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THE LANGUAGE OF COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Technology has always had a crucial role on communication and, in turn, on the vehicle which is mainly used to convey it, i.e. on language. The truthfulness of the previous sentence is unquestionable and we just need to look back in time to realize that, whenever a new technological means has been introduced, the whole way of communicating has been deeply affected.

In fact, our way of using language is deeply influenced by the role new media allow and, therefore, it is possible to talk of computer mediated communication, that is to deal with a brand-new way of communicative interaction which no longer uses writing paper and ink but takes advantage of computer technology.

Nowadays, everybody knows what the Internet is, although only few remember that this computer network – which allows people to send and receive messages on any of the different *hosts* of the net – was developed in 1960s America, at first for military purposes only, although it later spread to such an extent as to become the largest network in the world. Nonetheless, defining exactly how the Internet affects languages is very difficult, because of the multifaceted features the system presents, also considering that it, as well as any other means of communication, gives the

locutor both new expressive possibilities and sometimes constraints which we do not have in other semiotic situations.

The Internet allows people from all over the world to interact routinely – at least theoretically –, since third world countries are still far from having it as widespread as it is in wealthier parts of the world, will evidently have important consequences on language and this feature has led to the idea of the so called “global village”, i.e. of a boundless community of speakers or, to be clearer, of a situation which is similar to what happens in villages, characterized by peculiar languages or dialects, on a worldwide scale. Despite the favour the definition has met, from a linguistic point of view the situation is still uncertain since it is difficult to define the effects the Internet will convey on languages, that is, if it will merge the different linguistic behaviours into a homogenous linguistic *unicum* or, rather, it will maintain the characteristics of all the different linguistic trends.

To have a better judgment on how the Internet will affect languages, it is useful to recall the concept of language variety which can be defined as a particular set of linguistic expressions, as used in a certain environment, and which differs from all other languages in a consistent and systematic way, so that to conform to a language variety we must respect the features it presents in order to have our contribution recognized as acceptable. Generally, a language variety is defined in terms of its graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical and discourse features as far as written texts are concerned (and, at present, the Internet is mainly concerned with written

texts) while phonetic and phonological aspects are also considered in case of spoken messages.

Indeed, in order to consider how the Internet might affect language according to such parameters, we need to make clear the various communicative situations which are possible on the Net. They are seven, i.e. e-mail, chatgroups (both synchronous and asynchronous), virtual worlds, the World Wide Web, instant messaging and blogging; of course, it is also possible for one of the above mentioned situations to occur together with another or others, so that their linguistic features might come to be blurred.

Anyway, each possibility represents, in itself, a sort of *variety* and requires its users to conform to a set of rules which, actually, are not yet definitively fixed but, instead, are rather changing since there is no tradition to say what is linguistically right (or wrong) on the Net. People still have to realize fully the potentiality offered by each of the seven means mentioned and, in general, it is possible to say that the language of the Net is going through a period of transition which, on one hand, exacerbates the need of reliability and predictability and, on the other, registers the presence of ‘geeks’ (i.e. people who have long experience on the Internet) who try to set a sort of Net linguistic paradigm according to what they deem proper.

It is clear that there is a particular kind of language which is typical of the Net. Several attempts have been made to find a name for the language of computer mediated communication and one of the most successful solution has been the one

advanced by David Crystal, i.e. to call the Internet language as Netspeak, so avoiding to give too much emphasis to the specific features either of the linguistic situation or of the medium. That Netspeak exists is a feeling everybody shares, but defining its pragmatic (as well as morpho-syntactic) rules is quite difficult since, as it were, we have Netspeak variants according to the kind of Net situation we are involved into. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace a sort of 'core', that is a set of features common to all of the seven possibilities.

To begin with, we have to take into consideration all the limits and the possibilities that the Internet as a global and electronic medium allows; therefore, it is of the utmost importance to consider, from a technical point of view, the nature of the hardware and of the software used. Nowadays, in fact, although the expectations people have from the Net are really high ranking, only the most experienced users (the *geeks*) have (more or less) detailed ideas on how and to which purposes the medium should be used; but, generally speaking, one of the crucial issues of the matter refers to the relationship Netspeak has with written and spoken language.

Some, in fact, in order to define the language of the Net, have qualified it as a sort of written version of the way people speak, but this definition poses a series of problems. Firstly, it is very difficult to assume that a transcription of a talk might be as expressive as the talk itself, if we consider that all the information dealing with non verbal communication would be lost (if not pertinently included in the transcription) and, in the second place, we might ask ourselves whose talk should be

transcribed, i.e. who are the people whose language should be considered as the model to follow. Of course, geek-talk has been and is very influential in defining Netspeak, although it is very difficult to tell, whether it will be the rule once a broader basis of Internet users will soon have to be taken in the due consideration.

Really, both speaking and writing have proper features which characterize them in very peculiar ways. Speech occurs, generally, in face-to-face situations, implying a quick interaction between locutors who are allowed to structure their talk freely and able to revise their utterances; besides, speakers are heavily helped in getting the gist of a talk by a long series of elements which can be inferred both from their counterpart's non verbal language and from the context. Writing, instead, implies a totally different semiotic activity: it has a complex structure, is revisable and constitutionally produced for someone who is not present and will have to read our message at a later time (and who, sometimes, is not known by the author); moreover, writing tends to be concise and this is why the parataxis we generally find in oral speech is rarely found in written texts which, instead, are generally inclined to hypotaxis.

Naturally, Netspeak may have features which sometimes get it closer to written texts and sometimes to speech, but what is particularly interesting is that in some cases its characteristics are peculiar to both: in fact, instant messaging, chatgroups, emails and virtual worlds, although sharing with writing the fact that they are actually 'written', have a lot of the fundamental properties of orality. Nonetheless, no matter

how close Netspeak might get to speech, there will always be some differences between the two: for instance, messages arrive at the recipient only after the sender has deliberately decided to send them; therefore, there is no possibility of interaction while the message is being written, nor any way to know whether what we have written has been correctly understood as we meant it to. Furthermore, in most cases, messages cannot overlap so, once a message has been sent, there is a certain period of time (which our addressee needs to read and react) we must wait before receiving an answer (if any). This delay (usually referred to as *lag*) overtly implies that Netspeak has a much slower rhythm than natural talk. Although the presence of *lags* is firstly due to the nature of the medium, it may not be well accepted by some users and, when there are several participants to a conversation, as in chatgroups, it may cause serious problems of understanding. Besides, *lags* interfere with one of the core features of aural communication, i.e. turn-taking. In fact, while in speech turn-taking is set by participants (i.e. the nature of speech itself grants indexes which signal when our turn is over or, at least, gives our counterpart the possibility to ask for a turn-change) on the Internet it is managed by the software, i.e. if three or more people are interacting together, it is very common that interaction time line (i.e. to follow the *thread*) might get complicated by the fact that one or more participants are not willing (or just do not care) to allow proper *lags* to the others.

