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**A Study of Orthographic Features of Instant Messaging in Pakistan  
An Empirical Study**

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**Abstract**

In the postmodern era, technology has affected almost all aspects of human life including language. Electronic Communication has brought about revolutionary changes in the sphere of human communication. This paper aims to discuss the findings of the study of orthographic features of language used by Pakistani students in Instant Messaging (IM), a synchronous form of electronic communication.

The data of IM have been collected from the students of Baha-ud-Din Zakariya University Multan. The data have been analysed making different categories of virtual spellings used by the participants. The analyses illustrate that the participants make excessive use of virtual spellings such as 'bz' for 'busy', 'wid' for 'with', 'u' for 'you,' etc. These new ways of communication have evolved quite rapidly and have caused the innovative orthographic features of English words. The paper concludes with the view that time will decide whether or not these orthographic changes become regular feature of English orthography.

**Key words:** orthographic features, electronic communication, instant messaging.

## Introduction

Technology has affected almost all aspects of human life. Language has also been greatly influenced by rapid advancement in technology, especially the information technology. Computers have played a significant role in bringing about revolutionary changes in the sphere of human communication. Internet has become one of the major means of communication in this era. The speed and ease of electronic communication make it to be the most feasible media of communication. David Crystal asserts that internet language is a 'fourth medium' (after writing, speaking and signing) and opines that the rate of change in language is tremendous (Crystal, 2001). The use of the non-standard orthography is a useful resource in chatting.

Language has never been static and has continuously been changing over the years. It has never been handed down to the next generation unaltered, as each generation recreates the language of their predecessors (Coulmas, 2005). The changes in language are sometimes so unobservable that they pass unnoticed. Although the gradual changes in semantic, phonological and syntactic systems of a language are sometimes hard to notice, yet 'one glance at the works of Chaucer or Shakespeare shows how much English has changed in a relatively short time' (Aitchison, 2003, 160).

Language does not change by itself. Over the centuries, a number of factors like economy, analogy, language contact and some other social factors have caused changes in language. According to Holmes (1992) it is in fact the speakers and writers who change the way they use language. So it is basically speaker's innovations that cause language change. Coates (1993) argues that linguistic change occurs in the context of linguistic heterogeneity. She explains it in these words: "linguistic change can be said to have taken place when a new linguistic form, used by some sub-group within a speech community, is adopted by other members of that community and accepted as the norm" (ibid: 169).

In recent times, computer technology has become one of the major factors responsible for innovations in language. The Internet has shown drastic changes in language used in e-mails, chatting and instant messaging (IM).

## Instant Messaging (IM)

Instant Messaging (IM) is the exchange of text messages in the real time between two people who log into a particular IM service on internet. It is a synchronous form of electronic communication. IM is designed for fast text interaction and through this service messages are sent immediately and the responses are also instant. Both the interlocutors are online and involve in chat in real time situations. The users of this service maintain a contact list that contains the usernames of the people they want to chat with. Whenever they log on to the internet with their IM software, the user is instantly alerted with a *buzz* (A ring tone used to alert the other online friend/s who are added by the user in her/his buddy list.). When any of them logs off, the other one is notified about this fact. According to Crystal (2001) it is the synchronous interaction

which causes most radical linguistic innovation, affecting several basic conventions of traditional spoken and written conversation.

### **CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) - A New Way of Communication**

Linguists have been studying Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) for more than a decade. Many of their research articles have been published in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Over the years linguists like Baron (1998, 2000); Collot and Belmore (1996); Crystal (2001); Ferrara, Brunner, and Whittemore (1991); Herring (2002); Maynor (1994); Yates (1996) have been studying CMC from different perspectives. Most of these works focus on the social aspects of internet communication.

Baron (2004) conducted her research on Instant Messaging (IM). According to her IM is becoming a mainstay for online one-to-one communication. She believes that in one-to-one forums of CMC (with the partial exception of e-mail); the interlocutors generally know one another, whereas with one-to-many forums, they often do not. The main purpose of her research was to study gender issues in college student use of instant messaging. However, she has also analysed the linguistic variables such as turns, sequences, conversational length, and lexical issues like shortening of words or phrases and use of paralinguistic features like emoticons etc.

