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LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN AN INTERNET CHAT ROOM[1]

When communicating on the Internet, the participants, so to say, mingle two traditional modes of communication: writing and speech. The phenomenon appears to be most noticeable in chat room interactions. This suggestion is based on the fact that users try to behave as though they are engaged in a spoken act of communication, though the actual medium of communication employs written language forms. Therefore, Internet users need to know what conventions to employ and how to perform such actions in order to express the desired meanings, all with the aim of driving the interaction as close as possible to speech. Such implementations of certain language-related customs require a specific kind of language awareness from the users. This concept, plus the applied conventions, constitute the essence of this article. The discussion begins with an introduction to the research problem, in this case the intentional utilization by Internet chat participants of the graphic mode of communication in order to express their desired meanings. Second, the reader becomes acquainted with the terminology used in the paper, which includes: language awareness, (Internet) chat, and (language) corpus. Moreover, the source of the studied language material—a corpus of Internet chats—is presented. The said description additionally includes the informants' characteristics, as well as the topicality of their conversations. The further sections of the paper discus the application of selected non-normative spelling conventions and word-formation processes, with the support of examples taken from the corpus. Based on the discussion, an attempt is made to indicate which features comprise certain values to the participants of Internet chats.

KEY WORDS: language awareness, Internet chat, spelling tendencies, word-formation processes.

Introduction

For successful communication to take place, each language user is, or at least should be, aware of their language. Primarily, they need to possess knowledge of the smallest meaningful elements of the language they intend to use, as well as the rules which govern the hierarchy of the combination of such elements—which, in turn, allow the desired meanings to be expressed. Such an awareness is essential in order to produce comprehensible utterances and to convey the speaker/sender meaning. There are, however, instances of language use

[1] This article is based on a conference presentation delivered on 18 May 2012 in Kaunas.

when these norms are not enough. Such a situation might be observed in an Internet chat room, where the interlocutors often utilize graphic forms to communicate as if they were engaged in face-to-face communication. Naturally, the online text-based environment is deprived of non-verbal and paraverbal features of communication. This article discusses the non-standard conventions used by Internet chat users. First, the reader becomes acquainted with basic terminology in this study. Then, a corpus of Polish Internet chats is presented. Finally, the non-standard conventions are described, and the results are summarized in the conclusion.

Definitions

This section defines the terminology used throughout this paper. As mentioned above, the study in question is based on corpus analysis. A *corpus* is understood as "a collection of (1) machine-readable, (2) authentic texts (including transcripts of spoken data), which is (3) sampled to be (4) representative of a particular language or language variety" (McEnry et al. 2006: 5). The place from which the studied language samples were obtained is an Internet *chat room*, understood as an Internet text-based synchronous form of communication (Szymański 2007). For some users, whom one may call *chat users*, a chat room is more than merely a medium of communication. These people are inclined to treat a chat room as a virtual place in which a certain virtual community has evolved. For these users, a chat room is a place where a parallel virtual world is happening alongside the real one.

Aside from the above, the notion of *language awareness* needs to be defined. For the present author, this term covers a language user's conscious and purposeful choices of linguistic signs to enable a desired message to be sent through a desired code.

The source of data

For a better understanding of the discussed linguistic phenomena, this section presents selected elementary details about the studied language samples[2]. In the sequence of the presentation below, the reader is first acquainted with the chat room, perceived as a virtual community, and its participants. Further, the typical topics of these Internet chats are mentioned. Finally, some fundamentals of the Internet chat corpus are detailed.

The chat room

The language samples for the purpose of the study referred to in this text were obtained from a text-based Internet chat room named *Warsztat*. In order to communicate in this chat room, one requires a dedicated software application, *Direct Connect* (Protekta 2005). This program allows for two-layer interaction. First, one may take part in the communication exchange in the *main chat window*. This place is visible to everyone logged into the chat room. The other surface of communication involves engaging in a conversation carried out in a *private chat window*. This place is visible only to the two participants of the interaction involved in the process.

