focus on the notion of *informalization*² and *conversalization*³ as it relates to forms and uses of computer- or phone-mediated communication, and to see whether or not they impair writing skills and/or are an impediment to intelligibility in children?

Linguistic features of online writing

The Net and cell phone generation are reinventing and manipulating conventional linguistic and communicative practices, prizing whatever is short and simple to facilitate communication.

Aesthetics is not only to be found in art and sciences; a close look at chat (and SMS) reveals various dimensions of individuality and sociability, of subjectivity and of collectivity, of entertainment and ludicrousness, of the play of one's senses and of the sense (meaning), and of spontaneous creativity and expressiveness – all these existing within the “aesthetic” bounds of a technological setting. (Frias, 2004) The medium employs several nonstandard orthographic and typographic forms, such as (Thurlow & Brown, 2003):

- a. shortening (e.g., *thurs*, Thursday; *bro*, brother; *lang*, language); contraction (e.g., *wk*, week; *urself*, yourself; *abt*, about); and G- and other clipping (e.g., *darling*, darling; *couldn*, couldn't);
- b. acronyms (e.g. *SMS*, Short Message Service) and initialisms (e.g. *TTFN*, Ta ta for now; *LoL*, lots of love);
- c. letter/number homophones (e.g. *ltd*, wanted; *l8r*, later; *2getha*, together);
- d. nonconventional spelling (e.g. *xcelnt*, excellent; *skool*, school; *foned*, phoned)
- e. accent stylization (e.g. *wassup*, what's up; *dunno*, don't know; *gimme*, give me);
- f. the absence of space and punctuation;
- g. repetitions;
- h. smiles;
- i. code mixing and switching (e.g. *try karna mast hai*, try it, you will like it).

As for the themes, they could be numerous and of various orientations, such as (Thurlow & Brown, 2003):

- 1) *Practical* (Messages in this category dealt primarily with the exchange of practical details or straightforward requests for information):
M2: Where's sardinia?Answer me quick hun! xx
M3: Put money in ur account
- 2) *Relational* (Messages in this category dealt primarily with more solidary information exchanges or requests for personal favors):
M4: I Passed
M5: I'm not feeling v well can you get the lecture notes for me please
- 3) *Social arrangement* (Also about plans for meeting up, messages in this category were explicitly about recreational planning such as going out together for the evening, going to the cinema and other social arrangements):
M8: R WE DOIN LUNCH THIS WK?CHE
M9: Hello.Me and laura want2go2jive2moro.Does u want us 2 buy tickets
- 4) *Salutary* (Messages in this category were non-specific, usually very brief and often flippant; many of them were little more than simple, friendly greetings):
M10: Yo man whats de goss
M11: morning,how are you today? Xxjtxx

5) *Friendship* (Messages in this category dealt primarily with 'friendship work' such as apologies, words of support and thanks):

M12: Happy Birthday, i hope you are having a good one,see you in a few days.Love Duncan x x x x

M13: Don't worry bout exam!Just had hair cut & look like a ginger medussa!Arrgh!

6) *Romantic* (Usually more so than the Friendship Maintenance category, messages in this category dealt primarily with romantic expressions of love, intimacy and affection):

M14: R u bak already khevwine?!i am not comin 4 anuva 2 wks!oh my luv.I miss u so!x

M15: Each time ur name appears on my phone i smile like this :)

Synchronicity and asynchronicity are yet another key feature of computer- and phone-mediated communication;⁴ they allow for more dialogic and conversational structures. And since online writing makes use of a keyboard for communication, it is bound to create a specific kind of utterance, something that can be characterized as “*écrit oralisé ou oral scripturé*”.⁵ (Bernier, 2007, p. 202)

Texting and chatting versus face-to-face interaction

Having looked at some of the linguistic features of digital communication or online writing, it is important to establish whether the latter can be considered forms of “interaction” and/or a “verbal communication,” as is face-to-face communication?