In 2004, Colley, Todd, Bland, Holmes, Khanom and Pike studied the style and content used in e-mails and letters to male and female friends. They found that overall e-mails contained more abbreviations, incomplete sentences, and multiple exclamations – the typical styles of electronic communication. From their findings they indicated that ‘the growth of e-mail as a major communication medium may bring with it shorter and more rapid exchanges but also more subtle variations in which we communicate with others’ (Colley et al, 2004, 376).

Asif and Zahra (2006) studied the main features of the netspeak used by the young Pakistani net users in online social network called ‘Orkut’, which is a platform for an asynchronous type of electronic communication. They found different factors like fashion, foreign influence and social needs as the major causes influencing Pakistani Netspeak.

### **Research Question**

In the present paper, we have attempted to find the answer to the question “What types of spellings are used by the Pakistani users of the Internet while communicating through instant messaging?”

### **Methodology**

The present research is conducted in Pakistani context. The participants are the students at graduate and masters levels at B. Z. University Multan. They all use Instant Messaging (IM) for chatting on the internet.

We have chosen the students as participants of this research due to the fact that the young people are more inclined to use IM for communication. As there have always been some apprehensions on the part of the subjects/participants about the confidentiality, the participants are assured that their anonymity will be kept intact. The participants have provided their saved content of the chat (which they have done with any of their friends or dear ones from the list of *buddies* (a list of friends added to the messenger service with whom the users can involve in a chat when they are available online) through the provided email address. Some of them have provided their saved messages in soft form using the USB.

In this way, twenty-five *conversations* (each conversation consisted of a number of instant messages exchanged during a single sitting) have been collected from sixteen participants. The mean age of the participants is 22 years 10 months. Seven of the participants are females and nine are males. We have also included two of our own conversations which we saved during our chatting as participant observers. In nineteen of twenty-five conversations, the participants have used English as the dominant language, while Urdu dominates in the remaining six.

The collected data have been analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The soft copy of the corpus provided an objective way to analyse these messages. The different features of Microsoft Office Word, especially the 'Word Count' and 'Find' have been used to get the average length of messages and the frequency of usage of a particular word respectively.

Adopting from Thurlow (2003), the quoted messages are transcribed/translated (where needed) into Standard English. The frequency of the use of a particular feature is shown in number in brackets like this (n=?); for example, if a particular feature appears twenty times in the corpus, it is shown as (n=20).

Most of the past research has been conducted on the language of chat rooms used by the chat groups where the identity was kept hidden. The collected data of chat for this research is in the form of instant messages that took place between two people who knew each other and were involved in dyadic conversation over the Internet using a messenger service. Keeping in mind the research ethics, the names and identities of the participants have not been revealed in this paper.

## **ANALYSIS**

This part of the paper gives the analysis and shows the words written in short forms and with new non-conventional spellings to communicate meanings. In writing certain words, sometimes, only the phonic pattern is considered. The influence of Urdu phonology has its own part to play. These have been discussed under different categories. Many of these categories have been borrowed from other researchers and scholars.

The idea of 'virtual phonology' is taken from Shortis (2001). Following the idea of virtual phonology, the orthographic features of the language used in IM have been analysed under the

heading of ‘virtual orthography’. Different categories analysed under the headings of ‘virtual phonology’ and ‘virtual orthography’ have been borrowed from Crystal (2001), Thurlow (2003) and Baron (2004).

### **Message Length**

The data of IM comprises twenty-five *stretches* (a stretch of conversation consisted of a number of instant messages exchanged during single sitting) of chat. Using the Microsoft Word, the average message length is calculated as 4.5 words only. It is mainly the desire to communicate thoughts or feelings quickly to their interlocutors that leads to the use of less number of words in a single message.

Considering the number of messages used, the longest stretch of chat consists of 178 messages with an average of 3.74 words per message. While considering the number of words used in a single stretch of conversation, the longest chat comprises of 1145 words used in 125 messages, with an average of 9.16 words per IM.

There are many instances where the participants have sent more than one message in a sequence (a number of instant messages sent seriatim by the same participant). On the other hand the shortest chat consists of thirty words used in nine instant messages with an average of 3.33 words per message.

### **Virtual Phonology**

Phonological aspects of everyday speech in real-life are found in the purely text-based world of electronic communication. This is a feature of spoken language that we find in written medium of online IM. It is simply the medium’s speech-like spontaneity that gives users a desire to recreate sounds of spoken words in writing. While analyzing from this point of view only the words of English language are considered. The use of phonetic spellings in the following messages, taken from the data, is a common feature in electronic communication:

IM1: <wat r ur **activitiez** dese **dayz**..??>

(What are your activities these days?)