The language material for this analysis comes from the main chat window of the Warsztat chat room. There are several rea-

[2] The complete details are to be found in a monograph by Szymański (in preparation).

sons behind the choice of the source of the language material. For one thing, private chat windows, as the name suggests, are private, i.e., not meant to be seen by undesired receivers. Second, anyone participating in the main chat window discussions is aware of the fact that their utterances are visible to an unlimited number of receivers, and, what is more, these utterances become public, so anyone may access them. This entails a certain consent of the senders, in which they agree that their utterances may be read and discussed.

The informants

An overall chat user's profile has also been established. This was made possible through the application of a survey questionnaire, e-mailed to the chat participants by the author. Moreover, the chat room operators and administrators were also surveyed in order to find out information such as: the gender, age, profession, and origin of the chat participants. In addition, the author used his own and other users' experiences in their personal contacts with other chat participants.

This investigation revealed that the average person involved in these interactions was a male, in his twenties, either a (technical) college or university student or a higher-education diploma holder, living in a city or town in Poland. Of course, younger users and females also appeared in the interchanges; nevertheless, these numbered only a few (Szymański 2009, 2011).

The topicality

Chat room communication is ephemeral. Utterances sent to the chat window are displayed in a linear order. When the forthcoming lines of text appear on the screen, the messages sent before move upward and eventually vanish from the display, thus making room for new the lines of text to appear below. This is a continuous process; previously sent messages move up the chat window and disappear, thus leaving space for new ones to come out. What is more, the evanescence of chat room communication is related to the fact that an interaction instance exists as long as the chat software is working. Once the chat software is closed, the communication process terminates. As a result, returning to an interrupted conversation is impossible. This impermanence of this medium determines the topicality of the place. Since the text is not static and lasting, this medium is not suitable for formal and official communication, especially one entailing legally-bound responsibilities. Therefore, Internet chats are more suitable for informal and unofficial topics. This was also the case with the chat room studies discussed in this paper.

Warsztat was a place in which a certain speech community operated. This chat room was treated by the users as a specific social gathering place in a virtual world. The observed unofficial topics discussed there included: sport events, scandals, and catastrophes (see Szymański 2009). Moreover, these virtual chats performed the phatic function. This means that the communication in that virtual environment was not heavily information-saturated; rather, chat users visited that place for certain social purposes. The users made virtual friendships which were further maintained in this virtual community. Some of those social relationships, however, were also transferred to the real world (ibid.), resulting in a number of social gatherings of the chat users in various places in Poland.

The corpus

The language samples obtained from the chat room served further as material for a language corpus. The corpus of Internet chats was created from chat room interactions recorded between 17:32 on 20 February 2004 and 22:54 on 27 March 2006 (Szymański 2009, 2011). The raw language material was further edited to contain only human text-based communication. As a result, a corpus consisting of 1,629,823 running words was formed. Thorough research on this material is presented in the author's doctoral dissertation, which is under preparation as a monograph.

Data analysis

This section presents an analysis of the previously described language samples. Although one may argue that issues such as spelling conventions and word-formation processes in Internet chats have already been subject to broad analysis, those previous studies were based on traditional methodological approaches. Literature mentions three methodologies (cf. Szymański 2011, in press). One focuses on Internet communication as a whole, without differentiating its various forms. The second enumerates spelling deviations. Finally, the third discusses *netspeak* (see Crystal 2001) as a hybrid of speech and writing. The investigation referred to in this article, however, derives from a quantitative analysis of lexis (see Szymański in press).

Selected spelling conventions

Research on Internet chat room communication has shown a number of spelling conventions characteristic of this text-based medium.