According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1990) an *interaction* is defined by several criteria, some of which are external and others situational (p. 211):

- nature and destination of the site (private or public, close or open, commerce, school, etc.)
- format of participation (number of participants, distribution of roles, etc.)
- unit of time and space
- theme

In online writing, *site* can be taken metaphorically. As for *participation*, it is impossible to identify the participants because there is no one definite group of participants but many who come in and out of a conversation. The criteria of *time* and *space* are hard to determine because the exchange of information or interaction does not happen in a single continuous relay but in intervals. Lastly, the *theme* can be disorganized and confusing since every digression within a conversation can be a source of a new theme and vice versa. Thus, it is possible to claim that

conversations in a CMC (and SMS) are polylogous and discontinuous: it is a “state of open speech,” “a conversation constantly in progress and ongoing change.” (Goffman, 1987, p. 144)

As for *verbal communication*,⁶ from the point of view of conversation analysis (CA), computer- and phone-mediated communication can be considered as one – but at a distance, where the interlocutors are absent from the scene and time of the conversation. Despite the absence of interlocutors – hence the absence of nonverbal and paraverbal factors which are found, instead, in verbal conversations in praesentia – and the use of a keypad/keyboard, studies have shown that there is no major problem either in the intercomprehension or the content of an information to a large extent. On the contrary, interestingly, online writing has the ability to recreate the “presence” of the other. This leads us to believe that interaction, whether *endoglossic* or *exoglossic*,⁷ in absentia resembles interaction in praesentia. CMC has also introduced *emoticons* as a way to compensate or deal with nonverbal and paraverbal features.

Is online writing a threat to language?

Now given that the online writing has become popular with the younger generation of today, the so-called “net generation” (Thurlow & Brown, 2003), one cannot ignore the role of digital communication in the lives of these young people. The question asked much too often is whether it will affect communication skills, particularly writing and orthography, of the users. Popular beliefs and perceptions claim that the nonstandard orthography of/in texting and chatting are threats to standard spelling, writing skill and intelligibility; that SMS and chat language are “dangerous”, rendering the generation of adults illiterate and incapable of writing sensibly and bringing about a collapse of language. But they are wrong.

Many empirical studies (Baron, 2008; Crystal, 2001, 2008b, 2011; Ling, 2005; Herring, Stein & Virtanen, 2011; Shortis, 2007; Chilwa, 2008) – which focused on the issue of whether texting has a negative influence on standard writing, spelling, and grammar – maintain that it does not pose any threat to a language. Although there might be some diffusion of texting-chatting style into “formal” or “standard” style, texters and chatters almost always recognize that language is context specific and are aware of other pragmatic considerations such as relationship and communicative intent (Herring, Stein and Virtanen, 2011, p. 7). According to these studies, this diverse, flexible and creative activity has no codification since it constitutes standard and nonstandard forms of writing, which in turn allows for a heterogeneous and informal practice of spelling and communication, depending on the situation and people. Moreover, texting and chatting draw upon linguistically coherent and logical principles (regrouped under three main motivations like features for economy and text reduction, simulation of spoken language, and graphical and kinesthetic devices) which are acquired and “caught” (Shortis, 2007) by users and not taught. Users pay attention to the content of the text rather than the form and are free to

choose their stylistic repertoire – none of which exist in the conventional print. The success of these mediums suggests that, in informal situations, mutual intelligibility rests not only on prescriptive and standard methods. In fact, texting and chatting are more than mere reforms: they are a show of mastery of standard conventions (how else would one be able to communicate with the help of nonstandard orthography if one was not familiar with standard forms?), identity, and affiliation.

Furthermore, its graphic distinctiveness is not a new phenomenon, nor is it used only by the young. As a matter of fact, the process of abbreviation and the use of a few features of SMS and chat language (such as rebuses, initial letters for whole words, abbreviations) date back to centuries, and its appearance is known and is simple to figure out (Crystal, 2008a; Gay, 2011). The novelty of text messaging and chatting lies in the way it takes further some of the processes used in the past. Indeed, Crystal provides confirmation:

