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**Computer-mediated Communication in a
Bilingual Chatroom**

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Introduction

Tremendous improvements in the IT industry have played a pivotal role in aiding globalization and communication. As a result, communication has become more assessable and rapid with the presence of e-mails, online chat rooms and internet conferencing.

One phenomenon that arose from this development was the indiscriminate subscription to on-line chat rooms by all users all over the world. A new era has been created; one of a virtual community. This study will focus on a bilingual virtual speech community.

The aim of this paper is to examine the register of conversations that characterize the English language in a Malayalam-English bilingual computer-mediated conversation (CMC). CMC is a form of interactive discourse that resembles a unique form of 'written dialogue'. For the purpose of this study, the term CMCs will be used interchangeably with chatroom conversations.

Background to Study

This form of conversation is a form of synchronous conversation generally between strangers. Interlocutors are able to see their contribution almost immediately after they type them into the dialogue box. Depending on the number participants, many of these contributions are made at the same time by different interlocutors. They then have the option of engaging in a private chat with another person or to remain in the public forum.

Users on CMCs are crippled by their inability to see, hear or touch other interlocutors. Locke describes this phenomenon as one in which people 'go off-voice, off-face, off-eyes and off-body' (Locke, 2000:154). This deprivation generated the need for other linguistic cues such as punctuation and spelling to provide emotional support. It is hoped that an examination of the register of these conversations would shed more light on the functions of each linguistic strategy that is used.

Register in Chatroom Conversations

The relationship between speech and writing in the chatrooms were explored by Mar (2000) who concluded that there were no clear boundaries between speech and writing. CMCs also challenge assumptions about socialization. This study points out

that the Internet is used by people of different walks of life for various purposes. As many bilingual speakers do use CMC, it is pertinent to examine the language used in these chatrooms to see if Mar's findings can be generalized. This study will examine also another important criterion in a bilingual chatroom, namely, the presence of code-switching, which is a feature that has not explored by other researches.

Interlocutors on CMCs exhibit a desire to negotiate the extent of closeness they desire in the conversation. Interlocutors generally found that CMCs were a more attractive option for people as it was less expensive, provided greater anonymity by camouflaging the identities of the interlocutors (Baron, 2000). At the same time, they communicated their desire for a face-to-face conversation by re-creating paralinguistic cues by constructing facial features (Werry, 1996).

Hence the **tenor** of chatroom conversations is personal and yet as it is largely a conversation between strangers, distant. Although both these studies did not examine the register of chatroom conversations, the findings have a bearing over the present study of tenor in CMC.

Social Motivations

Social motivations seem to be the primary factor that propels CMCs (Crystal 2001). Hence interlocutors are more willing to make semantic allowances for the linguistic incoherence. This shared linguistic behaviour fosters a new form of community by itself: A community where readers are able to view 'written language in its most primitive state' (Crystal 2001:169-170). This feature has a bearing over the present study as part of the mode analysis.

Yates (1996) argues that in CMC, apart from the focus of the interaction at the present moment, there is no field beyond the interaction. Hence, the text of the CMC is the field. Furthermore, tenor may not be limited in CMC conversations apart from the lack of a clear semiotic field. Note that neither does the mode of CMC fit into either the speech or written category.

Yates (1996) then points out that more research needs to be done on the extent to which people in specific social and cultural settings enhance their communication through the use of CMC. When a channel such as #kerala has a regional or cultural theme, it is common to find a language like Malayalam being used to mark in-group identity, much as is found offline. Since in-group identity characterizes strong-tie social networks, we might expect such languages to be most common among the stronger ties on a channel.

Focus of This Study

The present study examines the register of such chatroom and how Malayalees around the world gain fellowship via this medium.

Relationship between Spoken Discourse and Writing in Chat room Conversation

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Written texts also convey different experiential meaning from spoken discourse. One of the features of writing is that it is relatively permanent and serves as an evidence to the communication whilst speech, unless it is recorded, leaves very little trace (Cook, 1997 and Crystal, 1987). If conscious efforts were taken, like speech chatroom conversations can also be stored and analyzed later 'as a static object' (Chafe, 1985:113). Unfortunately, this means that typing errors too are recorded and scrutinized later.

