

Fragmentation/Integration and Involvement/Detachment in Chatroom Discourse

Biljana Radić-Bojanić

Studies of the discourse of electronic chatrooms usually aim at determining how close this variety is to the prototypes of spoken and written language by analyzing a whole range of different features. The paper investigates four points of difference: fragmentation, integration, detachment and involvement, which reflect various types of cognitive activities entailed in text production and reception. Fragmentation and involvement are typical of speaking, while integration and detachment are associated with writing and this analysis aims at determining how chatting resembles written or spoken language in respect of the frequency of occurrence of certain features.

1. Introduction

The paper will be dealing with the grammatical features of electronic chatrooms in English, which are supposed to determine the similarity of this variety to spoken and written language. Chafe (1982) discusses four points of difference between speech and writing: fragmentation, integration, detachment and involvement, as features which reflect various types of cognitive activities entailed in text production. On the one hand, fragmentation and involvement are related to speaking, while integration and detachment, on the other, are associated with writing. In other words, fragmentation involves the stringing together of idea units without connectives or with coordinating conjunctions such as *and* (Chafe 1982: 38) and involvement is manifest in frequent reference to the speaker, usually with the first person singular (Chafe 1982: 46). Both of these are actually techniques frequently used in speaking, when there is very little time for utterance planning, which results in a simple sentence structure, and the active participation of communicators is observable in a high frequency of first and second persons singular. In contrast, integration involves packing more information into an idea unit by using a variety of devices for incorporating additional elements into idea units (Chafe 1982: 39) and detachment is manifest in devices which serve to distance the language from specific concrete states and events, such as the passive voice or nominalization (Chafe 1982: 45).

Studies of the discourse of electronic chatrooms usually aim at determining how close this variety is to the prototypes of spoken and written language by analyzing a whole range of different features (e.g. Crystal 2001). The differences between fragmentation and integration and involvement and detachment seem like a good tool for arriving at a description of this variety, so this analysis is also supposed to determine how the circumstances of text production (synchronous communication, speed, typing, etc.) affect the length and complexity of discourse and if the variety in question resembles written or spoken language more.

The analysis was conducted on 4 original texts from electronic chatrooms in English (*#wormbaby*, *#wendy*, *#Asylum* and *#4-irc*) with the total of 7230 words communicated in 1975 turns. The samples were written by native speakers of English who come from different English-speaking countries (the USA, Australia, Great Britain), which can be inferred from what chatters say about themselves. The dialogues were recorded in public chatrooms with more than two participants. Their exact number was difficult to ascertain since the coming

and going rate among chatters was very high. All of the samples were recorded in July 2005 at approximately the same time of day (midnight to 3 AM) in chatrooms which had no particular subject of discussion. The prior links between chatters are not difficult to establish, especially having in mind that the identity change in electronic chatting is normal, even expected. All the examples in the paper are copied directly from the analyzed texts, with idiosyncrasies, typos and other mistakes.

The linguistic features studied in the paper are the following: complex sentences, simple sentences/sentence fragments, the number of clauses in complex sentences, nominalizations, participles, passive, personal pronouns, monitoring of information flow, emphatic participles and fuzziness. The frequency of most features is expressed per 1000 units. The count of personal forms included both explicitly written personal pronouns and ellipted forms. On the level of syntax the basic unit in the analysis of syntactic complexity was the turn, used as a sentence-boundary mark, where the investigation aimed at determining the number and type of clauses.

2. Fragmentation/Integration

These two features are closely connected with the process of text production. Namely, as Chafe (1982: 36) states, speaking is faster than writing, which means that the difference in the amount of time a speaker and a writer have when producing a text is reflected in the level of complexity of the final product. Therefore, the foremost feature which clearly illustrates this is the syntactic complexity of electronic chatting. Other relevant features are nominalizations and participles (Chafe 1982) and their relation to the fragmentation/integration dichotomy in electronic chatting will be discussed in this section as well.

In a discussion about the differences between spoken and written language, Chafe (1985: 106-112) poses a hypothesis that an idea unit contains all the information a speaker can handle in a single focus of consciousness, which sets a limit to the amount of information on which a person's attention can be focused at one time. Due to the fact that it takes more time to write, read and interpret a text, sentence structure can become highly complex, while in speaking sentences are usually strung together in a chain, with a relatively small amount of subordination. For those reasons sentences in speech are shorter and more independent, but also more badly organized, with false starts, rephrasing, repetition and corrections. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate to what extent these features of speaking and writing are found in the discourse of electronic chatrooms. This has been mentioned or discussed in Ferrara et al. (1991), Collot and Bellmore (1996), Werry (1996) and Crystal (2001), but the authors in question did not engage in the detailed study of an electronic corpus, which is necessary in order to prove or dispute the present hypotheses.