The Polish language uses graphemes based on the Latin alphabet. However, there are also nine letters with diacritical marks. Dąbrowska (2000) claims that, due to technical limitations, the use of diacritics is not possible in chats. However, Szymański (2012a) shows the opposite. In this study of the frequencies of words with diacritical spelling and their nondiacritical equivalents, he found that there is a common tendency for nondiacritical spelling, despite the possibility of using diacritics. However, the nonstandard convention has become so deep-set in the linguistic performance of Polish chat users that they use the deviant spelling more frequently than the normative forms. Additionally, observations have proven that anticipated misunderstandings do not occur as long as the nondiacritical words appear in context. Consequently, the importance of context in word-meaning disambiguation comes to the fore.

Non-normative spelling conventions on the Internet include also the use of capital and lower case letters. Analyses have shown that chat users prefer their own conventions of capital and small letter usage. Typically, Internet chats appear on computer screens as strings of small letters. Chat participants maintain that the need to press the "Shift" key to create capital letters slows the process of communication. Therefore their interaction exchanges are lines of lower-case text. On the other hand, however, capital letters, as Schulze (1999) notices, stand out from strings of small letters. Hence, capitalized words are treated as being uttered in a raised voice or scream, both aspects of face-to-face or oral communication normally absent from writing. This typing convention is also used for emphasis. A word or a sequence of words, which the sender wants to enhance, are capitalized, and thus they become more

explicit to the receiver. Such a sequence of capital letters is visible and distinct from words typed in small letters, similarly to a raised tone of voice. This non-normative spelling convention is treated as a substitute for the lack of non-linguistic communication in a chat room.

Another convention utilized as a substitute for non-verbal communication is the multiplication of letters (Szymański 2007-2008). Users press a key with a certain letter to be multiplied, and they release the key when they choose to do so. In this way, words like *wiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiitam* [witam] or *bardzooooo* [bardzo] come into existence. This unconventional spelling is a purposeful action. Chat users decide on their own upon which letter(s) to multiply, and when to release the held key (Szymański 2012a). Thus, on the one hand, the occurrence of this phenomenon is intentional; on the other hand, the length of the word is a random result. In fact, there is no rule stipulating any limitations on the number of multiplied letters. This author's observations have shown that the more emotional the sender is, the more multiplied letters are likely to be in a word or words.

With multiplied letters, chat users are also able to express prolonged pronunciation of certain sounds. While in oral communication, only vowels, especially the stressed ones, can be naturally prolonged, in a text-based chat room any letter may be multiplied. This exemplifies a certain conventional inconsistency. On the one hand, Internet chat participants claim to express variants of pronunciation; yet on the other hand, they capitalize places in words, which in casual speech would not be prolonged naturally as these are not primarily stressed. Thus, the primarily assumed graphic representation of an element of orality has been reduced to the graphic representation of emphasis and emotions (see Szymański 2012a).

Szymański (2012a) defines *phonetized spelling* as an intentional attempt to represent features of spoken communication in the graphic form with the use of non-standard spelling. An example of this is, of course, the multiplication of letters mentioned above. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is not the only means by which chat users endeavor to portray speech characteristics with the means of graphics. This is visible especially in the non-standard spelling of loan words. These may be first divided into two categories: loans with diacritical marks and loans in non-Latin alphabets. The former are spelled either with the original diacritical mark (for example, *farväl*), or the diacritic is conventionally substituted by its Latin counterpart (for example, *schon* [*schön*]). The latter are typed with the use of the Latinized spelling. The reason lies in the technical limitations of the software, which does not allow communication with the use of non-Latin alphabets. Therefore, chat users transcribe words with the means at their disposal, and as a result, *sayonara* or *izwinitje* appear. These examples are originally spelled with the use of the Japanese and Cyrillic alphabets, respectively. Their Latinized forms come into being when chat users are limited by the software and keyboard characters available to them.