“There is increasing evidence that texting helps rather than hinders literacy. And only a very tiny part of it uses a distinctive orthography. Although many texters enjoy breaking linguistic rules, they also know they need to be understood. There is no point in paying to send a message if it breaks so many rules that it ceases to be intelligible. When messages are long, containing more information, the amount of standard orthography increases. Many texters alter just the grammatical words (such as “you” and “be”). Besides, the most important finding is that texting does not deteriorate children's ability to read and write. On the contrary, literacy improves. The latest studies (from a team at Coventry University) have found strong links between the use of text language and the skills underlying success in Standard English in pre-teenage children. They found that texters have a better grasp of language than the less-frequent texters and that the former are developing their linguistic knowledge through texting. The more abbreviations in their messages, the higher they scored on tests of reading and vocabulary; the children who were better at spelling and writing used the most textisms. And the younger they received their first phone, the higher their scores. Children could not be good at texting if they had not already developed considerable literacy awareness or have a grasp of language in general (such as the relation of sounds to letters, alternative or nonstandard spellings, enhanced sensibility towards texting, etc.). Before you can write and play with abbreviated forms, you need to have a sense of how the sounds of your language relate to the letters. You need to know that there are such things as alternative spellings. If you are aware that texting is different, then you must have been already aware that there is such a thing as a standard.” (Crystal, 2008a)

As a matter of fact, texting is seen as a possible teaching aid, serving to improve linguistic skills. Dr. Beverly Plester, a member of the team working at Coventry University, stated:

“so far, our research has suggested that there is no evidence to link a poor ability in standard English to those children who send text messages. In fact, the children who were the best at using ‘textisms’ were also found to be better spellers and writers. We are interested in discovering whether texting could be used positively to increase phonetic awareness in less able children, and perhaps increase their language skills, in a fun educational way.” (Gay, 2011)

Conclusion

This paper goes not to prove but sheds some favorable light on this new medium of communication which is shrouded with controversies and skepticism. Change in language and communication is inevitable. (Gay, 2011) And texting and online chatting have proven to be a genre of communication on their own, carved out from the necessity of the present day world to suit the various demands. Clearly it is a “revolution” and an “evolution” (Crystal, 2008b) in the field of technology and communication! But we need not be apprehensive about it, but rather try and accept it like we have done for other things.

References

- Baker, P., & Ellece, S. (2011). *Key terms in discourse analysis* (p. 23). New York, N.Y.: Continuum International Pub. Group.
- Baron, N. (2008). *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bernier, M. (2007). *Obstacles À la communication dans une situation de communication exolingue en contexte de clavardage* (1st ed., p. 202). Ontario: Acfas-Sudbury. Retrieved from <https://zone.biblio.laurentian.ca/dspace/bitstream/10219/84/1/bernier.pdf>
- Chiluwa, I. (2008). Assessing the Nigerianness of SMS Text-messages in English. *English Today*, 24(1).
- Clark, P. (2009). *From Telegraph to Twitter: The Language of the Short Form*. Poynter. Retrieved 29 December 2015, from <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/writing/97997/from-telegraph-to-twitter-the-language-of-the-short-form/>
- Crystal, D. (1995). Speaking of Writing and Writing of Speaking. *Longman Language Review*, 5-8.
- Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2005). *The scope of Internet Linguistics*. *Davidcrystal.com*. Retrieved 30 December 2015, from <http://www.davidcrystal.com/?fileid=-4113>
- Crystal, D. (2008a). *2b or not 2b: David Crystal on why texting is good for language*. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 30 December 2015, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jul/05/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview>
- Crystal, D. (2008b). *Txting: The Gr8 Db8*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2011). *Internet linguistics: A Student Guide*. New York: Routledge.