Crystal (2001: 40) claims that sentences in chatting may be based on planning ahead, on thinking what one is going to say before writing the message and on checking the text before it is sent into the chatroom, all of which does not normally happen in a spontaneous conversation. On the other hand, the time that chatters have at their disposal cannot be compared with the time a writer has when writing a text, so that some limitations in planning, typing and checking still exist. If it were not so, there would be no typos in chatroom dialogues, the sentence structure would be more complex and the vocabulary would be more diverse.

The syntactic analysis aims at determining the level of sentential complexity chatters are able to handle in structuring and understanding the sentences. Another aim is to investigate how speed of communication, which is slower than speaking and faster than writing by hand, affects the complexity of chatroom language. Although chatters theoretically have all the time they need at their disposal, the practice shows that, unless someone reacts quickly and sends their message into the chatroom, what they wanted to say will soon lose its importance and connection with the current topic, especially because nobody is going to wait and see what that chatter wants to say. In this respect the communication in chatrooms is ruthless and it is clear that a chatter will soon be forgotten if they do not keep up with others in the exchange. Therefore, the research intended to ascertain the ratio of simple and complex sentence structures, as well as the degree of complexity in the complex structures themselves. For that purpose sentences were counted in each turn in the analyzed texts: on the one hand there were simple sentences and sentence fragments and, on the other, complex structures. Whereas simple and complex sentences are defined as grammatically correct structures containing one or more predicates respectively, sentence fragments are types of sentences which are not grammatically correct, usually because they lack an overt predicate, but whose syntactic structure makes a message adequate in a communication situation, i.e. a context, or answers the expressive needs of a speaker. Such structures have a minimal number of elements necessary to convey a message in certain communicative circumstances. Because of that the sentence does not have any redundant elements, thus achieving a maximally economical structure. Just a few examples in (1–4) will illustrate what these sentence fragments look like, but it must be noted that these structures abounded in the analyzed data.

- (1) <Maz_the_spaz> Cool!
- (2) <Damned_Mali> New banner. Okay.
- (3) <PopeyTheUndead> o__o; creezy.
- (4) <XIR> Frizzled Five

The data shows that 110 of 1000 turns in the texts had a complex structure, which clearly shows that only one tenth of structures had two independent clauses or one independent and one or more dependent ones. The analysis of the degree of complexity within a turn showed that most frequently complex structures had two clauses (examples 5–6), while three or four clauses were very uncommon (examples 7–8).

- (5) <PopeyTheUndead> I'll see if I can find my computer drawing table.
- (6) <ArtZombie> Whatever you have in terms of pictures of the forumites, send em to me
- (7) <Damned_Mali> I was thinking The Moronic 5 Purple Girls, but I don't think Pope is a Purple fan girl.
- (8) <DestyNova> Im getting some sleep before the birds wake up and start screaming errhm, i mean singing outside my window.

890 of 1000 turns consist of either simple sentences or sentence fragments. In most cases they may just come one after another either in the same turn or in several consecutive ones (examples 9–12).

- (9) <Sphinx30> just go too the connect button
- (10) <Shania> im new here
- (11) <rage> ray, watch it, those hurt
- (12) <oBSeSSioN> wait he aint got one .. that's his wife on a bad hairday

Sentence fragments are actually types of sentences whose syntactic structure composes a message adequate for a communication situation or answers the expressive needs of a speaker. Such sentences have a minimal number of elements necessary to convey a message in certain communicative circumstances. They are more economical in comparison to sentences with predicates and are extremely frequent in speaking. In this respect it is not surprising that they frequently occur in chatrooms, where the brevity and communicative denseness are extremely important (examples 13–16).

- (13) <Maz_the_spaz> Cool!
- (14) <Damned_Mali> New banner. Okay.
- (15) <PopeyTheUndead> o__o; creezy.
- (16) <XIR> Frizzled Five

Two techniques which are commonly used in written texts to achieve a higher level of integration are nominalizations and participles.

A nominalization allows a notion which is verbal in origin to be inserted into an idea unit as if it were a noun. Such an element then plays the role of a noun in the syntax of the idea unit, acting as one of the arguments of the main predication. Thus it adds another one, intrinsically predicative, element to the idea unit in the guise of a nominal one (Chafe 1982: 39).

Of the total of 7230 words there were only 32 nominalizations (i.e. nouns derived from verbs by suffixation), which amounts to 4.4 words per 1000 (examples 17–19). Chafe's (1982: 40) data shows that this count is much closer to spoken texts, where he found 4.8 occurrences per 1000 words, than to written texts, where there were 55.5 occurrences.

- (17) <Spectre> Might need a replacement, I can offer you rage?
- (18) <Shania> gee Sphinx30 thats a disappointment
- (19) <ArtZombie> Mario bros 2 songs ARE cool upon further examination

Participles, "[a]nother frequently used integrative device" (Chafe 1982: 40), did not have a high frequency of occurrence: 8.9 per 1000 words, i.e. 65 in total (examples 20–22). Again, this occurrence is closer to Chafe's (1982: 41) data for spoken texts (8.3) than for written ones (35.6).