Another feature of writing is that it is edited (Cook, 1997 and Grabe, 1996) before the final version is available to a reader. Speech on the other hand is more spontaneous and is akin to the first draft with ellipses; therefore speech may not resemble the writing structure. Likewise, chatroom conversations since interlocutors are required to type out their reactions, thoughts and to respond quickly.

Furthermore, all of the writing is assessable at onset of the one's reading (Cook, 1997) and readers are presented with all the information at once. In theory they can choose to read backwards.

Speech is less tangible and interlocutors do not have the option of knowing where the conversation would lead. Unlike readers, interlocutors do not have the primary option of 'advance planning' (Crystal, 1987, 2001 and Grabe, 1996). This is another feature that chatroom conversations have with speech.

Although both speech and writing takes the audience into account, the objectives of speech and writing differ on many accounts. Writing is generally used for a more formal mode of communication and speech for less (Cook, 1997 and Grabe, 1996). The language in chatroom is informal in nature hence more characteristic of speech. An examination of the register of chatroom conversation would shed more light into the differences between spoken discourses and writing, types of linguistic strategies used in a bilingual chatroom such as code-switching.

Methodology

The data was taken from an actual chatroom conversation that took place in February 2008 on an online chatroom that caters primarily to Malayalees around the world. The researcher logged in as a guest user. The corpus was then copied as a word document and analyzed. The data was examined for register including Field, Tenor and Mode.

Field

Field is a description of the activity, the participants and the circumstances in which the activity is taking place (Eggins 1997). The online chatroom was set up for Malayalees living outside India to communicate with one another. Like other chatrooms with a cultural theme, there are no other restrictions on the topic of discussion. Hence it is not surprising that a lot of conversation is casual and even 'playful'. Apart from the topics of discussion, the announcements of the 'comings and

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goings' of interlocutors constitute a considerable proportion of the conversation as well e.g.

[deepak] has left the Chat room
[sniper] has left the Chat room
[reena] has left the Chat room
[coolguy22] has left the Chat room

These contribute to shaping the rapidly changing 'physical' environment of the chatroom where interlocutors can choose to log off or pursue a conversation at their convenience without any formality. At the same time it impacts the tenor of the conversation by lowering the level of formality in the conversation. As all three components of register are inter-related, many linguistic features effect all three components of the register in one way another.

Tenor

Tenor is a reference to the social relationships among interlocutors (Eggins 1997). The conversation in this present study is recreational in nature. With the high level of anonymity and equal chance at expressing themselves, all interlocutors are equal. This contributes to the rapid change in topic as well as constant interruptions by new corners to current discussions as illustrated by clauses 5-13.

Clause 5 <HaHa> evidey eppolum therriyum adiyum elley appuse
(so this place is full of fights and vulgarities)
Clause 6 <LittleSoni;> anyone free to talk
Clause 7 <kareena> asl pls
Clause 8 <coolguy22> hello anybody
Clause 9 <anu> hi
Clause 10 <kareena> working
-----[sniper] has left the Chat Room
Clause 11 <kareena> same age
Clause 12 <kareena> no
-----[reena] has left the Chat Room
----- [coolguy22] has left the Chat Room
Clause 13 <anushka> thaamarppuvil vaazhum devi allooo nee
(aren't (you/I) the goddess who resides on the lotus)

The dynamic lack of restraining social conventions such as turn-taking results in a situation where everyone can type out their messages at the same time. The linguistic confusion and incoherence has been described as 'both dysfunctionally and advantageously incoherent' (Herring 1999).

Use of emoticons - One unusual finding in this chatroom is the absence of any emotions that researchers report as a primary feature on CMCs. An actual conversation relies largely on paralinguistic features as well. On CMCs users do not have the luxury of studying their interlocutor's expressions. Interlocutors made up for the absence of emotions by using other means to express their emotions, namely by

emotives and punctuation (see also section on Mode). However this was not the case in this chatroom.