Another difference between spoken language and Netspeak is the lack of all of those paralinguistic features proper to spoken discourse; nonetheless, Netspeakers try

to convey them into their messages taking advantage of written artifices, i.e. if they want to ‘shout’ they write using capital letters and when they need to make their attitude toward the conversation clear they add peculiar acronyms (such as *lol*, which means ‘laughing out loud’ or *crbt*, which means ‘crying really big tears’), or include emoticons (also known as smileys), i.e. combinations of keyboard characters which recall – also from an iconographical point of view – the way they feel about the talk, as when they type ‘:)’ or ‘:(’ to express happiness or sadness. Anyway, there is not, at present, an agreed and shared ‘guide’ to the interpretation of those supplements of information and, in real facts, it is very different to tell if a “:)” stands for ‘I am happy’, ‘I am laughing’, ‘I am laughing at you’, ‘I sympathize with you’ and so forth.

Besides, acting as disambiguation devices, emoticons may be used to convey sheer pragmatic force, that is to express concerns which are felt by a Netspeaker about the understanding of his contribution. It is useful to note that the use of smileys has never appeared in common written communication before the diffusion of the Net, probably because conventional writing, being editable and revisable, allows the writer to have the time required to convey his thoughts clearly, which, because of the rapid interaction required by the Net, is not possible for a Netspeaker who has to implement the content of his message with his feelings quickly. Of course, there is also the possibility to write down explicitly one’s communicative attitudes but this would naturally collide with the requirements of the medium, not to mention that

typing speed is much slower than talk. Indeed, it is difficult to convey all comments on the ongoing of discourse, and this can be counted among those elements which differentiate Netspeak from speech and explains the reason why sometimes computer mediated communication is felt as cold.

Anyway, if it is true that Netspeak does not show the same features of speech, the same can be said of its relationship to conventional writing. In fact, the comparison of Netspeak texts with those of normal writing can be done in terms of elaboration, contrivance and revisability, as well as of factual communicativeness, decontextualization, and graphical reach.

It is to be said that the results of the comparison vary according to which one of the Netspeak devices we are referring to.

Generally speaking, the texts on the Net are changing (i.e. it is always possible to modify an Internet page, for instance) though, at the same time, they share the feature of persistence i.e. the fact that in certain Net environment texts remain on the screen until some more text arrives and pushes the old portion upwards till it disappears from sight, although we can always retrieve it by scrolling, that is using the bar on the right hand side of our screen to move up and down a text.

Besides, although not constrained by physical boundaries, Net texts have anyway limits of visibility, that is the portion of text, which can be seen, is given by the width and height of the monitor used, so, most of the time, we have to scroll if we are lucky enough not to encounter problems of graphic translatability, as when people write

texts without thinking that the width used as their text pattern is larger than the one of the recipient's monitor, so that the final user will have to scroll not only up and down, but also right and left to have the possibility to read the text in its fullness.

All considered, we may define Netspeak as a genuine new medium which shares features of both speaking and writing – although closer to the latter than to the former –, but which has also to deal with the possibility given or denied by electronically mediated properties.

The texts on the Net are characterized by fluidity, simultaneity (access to them is granted at the same time to a theoretical limitless number of users), non-degradability in copying and permeability (i.e. the feature that a text has to be integrated with or to integrate other textual portion).

A way of characterizing furthermore Netspeak might be given by investigating it in the light of how conversation has been analyzed by pragmatics research. Notably, one of the fundamental tenets of pragmatics is given by Grice's cooperation principle, assuming that the participants to a conversation have to cooperate for the success of the interaction. The basic assumption is to believe that our counterpart is telling the truth and that we have to behave accordingly. From this general principle, nine maxims – divided into four categories – are derived. The category of quantity deals with the amount of information provided (to be as informative as necessary, not to be more informative than necessary), the one of quality with the truthfulness of the information supplied (not to say things you believe false, not to say things you lack

adequate evidence for), the one of relevance with the meaningfulness of information (to be relevant) and the one of manner with the way in which information should be delivered (to avoid obscurity of expression and avoid ambiguity, to be brief, to be orderly).

Grice's maxims are seriously challenged in many Internet situations: to begin with, one of the main problems is that in some contexts (such as in chatgroups), anonymity is the rule, since people hide their real identities behind a nickname, with the consequence that people are emboldened and less inhibited, therefore interacting in a way which is not theirs in real life.

Accordingly, it is always difficult to interpret utterances since, while we lack information about whom we are speaking to and how he (or she) is conforming to Grice's cooperation principle, it is a hard task to identify the communicative meaning of a sentence.

As a consequence, phenomena such as *spoofing* (i.e. the sending of a message of uncertain origin, which is often inserted by a third party in the middle of an ongoing conversation and of which it is impossible to tell about its truthfulness or purpose) and *trolling*, i.e. the deliberate decision to send a message, called *troll*, whose aim is to irritate other people: it consists in false information which expect others to react furiously; most of the time experienced users just compliment with the troller, while newbies, i.e. inexperienced Net surfers, receive a mocking 'YHBT' (you have been trolled).

The cooperation principle is also violated – in its maxim of quantity – by *lurking* (i.e. the action of entering a chatgroup just to see what goes on without posting any contribute, thereby refusing cooperation) and *spamming* (i.e. the action of posting unwanted message to other users; this kind of messages are called *spam* or *junk-mail* and they have been classified into three different categories, i.e. playful, pernicious and ambiguous). *Flaming*, although being similar to *spam* since it is unwanted (and therefore violating the same maxim of quantity), differs from it as it consists of sending an aggressive message to a particular user on a specific subject. Anyway, most of the time the two users involved in *flaming* do not perceive their interaction as such, and in fact, the perception of *flaming* depends mostly on people's sensibility and cultural background; unsurprisingly, after a (supposed) *flaming* instance, a chatgroup generally leaves its topic to discuss about such an instance, thereby giving birth to *metaflaming*.

Flaming, besides breaking the maxim of quantity, disregards also – and mostly – the maxim of manner, which is also broken by many other Internet situations: how often, for instance, in chatgroup situations, people disregard being brief or orderly? How many times do bloggers conform to brevity? Not to mention clarity, which, being users compelled to short *lags*, is often the last thing a typist thinks of.