In addition to the above, a considerable number of foreign words in non-standard forms were found in the corpus. These included, among others, forms such as: *senkju*, *fenkju*, *nawigejszyn*, *danke szyn*, and *sajonara*. These are instances of *polonized spelling*, that is, the manner in which the letters are placed reflects the rules of the Polish orthographic system. Accordingly, one may

arrive at another conclusion, namely, that Polish chat users modify their spelling to reflect the way they themselves hear or pronounce these words.

Word formation processes

In-depth analysis of lexical items used in Internet chat room speech acts showed that chat users aim at informality. On entering a chat room, one is expected to greet other chat users present in the room, as in regular face-to-face communication. Research revealed that the studied informants most frequently used informal greeting phrases, for example: *cześć*, *hej*, *graba*, *siema*. Moreover, the unofficial atmosphere in a chat room was maintained with the use of foreign phrases, for example: *allo*, *hello*, *hi*. Also, informality attempts were manifested in the emotionally-featured phrases typically associated with official contexts, for instance: *dziendobrywieczor*, *dziendoberki*.

Observations similar to these above have been made also for farewells, thanks, and apologies. Likewise, these speech acts[3] were performed with attempts to minimize the possible officiality of the communication act. Internet users made every attempt not to allow for much formality to enter their communication environment. Using informal expressions, and, moreover, lessening the formality level of the utterances in speech acts are tools employed to minimize the distance between (or among) interlocutors.

Aside from the above, one of the significant measures of reaching communicative informality was also the formation of diminutives. Such words are typically associated with casual conversations in a friendly atmosphere, along with marking one's emotional attitude. Hence they were used as a tool for informality attempts in the researched chat room interactions. In fact, all the studied speech acts (greetings, farewells, thanks, and apologies) were performed with the use of diminutives. This might suggest the conclusion that Polish chat users have a tendency to play, so to speak, with the language. They use the diminutive morpheme *-k-* in words like: *dziekowka*, *dziendoberki*, *hejka*, *narka*. Some of them use even double diminutives, *-ecz-* and *-k-*, which are the allomorphs of the diminutive morpheme. Words formed in this way include: *hejeczka*, *nareczka*, *witeczka*, and *strzałeczka* (as a greeting).

In addition, the language users in question made use of diminutive forms in order to diminish the power of vulgarisms. This means that when they wanted to express their strong emotions at the very moment but, at the same time, did not wish to offend anyone's feelings by swearing, chat users employed the diminutive forms of such words. Hence words like: *kurwka*, *zjebka*, *hujki*. Such word forms may even sound hilarious to a speaker of Polish; however, one still is aware of the fact that they derive from vulgarisms.

The power of swear words was also lessened with the use of humor. Chat participants created a number of word blendings, for example: *mozgojeb* (disapproving or mocking of a cheap wine-like alcoholic drink), *winshit* (disapproving or mocking of a type of software), and *pizdzionek* (mocking of a jewelry ring). Each of these words contains a vulgar element. *Mozgojeb* includes *-jeb* which comes from the word *jebać*, as this drink "fucks? the brain (mózg);" *winshit* contains the element *shit*,

[3] An analysis of the speech acts in this Internet chat room is presented in Szymański (2011).

which depreciates the value of the referent; and *pizdzionek* contains the element *pizd(a)* which is a vulgar name for a vagina or a woman.[4]

The vulgarism *shit* is an example of another technique utilized in a chat room to achieve informality. Poles on the Internet (and offline as well) take loan words from a variety of languages. They do so for a number of reasons. First, with vulgarisms, foreign words are thought to carry less obscenity than native vulgarisms. Concordance studies have showed that Polish chat users use loan swearings in Polish-language contexts. They may do so for the purpose of fun, or to diminish the power of the vulgarisms with an intensive expression of emotions at the same time.