- Frias, A. (2004). Esthétique ordinaire et chats : ordinateur, corporéité et expression codifiée des affects. *Techniques & Culture*, 42. Retrieved from <http://tc.revues.org/95>
- Gay, C. (2011). The Rise of Texts. *Fresh Ink: Essays From Boston College's First-Year Writing Seminar*, 13(3). Retrieved from <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/freshink/article/view/1200/1660>
- Goffman, E. (1987). *Façons de parler* (p. 144). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- Goodman, S., & Graddol, D. (1996). *Redesigning English: New Texts, New Identities* (p. 145). New York: Psychology Press.
- Hennessy, B. (2006). *Writing feature articles* (4th ed., p. 157). Oxford: Focal Press.
- Herring, S., Stein, D., & Virtanen, T. (2011). *Pragmatics of computer-mediated communication* (p. 539). Berlin & New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C. (1990). *Les interactions verbales* (p. 202). Paris: Armand Colin.
- Ling, R. (2005). The Sociolinguistics of SMS: An Analysis of SMS Use by a Random Sample of Norwegians. *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation Of The Social Sphere*, 31. Retrieved from http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/1-84628-248-9_22
- Lodhi, A. (1993). The Language Situation in Africa Today. *Nordic Journal Of African Studies*, 2(1), 82.
- Nazaryan, A., & Gridchin, A. (2006). THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNET ON LANGUAGE AND "EMAIL STRESS". *FACTA UNIVERSITATIS: SERIES LAW AND POLITICS*, 4(1), 25. Retrieved from <http://facta.junis.ni.ac.rs/lap/lap2006/lap2006-03.html>
- Nordquist, R., & Nordquist, R. (2016a). *Distinctive Characteristics of Online Writing*. *About.com Education*. Retrieved 30 December 2015, from <http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/Online-Writing.htm>
- Nordquist, R. (2016b). *What Is Conversationalization?*. *About.com Education*. Retrieved 29 December 2015, from <http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/Conversationalization-term.htm>
- Nordquist, R., & Nordquist, R. (2016c). *What Is the Process of Informalization in Language?*. *About.com Education*. Retrieved 28 March 2016, from <http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/Informalization.htm>
- Pawelski, A. *Using Internet Slang in Spoken Conversation: LOL!* (1st ed.). Colorado: Colorado State University. Retrieved from <http://amandapawelski.com/InternetSlang.pdf>
- Shortis, T. (2007). Gr8 Txtpection: The Creativity of Text Spelling. *English Drama Media*, 8.
- Thurlow, C., & Brown, A. (2003). *Generation Txt? The Sociolinguistics of Young People's Text-messaging*. *Extra.shu.ac.uk*. Retrieved 29 December 2015, from <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/daol/articles/v1/n1/a3/thurlow2002003.html>

Footnotes

1. *Online writing* refers to any text created with (and usually intended for viewing on) a computer, smartphone, or similar digital device. Online writing formats include texting, instant messaging, emailing, blogging, tweeting, and posting comments on social media sites such as Facebook. (Nordquist, 2016a)

2. In linguistics, “[informalization] means the incorporation of aspects of intimate, personal discourse (such as colloquial language) into public forms of spoken and written communication. Also called *demotization*” (Nordquist, 2016c). Goodman (1996) refers to it as involving shortened terms of address, contractions of negatives and auxiliary verbs, the use of active rather than passive sentence constructions, colloquial language, and slang. (p. 42-43)

3. [Conversationalization] is “a style of public discourse that simulates intimacy by adopting features of informal, conversational language. Also known as *public colloquial*.” (Nordquist, 2016b) “With conversationalization, language is used to create and maintain a (sometimes synthetic) relationship between a speaker and hearer rather than just being informational, so this can involve emotional, subjective linguistic strategies, such as using appraisal lexis (*very, really*), vagueness (*sort of, kinda*), repetition (*that’s really really great!*), first- and second-person pronouns, contractions, active sentences, informal terms of address, slang and swearing, and humour and irony” (Baker & Ellece, 2011, p. 23).

4. “Email and electronic bulletin boards are generally considered to be more asynchronous, because the process of message production, reception, and response can take place over minutes, hours, days, weeks, or even months. Channels such as instant messaging and text-based multiparty chat are more synchronous, as the parties to the interaction must be logged in at the same time in order to interact” (Herring, Stein & Virtanen, 2011, p. 539).

5. Loosely translated as: “speaking of writing and writing of speaking” (Crystal, 1995).

6. *Verbal communication* is a process of communication between two or more participants. Messages are exchanged in turn following certain guidelines/rules. For a conversation to be successful, both the addresser and the addressee must exchange certain verbal, nonverbal (e.g. facial expression, postures, and gestures), paraverbal and vocal (it includes tone, pitch, and pacing of our voice) signs between themselves. Phatic and regulatory activities are indispensable in any mutual verbal communication. These processes/mechanisms, termed as interactional synchronization, are found in turn-taking, body language, register and style of communication, vocabulary, etc.

7. An *endoglossic* state is one where “the national/official language(s) is spoken as a primary language (mother-tongue) by a large section of the population and this language is thus referred to as ‘indigenous language’”. An *exoglossic* state is one where “the national/official language(s) has been imported, and implanted, from abroad and the few who traditionally speak it as their first language do not dominate any part of the country significantly. Such a language is referred to as ‘imported language’” (Lodhi, 1993, p. 82).