A lot are also the cases when the maxim of relevance is not respected. This occurs because it is often very hard to tell which the purpose of the exchange is: abrupt changes of topic are typical in chatgroups, where people do not often seem very

interested in any meaningful exchange, but rather they just want their presence to be noticed. In a chattalk, for instance, it has been noted that relevance is more concerned with social factors, rather than with the content or the ideational function of language. Unsurprisingly, in fact, most of the research on the Internet has been dealing with the social function of the language used and with the concept of ‘community’, although the outcome of such studies has highlighted that, not only the sheer fact of being involved in Internet conversation does not necessarily produce a sense of belonging, but that when it does, the resulting ‘community’ is far from being worldwide but, rather, we have a scenario where thousands of small groups exist, mainly made up of people showing shared interests. It is likely to expect that small groups will develop their social identity by means of linguistic and non-linguistic devices, so that it is likely, in the near future, that such aspects might be inquired by a forthcoming field of study which might be called Internet sociolinguistics. A starting point to research might be given by the trends which can be found in each of the seven domains of Internet communications, but it is also possible to find a common nucleus shared by all of them.

On the other hand, the appearance of thousands of publications dealing with Internet language is a demonstration of how linguistic guidance is felt as a need. Since such literature deals with rules, it can be classified into prescriptive and descriptive: the former having the aim of setting the rules stating what is allowed (prescriptivism referring to what is forbidden), the latter confining itself to the

description of what goes on and enters everyday 'normal' usage. As for natural languages, the quarrel between Internet descriptivism and prescriptivism is irreconcilable, although, despite what editorials say, prescriptivism seems to be more in power, also because of subtle technical ways (such as spell and grammar checks) to which users confidently apply.

Another feature of Netspeak is creativity: that is, users are always on the move on word coinage, since they need terms which have to face the new and ever changing reality of the Net. Of course, there are rules to be followed while you are linguistically engaged on the web, which are both prescriptive and/or proscriptive, according to real usage tastes and community belonging. Naturally, no one can pretend to be a dictator from a linguistic point of view, but, for instance, there are groups which have distinctive features: *hackers*, for instance, have their identity neatly defined by a set of both linguistic and non-linguistic conventions, which hardly would be accepted by *non-hackers*. From a linguistic point of view, the hacker community is of course one of the easiest to be identified, since its members are those who made the web but, nonetheless, it is not the biggest, because of later user aggregations in many other non-hacker groups. Of course, the destiny of Netspeak will be strongly influenced by the degree to which hacker language will be accepted by non-hacker groups.

Anyway, although there is not yet a shared accepted conduct code and guides for newbies and guidelines are always in demand, certain behaviours are not allowed and

considered as reproachable. Mainly, they refer to actions which collide with the nature of the medium used (as, for instance, sending an email with no content, or sending it thousand times). Of course, the risk we run in non conforming to such rules also depends on the kind of medium we are using; in many cases – as in chatgroups, for instance –, guidance on what is right or wrong is provided by moderators (the human counterparts of the *wizards* we find in games) who advice netsurfers on (non-)acceptable linguistic actions.

Apart from particular cases, such guidance is not common in real world communication, because we act according to our experience on the Net. In order to be able to say what is acceptable or not, large scale surveys would be required and, reasonably, large amount of data should be collected and analyzed. But we are still far from this and what happens is an increasingly offspring of Net codes (or netiquettes) which are, unfortunately, mainly based on their authors' tastes rather than on facts.

Certainly, the description of the linguistic features of the Netspeak should be carried out according to the different media used. Indeed, one of the things which is immediately noticeable is the peculiarity of Internet lexicon, which, although not necessarily including strictly technical terms, has developed the need of including a lot of lexical items needed to describe and talk of situations and Internet activities, as well as with the description of software function commands. Neologisms are often felt as indispensable and they are made up in different ways, such as compounding,

affixation and blend, although new words also come from the extension of lexical suffixes or word class conversion. Acronyms are also widespread and well accepted and, nowadays, they do not confine anymore to single words, but may refer to whole sentences (i.e. '*icwum*' for 'I see what you mean'). Netspeak is also peculiar as far as graphology is concerned. In general, we can say that capitalization is highly disregarded, and lower case is generally the rule (writing in upper case is the equivalent of 'shouting'). Anyway, although in most Internet situations using upper or lower case makes no difference, certain contexts (as web addresses and path) are case sensitive; moreover, sometimes we can find two capital letters in a name, a phenomenon which is known as bicapitalization or intercapitalization (i.e. GeoCities).

In Netspeak, also spelling rules are peculiar, in that, generally speaking, the English variant used is American English but, above all, on the Internet there is more tolerance to orthographic mistakes which are considered rather as the result of inaccuracy than of lack of education; the same can be said about punctuation and it is common, in emails, for instance, to find no punctuation at all.

Although spelling and lexicon are the bulky areas which characterize Netspeak, grammatical variation is sometimes noticed, above all in small groups (for instance, a common occurrence is given by verb reduplication, which is used to express a certain number of functions).

Let's now analyze in detail the features and the language of each of the seven ways of interaction on the Internet, beginning with the email.

Everybody knows what an email is, and it is not difficult to identify the various parts (most of which are managed directly by email programs) an email is made up of, although it is not so simple to describe what emails are for and what kind of language we should use to reach such a purpose. Indeed, emails are one of the most exploited and widespread ways of using the Internet to communicate.

From a structural point of view, an email is made up of two main parts, that is the *header* (or *heading*) and the *body of the message*. The former is in its turn composed of four parts (but different email editors may have different shapes and features), i.e. A) the recipients' address line or '*To:*' line which contains the recipient's email address (it can be typed or retrieved from our address book, a file where all our contacts are stored), B) the sender's address line or '*From:*' line which contains the sender's email address, C) the subject line (where we are called to give the shortest description of our mail) and D) the time and date. A, B and D are compulsory (with D being inserted automatically by the system) while C is optional, but if we forget putting it, the program will warn before the sending of the message, not to mention that it is a courtesy practice to do so.

Every time an email is received, the system, together with the copy of the body of the email, retrieves all the elements contained in the header. Besides, almost all email editors give the possibility to send our message to multiple addresses adding them in

the *Carbon Copy (CC)* or *Blind Carbon Copy* line (in the latter case the addresses inserted in this line will not be shown on the recipients' monitors, which means none of the recipients will be able to know that the message has been sent to the recipients inserted in the *BCC* line), to state the priority of the message and to attach one or more files to the email. There is little possibility of language variation in the header, although a great care is to be given to the *Subject line*: it must be brief and clear and, the destiny of the email is often dependent on it; for instance, spam messages are immediately recognizable from a lack of credibility of the *Subject line* (such as "Confirm your free gift card redeemable at your favourite toy store"), although it is not always possible to filter them out automatically because electronic filters work using strict parameters and there is always the risk to see expected mail put in our mail trash folder.

