

The Influence of Instant Messaging Communication on Standard Written Language and Social Communication

Ervin Hoxhaj

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Tirana University

Abstract: Unlike many other types of communication technology, the one through instant messaging or as referred to in the language of technology IM (Instant Messaging), has not been the focus of research or studies conducted. For this type of communication is spoken and studied very little, although its use is growing. Given that it affects the culture of writing, social and cultural factors are also a strong reason why this type of communication is not studied. Nowadays, it is increasingly difficult to come across letters or postcards that are distributed among the people; "postal service" looks like an old term and above all, time is what everyone is missing. In a world where technological developments are proceeding at a dizzying speed, and where cultural globalization does not only mean values but also anti-values, it is really difficult to maintain the classical forms of communication. It is true that communicating through instant and short messaging could be very easy and comfortable, but the point is that we totally forget about the fact that this kind of communication influences the way that we write and it would also influence our thinking process if we do not take it into consideration. The aim of this paper, is to analyze some of the major problematic issues regarding Instant Messaging Communication; the linguistic forms that are used, advantages and disadvantages of this kind of communication and the impact that it has on the culture of writing.

Introduction

Think back to when you were in middle and high school. What songs did you listen to? Did you have a transistor radio, boom box, or Walkman? Did you use to send postcards and letters to your friends and relatives? Did you have a computer or a play station?

The students we teach today are products of a very different environment, one in which the ability to stay connected with others is constant, and communication takes many forms. Writing, for students who live in an age of digital communication, has taken on new importance and plays a prominent role in the way they socialize, share information, and structure their communication.

The current information and communication technologies (ICTs) are fundamentally changing the ways in which youth today read, write, and communicate. Their writing uses the mediums of instant messaging (IM), text messaging (or texting), Twitter, and e-mail, as well as shared electronic documents and postings on blogs and social networking sites. The writing itself does not always follow traditional conventions, featuring instead images, audio recordings, and a form of shorthand in which vowels and punctuation are irrelevant and time-consuming to use.

Teachers may be concerned about the way some students write using these different ICTs, imagining the potential negative impact on their students' academic writing, but this interest can be an instructional advantage.

What is IMC and some of the major influences

Unlike other mediated communication technologies which have been analyzed over decades, IM communication has been the focus of relatively few academic inquiries, and very little is known about the content of "real world" instant messages. Increasingly, corporate users are forgoing e-mail for IM because of its synchronous nature and absence of spam (Strom, 2006a; Strom, 2006b.). A study released by Gartner Research in December 2005, predicts that by 2020, 90% of people with business e-mail accounts will have IM accounts, and the Radicati Group forecasts 349 million enterprise IM users by 2008 (Faulkner & Culwin, 2004). Unlike other technological communication innovations which were introduced and slowly gained acceptance and widespread use, IM has gained widespread adoption as a critical communication technology so quickly that scholars have had little time to investigate the characteristics and functions of communication within this medium.

Additionally, the fact that IM has not been supplanted by more media rich technologies such as internet based videoconferencing and voice communication is surprising, indicating a unique role of text-based communication in human interaction.

◆ **Short Message Service (SMS)**, more popularly known as text messaging, developed as an initial by-product of the cell phone industry (Goldstuck, 2006). SMS messaging is closely related to instant messaging (IM) (Goldstuck, 2006). IM is a

function of online chat rooms and has expanded to mobile phones due to their ability to carry applications that can be downloaded to the handset (Faulkner & Culwin, 2004). According to Goldstuck mobile phones were introduced to the youth market in the late 1990s. During 2004, 500 billion SMS messages were sent worldwide. A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that teenagers view text messaging as an additional means of communication, seeing that they have been exposed to it since childhood (Baron 2000).

◆ **Email** has become a very popular means of communication during the last decades, but it was not originally meant to serve as a means of transmitting personal information. The phenomenon was a result of various research projects during the height of the Cold War. The idea was to develop a decentralized network of computers that could be used in order to transmit information across the United States in case there was a nuclear attack. If one target was struck, it would not cripple the nation's ability to distribute defense data elsewhere in the country (Baron 2000: 241). In the mid 1990s, computer chat groups such as IRC, for instance, were very popular.

They were inexpensive and provided anonymity by camouflaging voices and sexual identity. They allowed people from all over the world to chat with each other, and one might compare this with the excitement of having a pen-pal from a different part of the world. Technically, email is a form of writing but its usage conventions are closer to face-to-face or telephone conversation, according to Baron. 'People sending email often reveal an editorial non-chalance, reflecting the casual tone of the medium and a psychological mind-set (however mistaken) that email, like the telephone, is ephemeral (www.microsoft.com, accessed 14 April, 2009). In contrast to a telephone conversation, when writing an email, one has the possibility to edit.