Clause 36	<u>haha</u> de kuude
Clause 57	he he he
Clause 75	hehe

It would be interesting to see if the absence of emotions is characteristic of other cultural chat channels.

Terms of familiarity - A high level of intimacy is enhanced by the use of Malayalam suffixes 'da' and 'di'.

Clause 20	Goodnight da
Clause 61	ayyadiiiiiiii
Clause 66	ayyedi

These are terms of endearment in Malayalam. This feature is only present in an informal spoken discourse between peers of the same age and status quo.

Mode

Mode is concerned with the way language has been organized to transmit meanings in a situation (Eggins 1997). The most obvious variation that was evident in this study was the presence of code-switching. Like spoken discourse, interlocutors code-switched between Malayalam and English. The presence of code-mixing and code-switching was not surprising since the community who frequent this chatroom are bilinguals. These features indicate that the conversations are less formal in nature.

Code-mixing - On the other hand there is noticeably less evidence of code-mixing in this speech than there generally are in bilingual Malayalam speech communities. Interlocutors generally seem to use either English or Malayalam in a sentence.

Code-mixing	Clause 23	<u>ok</u> china payyan
	Clause 29	<u>maha</u> bore
	Clause 30	nan athondu ee <u>time</u> l varilla
	Clause 32	ayedaa avante oru <u>bore</u>
	Clause 74	oru valicha <u>joke</u> aarunnu
	Clause 79	eee parena <u>partyde</u> jokene kalum kollaam
	Clause 81	ente <u>joke</u> busthankam veete vechu marnu poi

The vocabulary used in both languages was not as lexically dense as it would have been the written mode. Cook (1997) adds that the vocabulary used in speech and writing differs in the levels of formality. While the former is more informal the latter is formal. This made the messages in 'rapid visual media' (Baron, 2001:60) appears more informal and as a result creates an aura of intimacy between interlocutors.

Variation of spelling - Another main effect that Mode of CMCs has on language is the variation in spelling. Unlike children who learn to 'see' what they hear in their

speech, in chatroom conversations the roles are reversed. The written mode has evolved into a phonetically based one. Interlocutors express themselves terms of how words are pronounced. One has to decipher the symbols visually and rely on their auditory senses to understand the symbols.

Phonetically based spelling	Clause 7	<u>allo</u> anybody
	Clause 35	<u>howz</u> ur life
	Clause 83	<u>wat's</u> wrong with you anushka
	Clause 35	howz <u>ur</u> life

The lengthening of words in this data has only occurred with vowels. Multiple vowels and punctuation indicate emotional intensity that interlocutors have to express without paralinguistic features.

Lengthening of words	Clause 46	<u>Heloooooooooooo</u>
	Clause 61	<u>ayadiiiiiii</u>
	Clause 66	<u>ayyedi</u>
	Clause 82	<u>ayyeee</u>
	Clause 86	<u>vishnuuuuuuuuuuuuu</u>

The process of simplification as in the use of abbreviations and shortening of words could have been an effect of increasing the typing speed of interlocutors to allow synchronous conversations.

Shortening of words	Clause 7	asl <u>pls</u> (please)
	Clause 43	rohit <u>ru</u> frm usa (from)
	Clause 63	<u>oho</u> (oh no) sorry
	Clause 80	<u>r u</u> there (are you)
	Abbreviations	Clause 7

These features are also present in the language used in short message services (sms). The abbreviations enable interlocutors to not only engage in 'rapid speed speech' but also to pay less as they are charged according to the number of letters that they use for each message. It will be interesting to examine if such communication has an impact on language use amongst the younger generation, who tend to use them more than the others.

Punctuation - Finally as with other forms of CMCs, the varying uses of punctuations markers is a inherent effect in chatroom conversations. The punctuation in the chatrooms is guided more by rhetoric function than a grammatical function. Baron (2001:24) states that the rhetoric style of punctuation reflects the oral character of the text, while the grammatical tradition o punctuation is used to 'mark grammatical units of meaning'.