The body of the letter is made up of three parts, that is the message, the *salutation* (also called *opening* or *greeting*) which may precede it and the *signature* (also named *closing* or *farewell*) which may follow it. A salutation is not an essential part: for instance in circular mails and spam it is very common to find no greetings at all, as well as in emails received by close friends requiring a short response. On the other hand, a reply email sent after a considerable lag **generally** opens with a salutation formula and, apart from the cases stated before, most of the incoming messages open with a greeting which is, although there are many possibilities of classification,

usually determined by the presence or absence of an endearment element (Dear Mr. X *Vs* Mr. X).

Emails opening with an endearment element preceding the name of the recipient always place the greeting at the beginning of the email (generally spaced from the rest of the body), while in those without endearment the position of the name may vary, although it is generally contained within the opening paragraph.

As to *farewells*, we can distinguish two elements, with very little variations, i.e. the preclosing formula and the name of the writers. The two are usually found, although sometimes their absence might not be felt as compulsory, above all as far as signature is concerned, since they are contained in the header. The formulae used are the ones we find in conventional writing, although it is possible to notice that there is a bend towards informality (rarely emails close with ‘very truly Yours’ or similaria).

The identification of the sender can be added automatically or typewritten every single time we compose an email, and in case of automatic insertion, all the information is retrieved from a file the writer has saved before and which may contain extra information.

Farewells have two main functions, that is they signal that no further scrolling is required since the message is over and they provide information on the writer in case the message is to be forwarded (which is fundamental in case of a loss of the header). Of course, emails are used both for formal and informal communication, so the language we use depends on many factors. Naturally, the increasing popularity of the

medium will probably push email language towards a multiplicity of registers, so that, although emails are nowadays used mainly for informal communication, it is likely to assume that in the future this medium will be also used for formal interaction.

According to style manuals, the body of an email should be contained within a single screen view; when this is not possible, people are recommended to put the most important pieces of information first and to insert at the very beginning a sort of resume. The message should be as clear as possible and this results both in terms of legibility and intelligibility: insertion of blank lines and highlighting is highly demanded, although there is no way to be sure that what we are writing will appear in the same format on our recipient's monitor. As to intelligibility, generally emails are not read before being sent and so they often contain spelling mistakes. Besides, given the general informality of the medium, it is always a temptation to divert from standard English, this being an element which often causes problems of understanding. As mentioned before, and in contrast to what would happen with traditional writing, mistakes in emails do not lead to negative judgment on the writer's education, nor does the lack of punctuation. These linguistic behaviours do not generally prevent comprehension, which, in contrast, is sometimes hardly challenged by a lack of coherence. Most of the times emails are conceived as an adjacency pair, or, from a communicative point of view, as an exchange; in such cases it is normal that he who replies ought to acknowledge receipt of the previous

message and, without quoting, he may cause problems. Sometimes, even the whole message is quoted.

As to the length of emails, we can say that, although the possibilities are several, people tend to be brief and structure their paragraph shortly in replying to emails. The reply is generally made using the “*Reply to author*” function which allows us to keep the incoming message in our new mail; every line of the old message is preceded by a right pointing angle bracket and our text may either precede the one received, or follow it, or include it, although each of the three options presents advantages and disadvantages. When the paragraphs on the incoming emails are too long, we generally tend to summarize them before quoting and replying. The technique used when we respond to every single point, after having quoted it, is known as *framing* and, although convenient insomuch, it gives the possibility to respond to a series of issues quickly, thereby saving time and space; it also requires great care since words out of proper context might mean something different from what they really meant.

A framed message is uncommon in usual writing as it would appear, at least, unorganized, but in emails framing is a simple and fast way of responding and, actually, in e-mail correspondence every message is a new document, also when an old text, or some of its parts, is transmitted since, even in resending, some changes may occur, due either to electronic interference or human interventions.

As a linguistic variety, emails are characterized by their openings, closings and length of the body, as well as from their structure and, eventually, by framing, and,

even if of lesser importance, graphology, grammar and lexicon should not be totally disregarded. Considering the status of the medium, which is generally conceived as a question-answer exchange, it seems that emails contain more questions than shown in usual mail, with a good part of them absolutely rhetorical. But, naturally, this impression should be supported by more data analysis before we can state with certainty that this is a consolidated trend. The same caution should be used when talking of email graphology, although most emailers, above all the younger ones, seem to like playing with the graphic possibility such as colour and size of the characters allowed, as well as with punctuation and smileys.

The comparison of emails with other means of communications has been helpful to show what their advantages and disadvantages are. Emails, for instance, are better than phone calling when the person we were looking for is not in, but they cannot provide the same results when we have urgency of an immediate reply. At the same time, they are quicker than usual mail, but many people feel uncomfortable to communicate a sad piece of news using them. On the other hand, it seems that people feel freer to express using emails rather than telephone or traditional mail. Another feature which characterizes emails is that, no matter how reliable they are, they cannot be used when we need evidence above all in legal matters; hardly a copy of a will, received by email, would be considered valid if we do not have the 'original' handwritten and signed copy. But the limits of email are still to be discovered and critics are beginning to notice phenomena like e-bullying, sexism and similar. Email

style is fast changing and it is likely that the perception of its being informal or less important will soon change. There is a good number of people, belonging to professional fields such as economics or education, who are beginning to perceive email as a fast and reliable means. Therefore, it is likely that email styles will soon change and that it will be considered as another important way of communication which deserves the utmost care.

The main difference between emails and chatgroups is that the former is a situation in which two acquaintances exchange messages on a specific topic, while the latter, which is also defined under different headings such as *newsgroups*, *chatrooms*, *e-conferences* and others, are situations where there are several participants, whose identity is often unknown to one another, discussing on themes which are changeable. A chatgroup can be both synchronous and asynchronous: the former occurs in real time, i.e. as soon as a message is posted – that is it is sent to a central computer –, it appears on anyone else's screen. Incoming messages make older ones disappear, although they can be retrieved by scrolling, while, as to the latter, messages are still sent to a central processing unit, but they can be seen on demand, and people can respond to them, even if a considerable period of time has passed since the contribution was sent.

It is very difficult to talk of asynchronous group, because of their multifaceted aspects; there is a lot of stylistic variations among the different groups, not to give account of the differences referring to the topics dealt with. The general aim of a

chatgroup is to provide a virtual place where people can talk of a particular topic, but the social extraction of a group member, as well as the nature or the subject of the talk may vary greatly. More or less, the system works as follows: after having downloaded a certain software, which allows people to join the discussion, every user is able to send his contribution to a central computer unit which, in turn, makes the message visible to those who join. Before being available to all users, messages are supervised by someone – sometimes by a group of people – who is in charge of the management of the group and known as *moderator*, *postmaster*, *editor* or other names. He can have editing and/or filtering functions and, of course, a lot of metadiscussion on the editors' filtering role has always been one of the main issues of chatgroups.