IM2: <evrythng **f9**>

(Everything is fine.)

The above given examples of IM show the use of phonetic spellings for the words given in bold font, i.e., **activitiez** (activities), **dayz** (days), **f9** (fine). The users are familiar with these spellings and there is no misunderstanding on the use of these spellings and both the sender and the receiver recognize these, using both senses of hearing and sight.

Five categories have been made to discuss the features of virtual phonology found in the collected data of instant messaging. These categories are: change of consonants, mono-lettered words, letter-number homophones, digit-word homophones, final 'g' clipping.

### Change of Consonants

The consonants in words are like the skeleton in body, forming the main structure of words. In electronic communication the consonants in words have been replaced by the other consonants following the pronunciation of words. We found many (n=105) examples of this feature of phonetic spellings in the corpus of online IM.

- IM3: <u 9 evry body **iz bz**>  
 (you know everybody is busy.)  
 IM4: <so I have 2 find time 4 **dis**>  
 (So I have to find time for this.)  
 IM5: <nothing else now a days free after **igzam**>  
 (nothing else now a days. Free after exam.)

The most frequently (n=13) occurring word in this category is 'bz', used to replace 'busy'. 'Table 1' in the following shows the complete list of virtual phonology found in the entire corpus of IM.

**Table 1. Change of consonants**

Virtual Spellings	Standard Spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings
bcz	Because	da	the	foto	photo	dznt	doesn't
girlz	Girls	bz	busy	bcoz	because	masterz	Masters
daz	Days	skool	school	dez	these	dat	That
karing	Caring	dese	these	minz	minutes	buzy	Busy
frndz	Friends	wdr	weather	howz	how is	teacherz	Teachers
plz	Please	thnx	thanks	muzik	music	langz	Languages
alwaz	Always	dayz	days	evry	every	dis	This
waz	Was	igzam	exam	xamz	exams	activitiez	Activities
fon	Phone	coz	because	fotoz	photos	iz	Is
needz	Needs	itz	it is	thatz	that is	enuf	Enough
wid	With	roomz	rooms	examz	exams	mailz	Mails
thez	These	pplz	peoples				

As Table 1 shows, the consonant sounds in words are represented by the letters bearing those sounds. These sounds have been categorized according to the sounds of IPA (International Phonetics Alphabet) with letters representing these sounds as shown in Table 2 in the following:

**Table 2. Categories of consonants changed in IM**

Sound	Letter used in IM	Conventionally used letter (s)	Sound	Letter used in IM	Conventionally used letter (s)
[z]	Z	s	[f]	f	ph, gh
[k]	K	c, ch	[gz]	g(z)	X
[ð]	D	th	[ks]	x	ks

### Mono-lettered Words

Under the virtual phonology, we have analyzed another category words. Here, a single letter stands for the whole word as that alphabet produces the sound of a whole word. The use of these mono-lettered words is a regular feature of electronic communication. The corpus of IM shows quite a good number (n=469) of these letters. The mono-lettered lexeme ‘u’ has the maximum (n=218) occurrence in this category of virtual phonology. There are only six instances where the Pakistani *netizens* have used standard spellings of this word i.e. ‘you’. The complete list of these lexemes found in IM corpus is given in the following (Table 3):

**Table 3. Mono-lettered words**

Virtual spelling	Standard spellings	Virtual spelling	Standard spellings	Virtual spelling	Standard spellings	Virtual spelling	Standard spellings
z	Is	d	the	r	are	c	see
u	You	v	we	m	Am	b	be
y	Why	n	and				

### Letter-number Homophones

The combination of digits and alphabets produce the sound of a word. Thurlow (2003) terms this feature as letter-number homophone due to the fact that these are based on the phonological aspect of language. There are many instances (n=33) of this feature found in the collected data. The most frequently (n=12) occurring combination is ‘f9’ which stands for (fine). Some of the examples in the following illustrate their use in IM:

- IM6: <yah **gr8**>  
(Yes, that’s great!)
- IM7: <i m **f9**>  
(I am fine.)
- IM8: <wel see u **l8r**>  
(Well, see you later)

Table 4 gives the full range of letter-number combinations found in IM data.