◆ One type of electronic communication is **Internet chat**. This new means of communication across great distances became increasingly popular in the mid 1990s, with *mIRC* (Internet Relay Chat) as one of the leading channels for this type of communication. *mIRC* allowed people from all over the world to chat with each other either in multi-user group conferences or in one-to-one private discussions. Svennevig says that when emails and Internet chat groups came into being, people started communicating with each other without having any conventions that were established for this particular genre of communication. This resulted in new genres being developed. Svennevig says that Internet chat builds on the conventions of speech. In addition, Internet chat has developed new conventions that are particular for this means of communication, such as a system of abbreviations and icons (such as smileys).

In the late 1990s, *mIRC* seemed to decrease in popularity, and a new type of instant messaging took over. This Microsoft created phenomenon was called *msn* (messenger) and was meant for people who already knew each other, as one had to add people's email address in order to be able to talk to them. When logging on, one would automatically see who else was online, and one was able to chat in private with one's friends online. *Msn* was constantly updated since its debut in 1995, and by 2005, it allowed for more symbols (moving smileys and small figures) to be used, in addition to sharing pictures and transmitting video conversations (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2006).

◆ When **Facebook** was founded in 2004, it gradually started to take over the popularity that *Msn* had possessed since the beginning of the 21st century. Facebook allowed people from all over the world to get in touch with one another, and to share photos, videos and send messages to each other. The idea behind the phenomenon was that people would be able to stay in touch with friends, as well as reconnect with old friends. In 2007, Facebook developed a means for instant messaging which allowed people to talk to friends who were online. The chat window at Facebook is smaller than the one that *msn* uses, and it seems that people are now abbreviating even more than they used to because of this. The use of capital letters is very rarely found in instant messaging (unless capital letters are used for indicating shouting, or marking something of importance), where the need for giving quick responses might be essential.

I think that it is worth mentioning that the development of these kind of mediums of communication are closely related with the development of language and everybody is familiar with the fact that in our days English is the language of technology and communication. For this reason, I think that the concept of Standard English and the influences of IMC on Standard English deserve a special attention.

Before talking about the influences that IMC has on writing and English Language in particular, I think that we should try to define a clear meaning of the concept of Standard English. By that I mean standard written English. I will not discuss the varieties of English around the world, because I think that the varieties of a language can not be regarded as standard or non-standard language. The idea of correctness is in fact what matters most when we talk about standard language. Grammars will therefore be discussed, as will dictionaries because knowing how to use words in the correct context is also something I consider to be important. For my purposes, grammar and spelling are the most important

aspects of language. That is why I will only discuss pronunciation briefly, although pronunciation is also an important part of language.

Linguists and lay people talk about 'correctness' in different respects. Lay people talk about correct and incorrect use of language with regard to dialects, grammatical structures, pronunciation and spelling, whereas linguists talk about different varieties of language. For linguists, there is no such thing as incorrect use of language, merely non-standard use of language. Linguists are known to be of the opinion that there is nothing inherently better about a standard language than any other varieties.

The standard language came about through selection over many years, and the variety that was most widely used survived. Hudson says that a typical standard language will have passed through four processes. These are as follows:

1. **Selection.** A particular variety must have been selected as the one that would be developed into a standard language. This can be an existing variety or it can be an amalgam of various varieties. The chosen variety gains prestige, and the people who already speak it share in this prestige. Thus the choice is of great political and social importance.
2. **Codification.** Dictionaries and grammar books are written in order to "fix" the variety, so that everyone agrees on what is correct and what is not. This job usually belongs to some sort of agency or academy. After codification has taken place, every "ambitious citizen" wants to learn the correct forms, and this may take years of a child's school career, according to Hudson.
3. **Elaboration of function.** In order for the selected variety to be used in all functions associated with writing and with central government, it may be necessary to add linguistic items or norms to the variety. This may be technical words, for instance, but new conventions for using existing forms may also have to be developed, such as how to write formal letters or how to formulate examination questions.
4. **Acceptance.** The selected variety must be accepted by the relevant population. Usually, the variety serves as the national language. Once the variety is accepted, the standard language serves as a unifying force for the state. It also serves as a marker of its difference from other states, and as a symbol of its independence of other states.

Now, the question that discomfort linguistics and researchers is whether this kind of communication influences the use and concept of standard language and which are the most frequent influences. Regarding many researches and studies conducted in respect of Messaging Communication and the language that it is used there, linguistics agrees that this kind of writing deform the use of standard language.