Sometimes, as messages may arrive at any time, a kind of index is issued so that, after joining, we read the index first and only afterwards we decide which messages to read. In any case, most of the time a maximum message length is fixed and this is why one of the features of chatgroups is to receive short messages to which brief replies follow. The main feature of this medium lies in its asynchronicity: messages arriving at the most different time are stored and can be retrieved at any time in the future. Therefore, the language used is quite similar to the style we would find in actually printed paper and the messages posted have a proper autonomy. In a general sense, messages can be stored according to their topic or author and are usually classified keeping into account the timeline with which they have been posted. Of

course, being asynchronous, the medium may present situations where some messages have been skipped by a particular user who may post a contribution referring to an old message without reading the reactions it has caused. Since there are no rules regarding the possibility of posting a message, i.e. one can enter a conversation at any time, and also considering it is very difficult to follow a particular conversation, it is very important to be able to follow a *thread*, an index which organizes all the messages referring to a particular topic. Threads are assigned a name which, besides helping in their identification, often gives the point of view of the writer. This particular detail, represents a shared feature with newspapers titling: the more attractive the title, the more likely the message to be read. Besides, chatgroups share some feature with email too, in that messages of both media generally expect an answer, but while it is very strange for an email to remain unanswered, for a chatgroup message it is not so odd. In fact, when we post a contribution in a chatgroup, it is just to help the ongoing of the discussion and/or to have our presence felt. No personal reply is strictly required. The need of an easy-to-consult index, has caused that there is a certain standardization of title entries among the different users, since it is fundamental for the title to be clear and reliable. Most of the time, a title is decisive for the fate of a contribution. It works differently for email: sometimes, provided it comes from a known sender, people are used to read the message also if it has no subject, but it is not so in chatgroups where contributions with no title, or a generic one, are likely to be left unread. Titles are usually brief and thematic threads

are signalled by the repetition of language items. Pragmatically, quoting serves both to signal adjacency and to acknowledge membership to the group, although there are other ways of linking messages in a chatgroup, such as anaphoric cross-reference, usually found in the opening sentences, or other devices which connect our opening to a previous contribution. Such devices give the idea of a quick conversation, although months might pass between two different contributions.

Chatgroup messages end with a signature, which might be spared since the author's name appears in the header, and are planned according to a usual scheme which has an opening, a body and a closing. The body, in its turn, generally has a link to a previous message, the expression of a point of view and the request of other participants' views. Messages are generally short and more balanced in comparison with face-to-face interaction; besides, if it is impossible to predict the subject matter of a chatgroup, people remain on-topic and subject change is less frequent than in actual conversation. On the other hand, if someone changes topic abruptly, moderators have the possibility to intervene and even ban a particular user if someone obstinately keeps going off topic. From a linguistic point of view, in asynchronous chatgroups, as well as in everyday speech, people are used to accommodate, i.e. to use the same expressions, grammar, lexicon, jargon etc., regardless of their socio-cultural backgrounds. Generally speaking, chatgroup talks tend to develop personal contribution, i.e. authors refer to themselves using the pronoun 'I', and the use of rhetorical questions. The result is that the language used is something between formal

and informal writing: some features of the aural conversation are maintained, although there is still a lack of some fundamentals of speech such as turn taking. As all media, chatgroups have advantages and disadvantages; as to the latter, since the very nature of this medium promotes redundancy, it is likely to find a certain number of contributions which have, more or less, the same content. On the other hand, a chatgroup gives the possibility to everybody, even to those who are shy and are always put to silence by competitive situations, to express their own ideas and, above all, helps idea exchange. Peer talk is greatly facilitated and the language used is very helpful in keeping a group identity, and although not everybody agrees, it is nonetheless likely that in the next future chatgroup language will turn out to be a distinctive variety.

The other variety of chatgroup is the one which occurs synchronically, i.e. when all the users involved are online and interact in real time. Communication may take place between two users that is without any external moderator, or among many users and then a moderator may be present. Both situations are managed by specific programs as UNIX for the former situation and IRC (Internet Relay Chat) for the latter. When we are in a multiple user environment, we generally enter using a nickname, choose a channel among those available or create one, and start chatting. What happens on channels is controlled by operators or moderators who can warn and even ban participants who do not conform to the stated rules. Of course, although this system is more similar to face to face interaction than others, turn-taking is

always at risk, above all in a multi-user situation, and sometimes it is possible overlapping to occur. Another critical issue in synchronous chatgroup deals with lag; if we take too long to answer, our contribution might be meaningless because the situation might have gone on, and possibly to another topic. For such reason, shortness is essential and users tend to post their contributions as quick as possible. The outcome is that message overlap is common, which involves the disruption of adjacency pairs; at the same time silence is quite uncommon since it may mean that you are either taking time before answering or that you are physically absent, but still online. As above mentioned, when we enter a multi-user chatgroup we have to choose a nick, i.e. a fantasy name which will be used during the interaction. Unfortunately, a nick is not once and forever – as names in real life –: they can be changed during the interaction and it is also possible that when we try to sign in, our usual nick has already been chosen. Besides, nicks may assume a discourse value in order to make clear whom the message is being written for.

In synchronous communication, differently from what happens in the asynchronous one, topics change very quickly; sometimes moderators try to keep people on topic, but this attempt is not always successful and, on the contrary, it is not rare to have multiple topic conversation occurring.

As to the language used, smileys are widely spread, as well as abbreviations of any kind; as to spelling, we have the strangest instances of orthographic variance and mistakes are regular findings. Punctuation, as well as capitalization, is generally

disregarded, although some punctuation marks, as exclamation and question marks, are frequently used. From a grammatical point of view, language can be defined as colloquial and non standard, and from a lexical perspective we can find a good quantity of neologisms, jargon and slang, which is helpful in creating a sense of identity among group members. As soon as we enter a chatgroup, it is easy, after a short while, to realize what the linguistic conventions for that particular group are. Anonymity being the rule since none can tell who is hiding behind a nick, any participant should trust the others on the basis of the language used in the interaction. Since everybody is well aware of what might occur (anyone has had bad experience of viruses sent by potential friends...), language choices are determinant to identify whether newbies are reliable or not; more research is to be done, but great interest has raised toward the study of social, psychological and linguistic difference in chatgroup language.

Considering the nature of both synchronous and asynchronous chatgroup from a communicative perspective, the amazing fact is that they can work in spite of all constraints, i.e. that people, regardless of time-limit, turn taking and many other features, whose respect is compulsory in normal communication, still succeed in leading meaningful interactions in chatgroups. This can be explained by two reasons, the former is that in chatgroups maybe people do not look for information, but for opinions to react to and face-to-face interaction, the latter is that perhaps people give more care to the advantages which they may get from the social point of view,

instead of complaining on eventual problem on the linguistic or semantic perspective. According to David Crystal, chatgroup language is amazing to see, since it shows written language in its primordial state, i.e. most of the time, without any kind of revision, and also for the fact that it displays the language flexibility which is found above all among young people who, while adapting language to their needs, at the same time are aware of the way they are moulding it.