Loans were another step in reaching informality in a chat. Not only did the Polish chat users borrow words; they also borrowed foreign grammar rules. The speech act of thanking was realized with the word *dzięks* (spelled also *dzieks* without the original Polish diacritical mark *ę*). This word is a combination of the Polish stem *dzięk-* (*dziękować*) and the English plural morpheme *s*. Moreover, through analogy to the English shortening *thx*, the Polish equivalent *dzx* was formed. Such practices were supposed to maintain the unofficial atmosphere, and perhaps add some element of humor.

With foreign influences, some interesting findings were arrived at. The speech act of apology, among others, was observed to be realized with the use of borrowed expressions. Of course, since the linguistic environment of an Internet chat room is beyond any attempts at language control, chat users feel free to utilize language constructions from unrestricted sources. The users' motivations for the application of loans were various: introducing an element of jocularity, or boasting about their command of foreign expressions. As Szymański (2011) claims, there is yet another reason why chat users utilize borrowings when expressing their repentance: through the use of a foreign word, language users feel as if they are behind a certain shield. This is so because these people do not feel strong emotional ties to the foreign language, or at least the ties are weaker than those felt to their native language. Szymański justifies this statement with the fact that, in his study, the English apology *sorry* in Polish-language contexts appeared with a frequency that outnumbered the frequencies of all Polish expressions used for apologizing in the studied corpus (see Szymański in press).

Another characteristic element of chat room lexis is shortenings. Chat users shorten both single words, for example *psv* (*passive*), or whole phrases, for example *lol* (*laughing out loud*). Among the shortened forms one may distinguish between two categories: common and local shortenings. The former are shortenings generally known to chat participants, for example *lol*, *brb* (*be right back*), and *cu* (*see you*). The latter, on the other hand, are characteristic only of the given chat room. Using shortenings is supposed to be a method to accelerate communication. Short forms are believed to take less time to produce than full-word forms, as the former are made up of fewer characters. In addition, using shortenings has also become a marker of chat room community membership. Local shortenings are particularly effective at differentiating between members and non-members. The

[4] For the meanings of Polish vulgarisms, see Grochowski (2000).

latter are easy to distinguish as they do not communicate with the established code, nor do they comprehend the internally-canonical forms.

Conclusions

As research shows, Internet chat users make numerous informality attempts. They aim at diminishing the level of formality from the very beginning of the conversation, and try to further maintain this feature till the very last moment of the communicative act. They realize these attempts through the use of diminutives, loan words, and non-standard spelling. In addition to this, diminutives and humorous word plays are utilized to lessen the power of vulgarisms. Thus chat users may express their strong emotions and still maintain a friendly and positive atmosphere at the same time.

Internet chat users are aware of the technical limitations of the software and the communication environment. Notwithstanding this, they want to interact as if they were involved in a face-to-face communicative act. Hence they make use of the assortment of available graphic forms to compensate for the lack of non-verbal and paraverbal communication.

Additionally, chat users use shortenings characteristic of this communicative environment. The primary function assigned to these language forms was to economize and accelerate communication. Some of these word forms have become widespread, which has resulted in glossaries presenting such terms. These include of course the most common shortenings. The local ones are, so to say, restricted to the members of a certain chat community. Hence, people who do not belong to this established group of chat users cannot communicate with the shared code and are easily recognizable.

All in all, the practices of Internet chat participants evoked above have become, in a measure, Internet typing conventions. On entering the virtual environment, Internet chat interlocutors evince a certain tendency to switch from the standardized norms into Internet-characteristic conventions purposefully, knowingly, and willingly. These people are usually aware of the differences between language use in the real and virtual worlds. Moreover, chat users are additionally cognizant that not using these Internet conventions, they might be excluded from the established community of the chat room. The use of language forms characteristic of a certain community serves the purpose of ennobling the communication channel (Grzenia 2006). This is how extralinguistic aims might be achieved while maintaining group cohesion. The employment of the specific codification becomes a marker of membership in a social group.

In conclusion, one may say that Internet chat room communication requires from the participants a special type of language awareness, thanks to which, a considerable degree of fulfillment of the above-described aims might be achieved.