If we have a look at all the mediums of Messaging Communication, we will notice that each of them plays a crucial role in the transformation of standard language; each of them have their respective characteristics but on the other side, they all deal with grammatical and conceptual transformations.

1. SMS - English language slang, as it is used in mobile phone text messaging, is referred to as SMS language (SMS Language). According to the Oxford Dictionary slang is defined as "very informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language". Text messaging resembles code rather than standard language (Baron 2000: 193). Standard English is often referred to as standard language. Standard English is the variant of English that is usually used in writing (especially printing); it is associated with the educational systems of English speaking countries worldwide. Individuals who make use of Standard English are viewed as educated and outsiders and other educated people alike, can understand Standard English.

According to Thurlow text messages may be perceived as non-standard typographic or orthographic forms, which can be divided into the following types:

- G-Clippings (excluding the end -g letter), for example: "Goin" (Going)
- Shortenings (deletion of end letters), for example: "Aft" (After)
- Contractions (deletion of middle letters), for example: "Nxt" (Next)
- Acronyms and initialisms (formed from initial letters of various words), for example: "LOL" (Laugh out loud)
- Number homophones, for example: "B4" (Before)

- Letter homophones, for example: "U" (You)
- Non-conventional spellings, for example: "Nite" (Night)
- :-) indicates a smile or happiness
- :-/ indicates skepticism
- :-(indicates sadness or a frown (SMS Language),

2. E-mail and Facebook chat - The general opinion is that email has elements of both spoken and written style. With regard to grammar and vocabulary, one might say that email is closer to speech than conventional writing. 'Lexically, the messages tend to be extremely informal, including clipped words (such as *prob* for *problem*), simplified spellings (for instance *thru* for *through*), and the use of words like *nope* or *yep* (Baron 2000). Crystal says that the 'save a keystroke' principle is widely found in e-mails, virtual worlds and chatgroups. Whole sentences can be produced without punctuation or capital letters. Further, he says that '[s]pelling errors in an e-mail would not be assumed to be an indication of lack of education (though they may be) but purely a function of typing inaccuracy. Syntactically, emails tend to be quite casual, omitting modals, articles and subjects. There are similar levels of informality in punctuation, with high use of exclamation points and also lack of capital letters (So-called "emoticons", or "smileys" are often used as paralinguistic footnotes to the messages.

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All these changes that are taking place in the transformation of standard language mainly influence student's writing and this way teachers and linguistics are now worried about the future of writing. Regarding many surveys students are using IMC more and more everyday and this might be risky for the culture of writing and their thinking process as well. Instant messaging can cause some serious issues the classroom, especially if your child is just developing writing/spelling/vocabulary skills. During the early education years, texting could be detrimental to proper language development. Here are some of the reasons why.

Spelling — vocabulary is key skill in early education. The first grades are all about vocabulary lists, and spelling tests, not to mention sentence writing. Spelling can take a hit when kids, during this critical learning time, use short forms before they know the whole word; let alone how to spell it.

Grammar — A big part of grammar is punctuation. It takes years to learn how to properly use it, and even then punctuation can be a landmine for mistakes. Online messaging has practically no punctuation, and is basically a grammar free-for-all.

Complete Thoughts — another key skills that IM has a blatant disregard for is that of the complete, cohesive thought. The major challenge in writing is to be able to express an argument clearly as a complete thought: with a beginning, a middle and an end. One word sentences that are prevalent in IM don't help to develop the complete thought skill – they detract from it. Text messaging changes what and how students write. Whether these changes are viewed as positive or negative depends on an individual's beliefs on how closely writing should adhere to accepted conventions of formal writing (Wellman p. 439, 2001).. It was indicated by the majority of educators (54.6%) ($n = 12$) that learners use mostly simple sentences in various writing tasks given to them during creative writing. Some educators (40.9%) ($n = 9$) have also noticed the shortening of sentences during creative writing tasks over the past 4.25 years. The incorrect use of full stops (13.6%) ($n = 3$), commas (45.5%) ($n = 10$) and exclamation marks (45.5%) ($n = 10$) were encountered more in comparison to questions marks (4.6%) ($n = 1$), in learners' written work.

Homework — it's hard enough to stay focused on homework without being distracted by the chiming alerts of a messaging system every few seconds. If your child struggles to complete his homework, be sure that he signs out of IM before he begins so that he can dedicate some uninterrupted time to focus on the task at hand: homework.

Social Influences of IMC

However, the IMC does not influence only their academic or school performance, but also their social life and the way that they get in touch with each other and create their own network. Physiologists believe that this virtual communication, sometimes may lead to future communicative implications.