Another interesting linguistic scenario is the one of virtual worlds, imaginary places which have no actual correspondence with real entities. They are also known as MUD, an acronym which stood at first for Multi-User Dungeon (from the fantasy game '*Dungeons and Dragons*'), but which, nowadays, is also the gloss for Multi-User Dimension, which is done to eliminate the preponderance of the fantasy element which connoted the former abbreviation. A MUD might deal with any kind of situation, from a university campus to a fantasy world, but all MUDs are situations where participants act in real time and communicate by exchanging written texts. Although the first MUD goes back to the 80s, the idea has had a good fortune, with the consequence that a lot of MUDs (and the relating sub-MUDs) were created, most of the time with a change in the names which, anyway, still begin with the letter M, so that, nowadays, we have – among many others – MUSH (short for Multi-User shared allucination!!!) and MOO (MUD object orientated), with their users being referred to as MUDders, MUSHers and MOOers (or MOOsters). To strengthen identity a lot of neologisms are coined (so we have MOOmen and MOOwomen,

MOOtalk and MOOsex etc). Most of the participants are young and they enter their MUD by choosing an *avatar* (that is they select an identity not just picking up a name, but shaping their virtual body by choosing its physical appearance in the MUD); generally the character chosen is humanlike, but there are MUDs in which the choice is wider; besides, in some virtual worlds it is also possible just to type without using a character, although this is neither very common nor appreciated.

MUD life is generally supervised by *wizards*, i.e. administrators who, most of the time, are experienced users with programming abilities. They take care of the MUD life, i.e. that everyone conforms to the accepted rules without offending the others or behaving badly: if some should do so, he might be *newted* (i.e. prevented from using his character for a while), *toaded* (being limited in his faculties) or even *gagged* (silenced: all his message will not be shown).

To speculate on MUD language we must take in the due consideration the number of its users: too large MUDs might experience lag problems, but virtual worlds – although they never welcome publicity – with few users might get closed in a short period of time.

Although sharing some features with synchronous chatgroup, MUDs are different, as, while people are online and ‘modify’ the MUD, such interventions remain even after the user who has operated them goes offline. To give directions, cardinal points are used and the screen is orthogonally oriented under the assumption that its top indicates the north; characters may interact with one another provided that the two are

in the same room (a character cannot hear what goes on in another environment) and the talk occurs using a set of command supplied by the system which is helpful to perform a series of actions – such as smiling, seeing the object you have collected, inquiring about someone else’s identity and so forth – and all these situations give the possibility of much language creativity. Interaction among MUDders may take place through *saying* (typing a message with the possibility of addressing to some other particular character) or *emoting* (expressing a feeling or perform an action or, more generally, telling our own character what to do, thereby assimilating, under certain circumstances, our typing to a sort of stream of consciousness). Neologisms are created from gestures, and word class conversion is quite common. Emoting provides, in some cases, a narrative style which is often side by side with the colloquial tones granted by direct speech to which it often provides support. On the other hand, one of the problematic situations experienced in MUD is given by multiple conversations going on simultaneously. In such cases most MUD systems may intervene by a set of devices which help conversation development by moderating interaction or focusing on the topic and, generally, users also are cooperative in disambiguating complex discourse situations. Anyway, there are significant differences between chatgroups and MUDs. One of the most noticeable is given by person shift, that is by the fluctuation between the use of first and second person when characters are addressing through means of direct speech and the use of third person when emoticons are employed. Generally, since second person verbal voices (singular and plural) have

the same form in English, second person is avoided, above all when there are many possible addressees in the same room. Another feature to be noticed occurs when program generated messages, which generally conforms to the norms of Standard English, appear side by side to user generated speech (be it conveyed by speech or emoticon, both of which do deviate from standard English and have a bend toward informality) Although speech is always controlled (MUDs are not a linguistic no-man's-land), the mixture of the different styles is indeed one of their most interesting characteristics, a feature under which it is possible to trace MUD user identity, which, of course, is different from MUD to MUD. Unsurprisingly, the length of messages, as well as the use of first or third person, varies greatly within the different MUDs, although, from the data we have, it is possible to note a general bend towards economy in the number of the words used; but such brevity doesn't refer only to the omission of 'unnecessary' or implied words, but also to the fact that sometimes words are clustered together in neologisms (not necessarily shorter than the words used for their coinage as *onna* for *on a*) and sparing-time formulas. MUD language is used to create a particular idiolect which characterizes exclusively the specific group of MUDders; Of course in MUDs, Netspeak past linguistic usage is often chosen as the topic of discourse and language play is generally welcome within a group, but criticized as childish from other MUD users.

Virtual worlds have developed a new dimension where, at present, almost everything is possible, from flying to teleporting. But no one can tell where such an

evolution will lead: in fact, some MUD environments have begun to give the possibility to their users to send emails or enter asynchronous chatgroups. MUD language is evolving, but its study is very difficult because in the past it was quite complicate to collect data – which were and are rarely saved – and to give at the same time the due care of safeguarding MUD user privacy. On the other hand, it is very complicate to state whether MUD texts are public data or not and privacy speculations are quite intricate. Among other things, it is difficult to carry research on the data because it is very hard to identify who the author of a certain utterance is, i.e. if we have to consider the typist, the actual player or the character as responsible for what has been said. Anyway, the data available are still few and to individuate general trends is a very complex task, because of an excessive presence of individual linguistic features.

A totally different perspective is the one we have when we consider the language of the web, where almost all kinds of language aspects are present. Indeed, from a visual point of view, one of the most eye-catching features of a written text on the web is given by its being linearly interrupted or non linear: in the former case, the text is written according to a fixed sequence which follows that of normal spoken discourse, in the latter, it is possible to read the text in a multidimensional way, that is the text presents different parts which are read only in case they raise the reader's curiosity. A non linear text is characterized by the presence of links, that is connections – which can be represented either by an icon or a word –, allowing a user

to pass from a page to another and which, thereby, transform a text into a linked hypertext (i.e. a web text which is tied to another, or others, through means of links).