**Table 4. Letter-number homophones**

Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings
4m	from	l8r	later	sh9	shine	4ward	forward
f9	fine	gr8	great	2day	today	un4getable	unforgettable
fi9	fine	2moro	tomorrow	b4	before		

### Digit-word Homophones

The users sometimes use only a single digit for the whole word according to the similarity of pronunciation of the word and the digit used in its place. Two digits (2 and 4), used for this purpose, have been found in the collected data. The digit ‘2’ is used to replace ‘to’ and ‘too’, while the digit ‘4’ is used to replace ‘for’. There are 101 instances where the participants have used this category of virtual phonology.

IM9: <i m not fiting 4 them....>  
(I am not fighting for them...)

#### 4.2.5. Final ‘g’ clipping

Writing in electronic communication resembles speech as it is observed in this category of virtual phonology. The omission of the last letter ‘g’ in words ending in ‘ing’ is caused under the influence of spoken language. The study of IM found many (n=27) instances as far as this category is concerned. The most frequently (n=7) used word in this category is ‘doin’ (doing). The list of words with clipped ‘g’ is gives in Table 5 below:

**Table 5. Final ‘g’ clipping**

Virtual Spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard Spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings
sleepin	Sleeping	sayin	Saying	chatin	chatting	doin	Doing
sharin	Sharing	talkin	Talking	studyin	studying	callin	Calling
chekin	checking	watchin	Watching	workin	working	goin	Going

### Virtual Orthography

In this part of the paper the various types of spellings used for different linguistic expressions are analyzed under four categories: vowel clipping, non-conventional spellings, acronyms and initials, short forms of words. As in the case of virtual phonology, only the words of English language are considered for analysis in this category as well.



## Vowel clipping

Vowels play an important role in giving variable shapes to the pronunciation of a word. The users of instant messaging usually do not use vowels in spellings of words. They communicate by using the consonants only. There are quite a large (n=70) number of examples found in the data. The most frequently (n=10) used word in this category is ‘frnds’, used for ‘friends’. Table 6, gives a detailed list of words where the participants have omitted the vowels from the spellings of words.

**Table 6. Vowel clipping**

Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings
fmly	Family	wld	would	lv	love	bt	but
wht	What	frm	from	snd	send	cn	can
jst	Just	thnk	think	hv	have	nt	not
knw	Know	cnt	can't	ppl	people	nd	and
grls	Girls	m	am	sm	some	hw	how
frnds	Friends	shr	share	by	bye	ys	yes

## Non-conventional/Irregular Spellings

The participants using instant messaging consistently deviate from the standard spellings and use non-conventional spellings of various words. The observed deviation from conventional spellings has become a norm in IM. The collected data present 103 instances of the use of non-conventional spellings. The most frequently (n=61) used word is ‘ur’ (your). The list of these words with their standard spellings is shown in Table: 7.

**Table 7. Non-conventional spellings**

Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings	Virtual spellings	Standard spellings
nite	Night	ma	my	lissen	listen	surch	search
nuthng	Nothing	tym	time	brakefast	breakfast	gud	good
rite	Right	ur	your	hev	have	urs	yours
sum	Some	luv	love				

## Acronyms and Initials

In electronic communication, the users write quickly and in the process they use only the initial letters and the acronyms of phrases to represent the whole word and the phrases respectively. The data present 25 instances of their use. The list of the acronyms and initials used in data is presented below (Table 8):

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**Table 8. Acronyms and initials**

Initials/ Acronyms	Complete Words	Acronyms	Complete words	Acronyms	Complete words
V	Very	dc	disconnect	asl	age, sex, location
H	hours, how	tc	take care	tyt	take your time
Lolz	lots of laughs	ilu	I love you	wcb	welcome back
Hru	how are you				

**Short forms**

Another regular feature of electronic communication is the use of short forms of words. The participants regularly use short forms of words regardless of the fact whether they are acceptable in formal language or not. The findings show that most of these forms do not follow any regular pattern even in electronic communication. Quite a large number (n=164) of these short forms have been found in our data.