Based on a survey passed out at Stanford University, 90% of the students use IM on a weekly basis. This survey, given out to 70 undergraduate students, asked the participants about various aspects of how they use IM including the topics they discussed, how much time they spent online, how comfortable they felt over IM and in person and how they

used IM to flirt with others. Almost three-fourths of the students indicated that they would be as likely (if not more,) to gossip on IM than with any other tools of communication (i.e. phone, etc.) Two-thirds of the students also that they also would be likely to use IM to set up social events in real life as well as use it for ranting and complaining. Other popular activities through IM include wishing a friend a happy birthday and flirting. Although these survey results are from Stanford students, these responses are probably representative of college students nationwide.

Research on online interaction shows that online interaction causes its users to reduce their social abilities because of less face to face interaction with others. As argued by Barry Wellman, only a limited number of waking hours exist in a day. When one uses the internet, "the internet may compete for time with other activities in an inelastic 24-hour day," including activities that would have the users interacting with others in real world situations. (In addition, as Tom Tyler points out, online interaction could possibly even replace those activities that one traditionally does in the real world.)

Despite the initial concerns raised about the isolating effects of online interaction, the later research conducted reached very different conclusions regarding virtual communication. It is true that this kind of communication may cause a feeling of isolation. In fact the internet creates an initial increase in depression. However, in approximately two years, as soon as the person becomes a "sophisticated internet user," the level of depression is reduced (Bonebrake p. 553, 2002), due to the acquired familiarity of the internet by the user.

This kind of impact is very important and sometimes psychologist advice using these social networks because in a kind of way they substitute the audience, the possibility to be heard and, let's face it, it is easy to speak your mind in a world full of conventions and standardized.

And this is closely related to the topics that people chose to talk about when they use IMC. It is not difficult to imagine that the major topics used by students and the majority of those who use IMC are gossip, setting up social events etc.

As noted from the survey results, students using IM do not talk about only one thing.

Conversations through instant messaging include many different topics. IM chats are as varied as conversations held face to face. Some students' online conversations may be shallow and impersonal, but there are also many others whose conversations are very in depth and meaningful. As Bonebrake states, "The Internet provides a unique environment for relationship development; it can be very personal yet at the same time, a feeling of personal space can be maintained".

One trend that was found in the survey is that if a conversation on IM became too personal for the student, they would use another form of communication to continue the topic.

Topics which are normally regarded in real space as impersonal and informal (i.e. gossiping, complaining, setting up social events, etc), were much more likely to be discussed through IM while those topics which are considered more serious and personal (sharing religious and political views, giving bad news) were discussed less on IM and more in person or over the phone.

Conclusion

Instant messaging is a communication phenomenon which is becoming increasingly pervasive in modern life. Such a technology has the potential to alter the ways in which humans communicate. In this article, I have tried to provide a detailed summary of the linguistic dimensions of IM phenomenon among college students as a benchmark for future studies within this medium. This kind of mini-research showed a significant difference in levels of emotion based on conversation dyad as well as significant linguistic. I think that it has raised numerous questions and areas for future study in this realm. As yet, scholarly inquiry in this area has not resulted in significant theories about text-based mediated communication, but there is no denying the increasing popularity of IM for communication. As far as we have seen and read in this paper, using IMC has profoundly changed the way that we write, but most of all the way that students write in our days and as a matter of fact, academic writing is the most contaminated among all kinds of writing.

The nature of the perceived influence of IMC language includes the encountering of spelling adaptations that are based on the IMC language categories, shortening of sentences and incorrect punctuation use. Sentence structure and length is also perceived to be influenced as sentences are shortened and simplified. Furthermore, punctuation is also perceived to be influenced. The incorrect use of full stops, commas and exclamation marks are encountered the most in learners' written language tasks.

However I believe that it is worth mentioning the fact that the linguistic environment in which these changes are taking place, is developing and transforming the concept of writing. According to many scholars and studies IMC language is undoubtedly a deformation of standard language, but the present and the trends of future writing are transmitting a different effect.

In our days, students do not consider abbreviation or using symbols as a kind of grammatical or linguistic error and these kinds of changes are affecting not only the written but also the oral communication. One can hear many examples of speaking abbreviations during their conversations and nobody considers them mistakes anymore.

On the other hand, linguistics argues that using some of the major characteristics of IMC language is not a grammatical "sin". If we write "don't" instead of "do not" does not mean that we are threatening standard language. If we all agree with the development of language than we should all accept the fact that there might be changes that we are not obliged to appreciate. After all, if language is meant to be a medium of communication it means that it will always change; as globalization changes the way we live IMC language is changing the way we write in such a way that it will become increasingly difficult to define what is standard language, because standard language is whatever symbol, word that makes you feel comfortable or able to express yourself.

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