What is interesting, in web language, is that it shows all the different varieties of language, with their relating peculiarities, we have in real life, so it is quite hard to define web style or register in a general way. But, of course, this does not mean that we have the *same* languages, because, in any case, the linguistic transmutation from the real world to the web had to go through the advantages and the disadvantages conveyed by the medium. For instance, web users had to cope with legibility and intelligibility problems and, nowadays, anyone familiar with the Internet is accustomed to scrolling; besides, although the possibility of graphic and style innovation is theoretically limitless, most of the time there is a very high degree of conformity in the typographical features of websites. Nonetheless, it is important to say that the web allowed the introduction of considerable differences in comparison to traditional printed texts, such as the possibility to animate text (also by turning letters into animated characters), having it blink or coloured, just to mention few of the many possibilities. Indeed, some customization has emerged, as that of signalling hyperlink words by colouring them differently from non linking words, and, generally speaking, a certain taste for web page style has turned out as well. For instance, one major trend refers to the fact that web pages should be harmonized (texts, pictures and sounds should be coherent and consistent) and another to the fact that web pages should conform to monitor space, i.e. it would be better to create

pages that fit the screen without any need of scrolling; which has caused a certain trend towards text brevity, above all for main pages.

Indeed, the main feature of hypertext is their being linked to other resources, a practice which, although vaguely comparable to footnoting, has not been exploited to its fullness yet. Nowadays, in fact, documents are not wholly interrelated, and most of the time there is no reciprocity in linking, so the auspicated equal status of linked hypertext pages is not yet fully realized and it hardly ever will. Besides, the mere fact that a link exists, does not mean that it is working and every web user has encountered a “404” error (page not found) while netsurfing. Generally, the advice is to limit the presence of links to the minimum, that is to insert a link only when it is really needed.

Internet users, or readers, can interact with web pages and their links in three different ways: they can choose a page to read, scroll through it and cut and paste from its content, but they cannot alter it or change its links: at best, if they want a new link to appear, they can write an email to the website owner asking him to insert it, but the final decision is his. Nonetheless, it seems that interactivity demand has begun to be felt and most of the time websites have pages for users’ comments or suggestions; a further signal that things are changing is also provided by, for instance, Wikipedia, the web encyclopaedia which allows users to insert new items or to correct the items posted by other users.

Since web pages are web owners', it is licit to ask ourselves what will happen as this situation develops. In fact, although there are people who are not considering the restraints suffered by the language as soon as it arrives on the web, there are also users who are toiling to care about the new linguistic requirements of the web and we can consider the actual web language as a sort of interlingua, whose fate is still uncertain. Indeed, the fact that people from all over the world can (theoretically) access the Internet will add, to strictly linguistic matters, problems of cultural sensitivity: on the Internet there are no moderators and what is normal for someone with a cultural background might be highly offensive for someone else.

Another issue which creates concerns, from the linguistic point of view, is that of copyright: since the texts on the Internet are generally access free, it is always possible to cut content from a web page, and paste it (with little variations or none at all) into a new one, pretending to be the author of the pasted text; although the deplorable phenomenon is widespread, there are authors – including famous ones as Paulo Coelho – who still recur to Internet devices as blogging to publish preview chapters of their works.

Anyway, a difference between the language of printed paper and web text is given by the fact that, in a general sense, traditional texts go through a complex process of editing before being actually printed, which is not what happens on the web where the possibility of multi-authored pages may cause severe shifting in style. Besides, stylistic variety is also influenced by the fact that other users' reaction may influence

the language used on a particular website, since they are given the possibility to add comment lines to the text through interactive web pages, differently from what happens for traditional printed matters. But another phenomenon which indeed is interesting, as to style matters, is given by time sink: it is a very common experience that, while looking for something, our browser returns addresses of pages which are out of date or not pertinent with what we were looking for. As for old data, sad to say but it is a common habit not to delete them, and this is why, provided that the pages contain the word we have inserted in our research, they still keep on coming back. Then, the problem concerns the very concept of knowledge which, in turns, comes to be a problem of carrying out research, including only relevant data in the result. Indeed, the large amount of data, most of the time, carries to an information overload and this is why many have begun to dream of what has been called the Semantic Web, (an evolution of the web), so that data would be readable not just by human beings but by computers too. Data, in SW, should be coded, so that machines – without any intervention by humans – should be able to integrate relevant data by themselves. Of course, data should be coded in machine processable forms and computers should be helped in ‘learning’ how to treat with these data. Computers should be able at first to describe, then to infer and finally to reason on the data but, of course, this implies a lot of work concerning the description of knowledge. Therefore, features of SW data should be shareable and reusable. But a lot of problems arise: firstly, those regarding the difficulties of using different languages and the particular expressions each one of

them has, not to mention the trouble of coding multiple meaning signifiers or metaphorical meanings. Naturally, there are, indeed, data which are simpler to code (such as timetables), but indeed a lot is still to be done on the part of semantics. On the other hand, we already experience such problems when we use search engines: when we enter a single word as a research key, the system will return every single page containing it, regardless of the context or usage we were looking for. Besides, the problems are also experienced from another point of view: since there is no semantic control, but there is the need of forbidding access to some pages (for instance to prevent children from accessing to adult content pages), *ensorware*, in some cases, prohibits access to pages containing words as Sussex or analysis, because, if you split them (as Sus-sex or anal-ysis), they contain stopping words. But there is more. When we use a word-processing program, and we take advantage of the grammar and spelling check, most of the time, our way of using language is seriously modified and, generally we resign our linguistic freedom in change of a sort of assumed reliability, which the suggested word has, only because it is provided by the system. Naturally, although in many cases these devices are helpful in preventing spelling errors, most of the time they seriously challenge people's stylistic attitudes (there is really no reason to say that the word 'colour' should be spelled as 'color' and no speaker who is not a pedant American style independence supporter would ever claim so).

Before taking into consideration the newest form of Internet interaction, a reflection on the language of the web is due. In fact, although the Internet was created as an English speaking system, the actual globalization of the world has seriously challenged the idea that English is still the language of the web and, nowadays, not only there are many other languages spoken, but there are serious signals that in a short while English will also lose its primacy position. In the long run, it is likely that websites written in national languages will be created accordingly. Furthermore, considering countries as big as China or Russia, it is likely that in such places English will have a very hard challenge to take up. Websites are increasingly displaying national languages and, according to recent trends, it is likely that soon more than a quarter of the world languages will have sites displaying them. Naturally, the existence of websites using national languages does not imply their effective usage. Indeed, the fact that such websites may have success depends on several factors, as a bulky presence of Internet technology in that particular country, a good deal of contents existing in that particular language, the degree of diffusion that English has in such nations, as well as the need to have accessible information in the national language. Since the Internet is a very low cost technology, it is reasonable to think that it will be theoretically able to represent, in the near future, a repository for minority languages, but, at the same time, there is the risk that, if the development of programs dealing with voice recognition or translation of such languages, will become not convenient for software producers, then probably they will be

condemned to silence. Anyway, signals are for a further multilingualism of the Net and the experts are toiling hard to solve technical problems as, for instance, the rendering of symbols and non Latin characters.