The word 'what' is written with short spellings 'wat' at the most (n=30) of the places in the corpus. The participants omit both consonants and vowels in the short forms. Most of these are used in an irregular way as for example, a single word sometimes is written in more than one way of short forms, for example, the word 'back' is written in two short forms: 'bk' (n=2) and 'bak'(n=2). The table 9 gives complete variety of short forms found in the entire data:

**Table 9. Short spellings**

Short forms	Standard Spellings	Short forms	Standard spellings	Short Forms	Standard spellings	Short forms	Standard spellings
ofc	Office	shud	Should	Abt	about	noting	nothing
wt	What	askng	Asking	Abut	about	wat	what
congrats	congratulations	luk	Luck	Helo	hello	adict	addict
signd	Signed	evrythng	everything	Dl	dull	lif	life
kil	Kill	wel	Well	Intrstd	interested	prepar	prepare
serchng	Searching	lit	Light	Mints	minutes	mob	mobile
blive	Believe	pik	Pick	Hom	home	sis	sister
al	All	posibl	possible	Whre	where	thro	through
lov	Love	quik	Quick	Com	computer	brther	brother
srch	Search	kichen	Kitchen	Fin	fine	msg	message
bk	Back	charactr	character	Computer	computer	jok	joke
smthing	Something	wen	When	Cam	camera	dangrs	dangerous
alow	Allow	bro	brothers	Clik	click	jus	just
wory	Worry	evthg	everything	Uni	university	bak	back
pl	Please	whr	Where	Recevin	receiving	pic	picture

### UrdEnglish: A New Lingo in Pakistani Context

*Netlingo* is a kind of fusion English which has mixed certain features of more than one language. CyberSpanglish gives the terms like *surfeando el Web* and *estoy emailando* (Thurlow et al, 2003). Similar kind of fusion is observed in the Pakistani context. The ‘Pakistani netizens’ (Asif & Zahra, 2006) are using Urdu-English combination of words. A new term ‘UrdEnglish’ can be coined to account for the frequency of occurrence of this feature in cyber lingo. This is a new phenomenon that has emerged in this variety. It is evident from the following examples provided by a twenty years old girl who has been one of the participants of this research:

IM10: <uni ke elwa kia **karing!**>  
(What are you doing besides university?)  
IM11: <uni k ilawa ash **karing...**>  
(I am enjoying besides university...)

In these instant messages the participants have used an Urdu word ‘*karna*’ (to do) in combination with English ‘ing’ to form the present participle of ‘*karna*’.

At the same time the digits with their Urdu phonological sounds are used to represent English words. We have also found two different numbers used for English words keeping their Urdu pronunciations. The digit ‘9’ is used for ‘know’ because it is pronounced as [nəʊ] in Urdu. Its occurrence is quite frequent (n=25) in IM. Similarly the number ‘100’ is used in combination with letters ‘ri’ making it ‘100ri’ to mean ‘sorry’. The number ‘100’ is pronounced as [sɔ:] in Urdu language. So by adding ‘ri’ the users make it sound like the word ‘sorry’. This is an important variation observed in electronic communication. The instant messages quoted in the following illustrate their use in IM:

IM12: <but u **9** it's difficult 2 spend the whole day doin nthng>  
(But you know it's difficult to spend the whole day doing nothing.)  
IM13: <**100ri** i have to go 4 my studies>  
(Sorry I have to go for my studies.)

Combinations of this type are a new addition to the cyber language. Many of the netizens over the world may still be unfamiliar with this variety of language use.

### Conclusion

The study illustrates that the language used in IM by Pakistani students is getting the flair of new technologies. The speech-like spontaneity in this genre of communication causes certain orthographic changes in language. The innovative and telegraphic styles of writing develop

certain patterns in the use of spellings of words. Although, many irregularities are still observed in certain categories discussed in the analysis, but many of them have certainly taken a regular and organised shape. Almost all users of IM have used new forms of certain words like 'you' (u), 'are' (r) etc. There are only few instances where the participants have written these words with standard spellings. The regular and patterned use of virtual spellings indicates that electronic communication is playing a significant role in developing new trends as far as orthographic change is concerned. In other words we can say that IM is bringing linguistic revolution with its influence on orthography of English.

It can be concluded from the detailed analyses of the corpus that a new 'lingo' is developing in electronic communication in Pakistani context. The use of irregular and non-conventional spellings of different words is a norm in electronic communication. This phenomenon has developed so quickly that there exists a community of netizens who have become quite used to this and they do not find any problem in their usage. Some of the new forms of words may become the part of formal language; only time will decide how far and how much the change would be.

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