In the chatroom, the role of punctuation is not rhetoric in its conversational sense but a tool that helps 'the eye to make sense of messages intended to be viewed quickly' (Baron, 2001:56). The omission of punctuation is a tool to aid the viewer to rapidly

process the written messages. Furthermore, it is not necessary for all verbalized differences to appear in writing (Olson, 1996:89).

Spacing - One of the features of writing is the spacing that is present between words. Cook (1997) comments that “spaces are an integral part of the modern writing system but do not normally corresponds to anything in the spoken form”. The unpredictable spacing between words in computer-mediated speech however could be brought about by typing mistakes made in speed typing. This is similar to the ‘first draft status’ (Cook, 1997) of speech.

Esser (2000:1532) point out that ‘in its typical form a sentence starts with a word that begins with a capital letter and ends with a full top’. On the other hand, some medium-independent features of speech are not characteristic of writing, for example the presence of connectors, ‘ellipsis, fragmentation and special constructions such as left and right dislocation’ (Esser, 2000:1538). The conversation is full of ellipsis as most of them are not complete sentences e.g. Clause 2- 22.

Connectors	Clause 63	<u>oho</u> (oh no) sorry
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Capitalization - The use of capital letters is another feature that would not be picked up in speech (Cook 1997). Chafe (1985, p.111) points out that it is difficult to identify sentences in speech. Olson (1997m, p. 97) adds that writing makes one conscious of structures such as sentences. Understandably, there is a complete absence of full-stops to indicate the completion of a sentence since most utterances are generally simple and unmarked.

The lack of capitalization of the first alphabet in a new sentence and names is a norm rather than an exception.

Capitalization of the first alphabet	Clause 20	<u>Goodnight</u> da
Capitalization of name	Clause 18	da <u>Akku</u> njaan pova, nalle kaanam

Capitalization of the entire word or sentence is another manner in which interlocutors could express emotional intensity (clause 22) or assert their identity as in the case of Vishnu (clauses 46, 52, 89, 91, 93). Assuming that he is not a novice in this chatroom, he has used this form of punctuation for all his utterances.

Capitalization of entire word/sentence

Clause 22	BYE HAHA
Clause46	HELOOOOOOOOOOOOO
Clause 52	THEN?
Clause 89	YES
Clause 91	I AM HERE
Clause 93	BUT U WERE BUSY

The absence of punctuation is motivated by speed in which interlocutors are expected to respond.

Absence of punctuation	Clause 31	<u>let's talk</u>
	Clause 56	<u>what's the new there</u>
	Clause 83	wat's wrong with you <u>anushka</u>

Question marks were used to indicate emotional intensity more than a reaction signals.

The use of Question Mark	Clause 52	THEN?
	Clause 54	jaan pedichu pooyaalo???
	Clause 71	alle???

The varied use of punctuation could be an effect of the conversations being short and unequivocal and used to convey empathy or emotions. As discussed earlier this is the result of the lack of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated conversations.

The most interactive interpersonal relationships are characterized by immediate visual, aural and verbal communication. Chatroom conversations are handicapped by the absence of visual and aural contact. Users have made up for this deficit by using symbols to provide immediate feedback.

Conclusion

More research needs to be done in the area of bilingual communication on CMCs in order to study the correlations of linguistic features and their functions across the different chatrooms as these would shed more light on the bilingual virtual speech communities especially in a code-switching setting.

While the functions and features of writing and speaking are distinguishable in many ways and do fall into conventional categories in extreme end of the continuum the role of language in CMCs it is not crystal clear. These distinctions are not exhaustive nor can they be taken to be a universal phenomenon as they are challenged in many facades of communication.

Without the presence of extra-linguistic features such as facial expressions, interlocutors have revolutionized the English language in terms of punctuation and spelling for effectively communicating at a speed that resembles speech. Hence, the register of chatroom conversations is another recognized means of written dialogue.

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