Indeed, blogging is one of the ultimate resources of computer mediated communication. A blog (shortening for Weblog) is a space on the Internet where every user is able to enter, display and manage posts at any time. At first, blogs were thought of as a kind of diary the owner updated on a regular basis, but soon blogs became also a way exploited by public bodies, as firms, radio and TV stations, to have a closer touch with their public. Although blogs generally have a single author, multi-authored ones exist. Anyway, regardless of the numbers of the owners, blogs generally show less interactivity than chatgroups, to which they are often compared, and rely heavily on links both to other blogs and to external websites.

Blogs became very popular and appreciated by those who wanted either to express radical ideas, which of course would have been left unconsidered by other media, and those who had no possibilities of having their voice heard.

As to the topic blogs are interested in, there is a very wide range of themes covered, some being monothematic, others covering more subjects. It is difficult to say what will be the consequences of this medium both from a social and a linguistic point of view. Indeed, much of chatgroup contents will find room on blogging and, from a linguistic point of view, it is possible to notice a language striving between the orthodoxy of standard English and the need of being informal. Although there is

respect for the norm, many are the fields where deviations from it are noticed. Though there are some bloggers who are very strict in editing their messages before putting them on the web, the fact that language is under no editing control before being published renders the message very peculiar in its linguistic features, i.e. unconstrained by nothing but the author's inclinations and freed from all formal language restrictions.

The diffusion of blogs will have implications also on the other computer mediated ways of communication, and it is likely that in the next years will be deeply affected by the multimedia changes which blogs are going through.

Another recent way of using the web for communication is given by instant messaging, which requires users to download and install the same instant messaging (IM) program: there are, in fact, many different kinds on the market. IM is similar to chatgroups but it differs from them since every single user adds a list of contacts he wants to stay in touch with, so, practically, an IM device creates a sort of chatgroups where only two people at a time are involved, although there is the possibility to invite other users to the conversation. Once the contacts are added to the list, the system notifies whenever a contact is online, so that we may get in touch with him, and, in any case, we have news on his status: the user might be online but busy, or simply he has forgotten to disconnect and, being still online, he is not by his computer). Thanks to IM, people can do much more than simply sending text

messages: in fact, images, video and any kind of files can be delivered to a contact provided that he is online.

IM has peculiar linguistic and communicative features: since the condition to communicate is that both users are online. The system returns messages on every single user status to all computers where such user figures in the contact list so that phatic communication is reduced to the minimum. Generally, while communicating, users are used to chunk their messages; basically there are two ways of chunking, i.e. single-theme and multi-theme one, depending on how many topics are being dealt with at a time. Chunking occurs more frequently in IM than in chatgroups, although in the former the meaning is almost never at risk and, in case problems occur, they are immediately and easily solved. This is also possible since IM users, knowing each other, share a common encyclopaedia, and therefore, most of the time, the assumptions they make draw on such shared knowledge.

From a linguistic point of view, since users know each other's identity, the persona used, if not omitted, is the first or second, which, in a chatgroup, would create a lot of confusion. Besides, in IM communication there is not the need to create a group identity, so, informality is generally the rule; nonetheless, since there might be several style and usage differences between the users (because of age distance, for example) a lot of variability is possible to take place. IM language is completely overt and explicit and it is not filtered through formality which is not likely to have room between users who are close.

Indeed, blogging and IM are two of the latest resources of computer mediated communication, but technology is fast pacing, then it is likely that in a short while new forms of communication will come to front. Among them, one is already a reality: it is the so called VoIP, short for Voice over Internet Protocol, that is a way of using the Net to make phone calls without extra charge. VoIP, reasonably, will be combined with the other media already existing, so, it is likely to assume that the next future will be very rich in the spreading of new means of communication, which will implement the exchange of text, voice and images; webcams are, nowadays, an increasingly spread reality in everyone's home.

Anyway, computer mediated communication does not limit itself to the seven media shown, since new technology innovations (which are increasingly evolving) will soon integrate the communication devices already existing, thereby giving origin to new and unprecedented ways of communication. Nowadays, integrated ways of conveying text, voice and images have made streaming media a reality. From a linguistic point of view, such developments will be relevant both for the linguistic usage within every single private community and because they will cause the different languages to be put together. One issue, for example, refers to the fact that simultaneous language translations might come true, which will have serious implications both for the development of English as a *lingua franca* and since, being possible for the speaker to give his talk in a language A and have it heard in a

language B, a possible consequence might be that learning a foreign language might be felt as a useless effort, with all the implications deriving from it.

Many pieces of information will be rendered available on very small devices, which will reasonably imply that people should develop a good management capacity in order to use them. It will also be meaningful for linguistic expressivity and it is likely that there will be a scenario similar to the one which appeared when SMS technology evolved, that is it compelled people to express themselves in just 160 characters, bending language expressivity and introducing all kinds of abbreviations, acronyms and smileys in order to confine their thoughts in the space allowed. Briefly, linguistic expressivity will soon be called to confront with the limits set by technology constraints. New forms are developing, such as WAP for instance, but, paradoxically, it is hard to tell if Wireless Application Protocol will last enough to modify the way people use language.

The new possibilities offered by the spread of technology are also interesting as far as they can be useful to help other human activities where language is involved, such as language teaching and learning, general education or, even, entertainment. One of the fields, which has been deeply affected by computer mediated communication, deals with foreign language teaching: technology has helped to solve a lot of the problems teachers had, as the difficulty in obtaining 'authentic' material written in the foreign language, even if education personnel will have to develop new skills in managing the new media, so that students will be able to get the best of them. On the

other hand, students also have to face new situations when the foreign language they study – i.e. standard English if we refer to English language – is often different from the one they read.

To conclude, some considerations on computer mediated communication as far as language is concerned are required. All in all, it is possible to state that the introduction of Netspeak, which is really to be considered as a series of new language varieties, has radically changed the way of thinking, not just the way of using the language. Then, reasonably, Netspeak may be considered as something different from written, spoken or sign language. It is a new way people have to express their thoughts and, as such, it is reasonable to think that it will soon develop in all its features. However, it is very hard to state how this evolution will take place, nor is it easy to tell which devices will survive, disappear or which of them will be conceived, given the fast changing pace with which new means of communication are produced. It is reasonable to suppose that creativity will have an important role in the usage of the language *and* of the possibilities with which it might be conveyed by new media. Besides, although it seems that one of the hallmarks of the Net is to share one's knowledge with as many people as possible, new trends are developing, which show the need for privacy. Netspeak has added a new way of expressing oneself, although it is difficult to tell whether the other ways of expression will be substituted by it; besides, it is likely to think that the usage of CMC will enlarge our awareness of

linguistic contrasts, therefore extending the communicative possibilities we have as it has never happened in the past.

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