

INNOVATION AND CHANGE WITHIN DIGITAL WRITTEN LANGUAGE

It seems fair to say that the issues covered so far have often been raised, but rarely systematically studied. What has moved researchers since the mid 1980s was innovation and change in CMC language itself. Early accounts often proceeded on a ‘butterfly collector’ basis, exploring data from various sources and often focusing on a single mode, such as e-mail or Internet Relay Chat (IRC). They generally belonged to the ‘first wave’ of CMC linguistics scholarship, focusing on the effect of digital technologies on language (Androutsopoulos 2006; Herring 2003).

A key methodological issue in these as well as later studies has been what to compare interactive written discourse with. The most obvious benchmark, as some researchers have pointed out, would be non-digital vernacular writing, such as private letters or note-taking (Elspaß 2004; Quasthoff 1997; Ferrara et al. 2001). Others have opted for large corpora of written or spoken language (Yates 1996; Jucker 2006). However, the mainstream approach has been to draw on frameworks that juxtapose typical features of spoken and written language on situational and linguistic parameters. While these frameworks differ by language and country,⁶ they share ‘the analytical foundation of a strong distinction between spoken and written language’ (Squires 2010: 462), leading to a certain idealisation (and implicit normativity) of typical spoken and written language properties, setting a benchmark against which CMC could be conceptualised as a blend or hybrid of written and spoken aspects of language.

The main dimensions of innovation in digital written language, as they emerge in research across languages and countries, from early exploratory accounts (e.g. Werry 1996) to later textbooks (e.g. Crystal 2006), can be encapsulated in three themes (Androutsopoulos 2007): *orality*, *compensation*, and *economy*. To offer a brief summary, *digital orality* includes all aspects reminiscent of casual spoken language in written discourse. Ulrich Schmitz (2001: 2172) coined the term ‘secondary literacy’ drawing on Walter Ong, and Naomi Baron viewed CMC as part of a ‘general tendency for writing to become a transcription of speech’ (1984: 124). The second theme, *the semiotics of compensation*, includes any ‘attempt to compensate for the absence of facial expressions or intonation patterns’ (Baron 1984: 125) by the standardised means of keyboard and typeface. Compensation devices include emoticons, abbreviations that signify various types of laughter, simulations of expressive prosody by iteration of letters and punctuation. The third theme, *linguistic economy*, includes any strategy of shortening the message form. This theme is most clearly predicated on technology effects, attributed to the necessity of speed in synchronous exchanges, to financial considerations or to constraints on the size of message. Its counterpart, implicit in the preceding two themes, is the economy of expressiveness, the tendency to contextualize exchanges as informal, engaged and jointly accomplished, drawing on means that often run counter to linguistic economy.

These themes are already present in one of the earliest empirical studies in the field, Wichter’s (1991: 62–96) analysis of 1980’s mailbox communication. He observes simplifications, conversational ellipses, representations of colloquial pronunciation, expressive iterations of letters and punctuation signs, and a ‘playful relationship between the phonematic and the graphematic level’. He views mailbox dialogues as ‘a complex meeting of media’ that displays both ‘collaboration and antagonism of orality and literacy, as it is characteristic for phases of media shifts’ (p. 89).

A more detailed account of ‘Internet communication and language change’ by Haase et al. (1997) featured a classification of grammatical, lexical and discourse innovations from Ger-

⁶ In the English-language literature, the categories used by Crystal are based on Chafe, while Biber’s framework has also been used. In German and Romance literature, Koch and Oesterreicher’s model of conceptual orality and literacy has been influential (see discussion in Androutsopoulos 2007; Haase 1997; Dürscheid and Wagner 2010).

scale regional varieties or dialect *koiné*. In a third sense, which is of interest here, destandardisation describes change of status rather than change of structure: the standard variety loses (some of) its generally-binding normative claim and is replaced in that regard by a number of regional standards, which take on the functions of standard language in formal and official situations. A formal standard still exists, particularly in (orthoepic) pronunciation, but is losing its relevance for most institutional contexts, with educated and professional speakers shifting to supra-regional colloquial standard or to regional standards. This is similar to Coupland's notion of de-standardisation, which he defines as 'a type of value levelling that washes out status meanings formerly linked to "standard" and "non-standard" varieties' (2009: 44). De-standardisation is a language-ideological shift, whereby formerly stable indexical meanings are neutralised or reconfigured in particular contexts (p. 44–5).

Neither Auer nor Coupland specifically consider written language; however, a concept of destandardisation focused on status/value change suits well the processes discussed here. The elaboration of vernacular writing does not induce changes in standard language structure, apart from lexical innovations discussed above; in graphology, vernacular spelling conventions do not replace standard orthography nor do they lead to a loss of its prescriptive awareness. However, the normative claim of standardised written language, particularly in orthography and punctuation, is partially replaced by smaller-scale conventions, often limited to particular networked groups and their online platforms. As discussed in this chapter, networked writing brings ample evidence for 'a more multi-centred sociolinguistic culture', in which 'singular value systems (...) are being replaced by more complex and (...) more closely contextualised value-systems' (Coupland 2009: 45). This process is most obvious in spelling and punctuation, i.e. the written materiality of language online.

We may ask whether destandardisation equals 'linguistic whateverism', an attitudinal shift towards written norms diagnosed by Baron (2008) in her discussion of language online. According to Barton, 'whateverism' manifests in 'united indifference to the need for consistency in linguistic usage' (2008: 169). 'Whateverism' suits to a certain extent the elaboration of vernacular writing, particularly when said indifference is related to usage across groups rather than intra-writer variation. Indeed, pluralisation of written usage in a post-standardised era presupposes that networked users themselves accept that written language online entails much more variability than standard language ideology is prepared to acknowledge. However, it seems important not to confuse this attitudinal shift with a) the emergence of localised norms or b) public metalinguistic discourse on language online. Indifference (or tolerance) to written language variation does not prevent networked writers from focusing on contextualised norms of limited reach, readjusting their written language repertoire according to their digital media usage. Moreover, whateverism is probably not an adequate label when it comes to public discourse on language online, at least with regard to mainstream media in post-standardised societies.

Media representations of new media language are predominantly shaped by concerns over the future of language, technological determinism, and a narrow view of 'newness'. As Thurlow (2006, 2007) and Squires (2010) have shown, their discourse is shaped by an 'exaggeration of difference' (Thurlow 2007). News reports and other genres construct language online as a distinct language that may be indecipherable, thus raising a need for explanation that can then be served by glossaries and related products. A homogenised perception of 'new media language' or 'netspeak' is made possible by technological determinism, a view that gives agency to media technologies as shapers of commonalities in usage. Effect and influence scenarios directly follow from that, as they assume media agency on language, separating the two from each other and from discourse practice. The authentication of this construction in media discourse may run counter to empirical evidence, in that features that are rather rare in data are constructed as icons of new media language (Squires 2010). Thus the diversity of networked writing is 'lost in the translation' into popular, and perhaps also some expert construc-