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KALBOS SUVOKIMAS INTERNETO POKALBIŲ SVETAINĖSE

Santrauka

Internetinėje komunikacijoje pastebimi tam tikri, tik jai būdingi, savitumai. Jie susiformavo interneto vartotojams „sumaišius" du tradicinius komunikacijos kanalus: šnekamąją ir rašytinę kalbas. Tai akivaizdu pokalbių svetainėse. Vartotojai elgiasi kaip žodinio bendravimo metu, tačiau bendravimas vyksta raštu. Todėl interneto svetainės pokalbių da-

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ŚWIADOMOŚĆ JĘZYKOWA W INTERAKCJI KOMUNIKACYJNEJ NA CZACIE INTERNETOWYM

Streszczenie

W komunikacji internetowej zaobserwowano pewne cechy charakterystyczne. Powstały one, ponieważ uczestnicy aktu komunikacyjnego mieszają, rzec by można, dwa tradycyjne kanały komunikacyjne: pismo i mowę. Zjawisko to zdaje się być najbardziej widoczne w interakcji na czacie

lyviai, bendraudami internetu, turi būti susipažinę su kai kuriomis grafinėmis normomis ir mokėti jomis pasinaudoti norėdami išreikšti norimą prasmę. Tokios kalbinės elgsenos taikymas iš internetinio pokalbio dalyvio reikalauja atitinkamo kalbos suvokimo. Šio straipsnio esmė – kalbos suvokimo reiškinys ir naudotojus įpareigojančios internetinės komunikacijos kalbos normos. Straipsnio pradžioje aptariama mokslinių tyrimų problematika. Tai interneto pokalbių svetainių dalyvių sąmoningas grafinių būdų vartojimas komunikacijoje siekiant išreikšti norimą prasmę. Skaitytojas taip pat supažindinamas su straipsnio terminologija: „kalbos suvokimas“, „(interneto) pokalbis“, „(kalbos) tekstynas“. Ištyrus interneto pokalbius, pabaigoje suformuluotos išvados, taip pat apibendrinti mėginimai nustatyti kai kuriuos interneto pokalbių dalyvių privalumus.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kalbos supratimas, interneto pokalbiai, žodžių užrašymo tendencijos, teksto formavimo procesai.

internetowym. Wniosek ten oparty jest na obserwacjach interakcji użytkowników, którzy zachowują się jak w komunikacji mówionej, ale wykorzystują formy pisemne. Dlatego też konieczne jest, by uczestnicy czatu znali odpowiednie konwencje graficzne i wiedzieli, jak je stosować, by wyrazić zamierzone znaczenia. Ma to na celu zbliżenie interakcji na czacie do komunikacji mówionej. Wykorzystanie takich zwyczajów językowych wymaga od uczestników określonej świadomości językowej. To zjawisko, wraz z wykorzystanymi w Internecie konwencjami, stanowi esencję tego artykułu.

Artykuł rozpoczyna się od przedstawienia problemu badawczego, czyli świadomego wykorzystywania przez uczestników czatu internetowego graficznej postaci kanału komunikacyjnego do wyrażania zamierzonych znaczeń. Następnie zdefiniowano pojęcia: *świadomość językowa*, *czat* i *korpus*. W dalszej części omówiono źródło materiału badawczego, który stanowi korpus pogawędek na czacie internetowym. W opisie uwzględniono także charakterystykę uczestników badanego czatu oraz tematykę prowadzonych przez nich pogawędek. W dalszej części na wybranych próbkach języka ukazano wykorzystanie wybranych konwencji niestandardowej pisowni oraz wybrane procesy słowotwórcze. W podsumowaniu artykułu podjęto próbę wskazania pewnych właściwości, które mogą stanowić swoiste wartości uczestników czatu.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: świadomość językowa, czat internetowy, tendencje zapisu wyrazów, procesy słowotwórcze.

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