Instant Messaging and the Future of Language

The writing style commonly used in IMing, texting, and other forms of computer-mediated communication need not spell the end of normative language.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides young users opportunities for social affinity and control over when and with whom they interact, but its long-term influence on language remains largely in the hands of parents and teachers, their traditional linguistic role models.

Are email, instant messaging (IM), and text messaging on cell phones degrading the language? This question surfaces in debates among language professionals and, perhaps more important, among parents and their teenage offspring. If some traditionalists are correct, we must take swift action now, before these children are reduced to marginal literacy. But if those celebrating linguistic innovation are correct, adults should get out of the way of normal language change. Families and educational purists have an obvious stake in the outcome of this controversy, but so, too, do the makers and marketers of computer-based software and devices—from IM platforms to predictive text programs for cell phones.

The problem with viewing CMC as linguistically either good or bad is twofold. On the one hand, such a dichotomous perspective ignores the variation in online communication, reflecting age, gender, education level, cultural background, personality, and years of experience with the CMC platform (listservs, for example, do not function like IM) or the purpose of the communiqué (a well-crafted email message applying for a job vs. a hasty blitzmail note arranging to meet at the library at 10). On the other hand, many evils attributed to CMC, especially as practiced by teens, can be traced back to ARPANET days.

Here, I highlight CMC issues in English-speaking countries, particularly the U.S. Admittedly, CMC practices vary in some respects elsewhere. For example, the international texting craze is just now taking hold in the U.S., while computer-based IM is a relatively recent phenomenon in Europe. However, the linguistic novelties cropping up in CMC are as pronounced in Stockholm and Seoul as they are in San Francisco.

If we look at the history of written English over the past 1,200 years (roughly from the time of *Beowulf*), we find shifting patterns in the roles speech and writing play in society. Up through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, writing was essentially a handmaiden to speech and was generally rather formal. Preachers read the Bible aloud; written speeches were memorized and delivered orally; plays were intended to be performed, not published. Not surprisingly, orthographic conventions were not strict; even Shakespeare spelled his own name at least six different ways. Gradually, with the spread of literacy and the rise of print culture, writing became a distinct genre. Spelling began to matter, and even those with a grammar-school education knew the difference between formal and informal writing style.

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Fast forward to the mid-20th century. In the U.S., pedagogy underwent a sea change, fueled by progressive education (eschewing rote learning, celebrating creativity) and by the national confusion during the Vietnam War and afterward over the relevance of existing curricula. A student-centered agenda emerged, first in grade-school education and eventually in colleges, counseling teachers to be guides on the side rather than sages on stages. Writing instructors were commonly advised to focus on content and de-emphasize mechanics, with the result that many graduates from even the finest U.S. preparatory institutions could not spell and had no clue how to use a semicolon. Add to these new educational practices a growing social trend toward informality, and you had an environment ripe for teenage innovation of

or acronyms. Spelling is remarkably good, and punctuation isn't particularly bad either. Students use contractions (such as "don't" rather than "do not") only about two-thirds of the time, spelling out the full words the other third, with females significantly more likely to type full forms than males.

IM conversations are not always instant. An online survey we conducted in the fall of 2004 of the other activities the undergraduates engaged in while IMing—surfing the Net, working on a paper, listening to music, eating, speaking face-to-face, and managing up to 12 simultaneous IM conversations—revealed considerable multitasking among survey participants. People can physically be typing in only one IM conversation at a time, rendering the others asynchronous to varying degrees. Participants in

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the sort we now see in IM and text messaging.

Adolescents have long been a source of linguistic and behavioral novelty. Teens often use spoken language to express small-group identity. It is hardly surprising to find many of them experimenting with a new linguistic medium (such as IM) to complement the identity construction they achieve through speech, clothing, or hair style. IMs laced with, say, brb [be right back], pos [parent over shoulder], and U [you] are not so different from the profusion of "like" or "totally" common in the speech of American adolescents.

The IM behavior of many younger teens is not generally reflected in the language patterns we find in contemporary college students. For the past three years, my students and I at American University in Washington, D.C., have been investigating undergraduate use of IM on America Online Instant Messenger (AIM). Our research suggests that IM conversations serve largely pragmatic information-sharing and social-communication functions rather than providing contexts for establishing or maintaining group identity. Moreover, college students often eschew brevity. Our data contains few abbreviations

focus groups reported feeling comfortable juggling multiple online and offline tasks. Several of them indicated that engaging in only a single IM conversation (doing nothing else online or offline) would feel odd. IMing, they suggested, was something they did under the radar of the other virtual and physical activities vying for their attention.

The most important effect of IM on language turns out to be not stylized vocabulary or grammar but the control seasoned users feel they have over their communication networks. In earlier research (fall 2002), a group of my undergraduate students looked at away messages in IM that had been posted by members of their Buddy Lists. Users ostensibly post away messages to indicate that the person posting the message will be away from the computer (though still logged on to the IM system) and therefore unable to respond to incoming IMs. However, study participants used away messages for a variety of functions, including requests for virtual company ("Please disturb me") and screening incoming IMs ("Sleeping"). College students commonly read their buddies' away messages to catch up on the activities of people (such as friends from high school) they do not want to IM or call.

The shape of written language has always been as much a product of social attitudes and educational values as of technological developments. IM is unlikely to play a significant role in altering writing standards—unless we as parents and educators let it.

Our data suggests that when teenagers transition to college, they naturally shed some of their adolescent linguistic ways in favor of more formal writing conventions (such as correct spelling and reduced use of contractions) they learned in high school. But what about these students' younger siblings who often begin IMing at nine or 10? Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of their teachers, not wanting to be branded as troglodytes out of touch with contemporary culture, tolerate IM novelties in classroom written assignments. No harm, but only if these same teachers ensure their students develop a solid grasp of traditional writing conventions as well.

Unless society is willing to accept people spelling their names six different ways or using commas, semicolons, and periods according to whim, we owe it to our children and to our students to make certain they understand the difference between creativity and normative language use. Knowledge of contemporary CMC style (and the social control IM and other media offer) is empowering. However, if today's teenagers are also to master more formal written language style, their parents and teachers must provide good models and, if necessary, even gentle sticks. **C**

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