(20) * coco joins her spazzing

(21) * Maz_the_spaz goes on an insane killing rampage with a spork

(22) * Maz_the_spaz is confused.

From what has been said above it is obvious that the analyzed samples of electronic chatting bear much more similarity to spoken than to written texts in all aspects. They have a simple syntactic structure, with very few nominalizations and participles, which shows their fragmented nature. In addition, other features mentioned in Chafe (1982), such as relative or complement clauses, could not be included in the analysis because of the fact that there are very few complex sentences in the first place.

3. Involvement/Detachment

The simultaneity of communication or the lack of it, along with the accompanying circumstances, is reflected in the distinction between involvement and detachment. In case of speaking the interaction happens in real time, which allows the speaker to monitor the effect of what they have said and for the hearer to contribute to the communication process by signalling their approval, disapproval, interest, etc. Writing is different in that there is a spatial and temporal distance between the participants in the process of communication, which means that

the writer is less concerned with experiential richness, and more concerned with producing something that will be consistent and defensible when read by different people at different times in different places, something that will stand the test of time (Chafe 1982: 45).

One of the markers of detachment is the passive voice, which "[...] suppresses the direct involvement of an agent in an action" (Chafe 1982: 45). Interestingly, in the analyzed texts only two passive forms were found, both in one turn (example 23). The first instance of passive is probably the only natural way of phrasing the idea, so it is questionable if it could be counted as passive at all.

(23) <DestyNova> Its made of elephants. thats why its called zebracake

However, many features of involvement that Chafe (1982) mentions were found: primarily frequent first and second person forms, followed by the monitoring of information flow, emphatic particles and fuzziness. All of the features were counted in the analyzed data in order to arrive at their frequencies and the results are presented further on in the paper.

The use and frequency of personal forms are one of the best way of determining to what extent the speakers or writers refer to themselves in the process of communication, as well as to what extent they generalize their statements in order to distance themselves from the topic and subject of communication. First and second persons singular are used more frequently in spoken language, while third person singular is more frequently found in written language. The reasons for such a distribution lie in the motivation of the speaker/writer. On the one hand, the speaker enters the dialogue in order to exchange information with the hearer, which often includes expressing their attitudes, opinions and feelings, so subjectivity does not pose a problem. On the other hand, the writer produces a text, especially in scientific or administrative registers, in order to present an objective opinion or present their own opinion as objective. Therefore, frequent strategies in writing include the passive voice, nominalization, third persons singular or plural or any other means which distances the writer from the text. In contrast, spoken language is dominated by strategies which suggest the active roles of the speaker and hearer in the process of communication, such as the active voice or first and second persons singular or plural.

Since the communication taking place in electronic chatrooms is inherently dialogic in nature, it is not at all surprising that first and second persons singular are the most frequent. First person singular comprised 494 of the total number of personal forms (1164), which is 424 forms per 1000. Second person singular had 362 occurrences, i.e. 311 per 1000, thus together with the first person making up almost three quarters of personal forms in the analyzed texts. The rest of the cases are distributed among third person singular and all persons plural. Third person singular is used in 230 cases, which is 193 forms per 1000.

As far as personal forms in plural are concerned, the analysis showed that they are used very infrequently, especially in comparison to singular forms. First person plural is used in 20 instances, which is 17.1 forms per 1000. Second person plural is used in 12 cases, which is 10.3 forms per 1000. Third person plural is used slightly more often than first and second persons. There are 52 occurrences, i.e. 44.6 forms per 1000.

Other features characteristic of involvement which have already been mentioned (monitoring of information flow, emphatic particles and fuzziness) were also found in the analyzed texts. Colloquial expressions connected with monitoring of information flow (*well, I mean, you know*) had 29 occurrences in the texts, which amounts to 4 words per 1000 (examples 24–25). Chafe's analysis (1982: 47) of written texts found no such phrases, which speaks in favour of the fact that chatroom discourse is highly dialogic in nature and, in respect of monitoring of information flow, bears resemblance to speaking.

(24) <coco> BRB-i am going to check brian-i mean SOMEONE's DJ..BRB!

(25) <Maz_the_spaz> Well, THAT's a bust.

In addition, emphatic particles (*just, really, truly, certainly* and *indeed*) express "[...] enthusiastic involvement in what is being said" (Chafe 1982: 47), thus clearly belonging to the spoken mode where emotions of the speaker are frequently a natural part of the message. These particles have an extremely low occurrence in written texts, i.e. 0 – 0.4 words per 1000 (Chafe 1982: 47), but they were found in the analyzed sample. Namely, there were 6.2 words per 1000 in the texts, i.e. 45 occurrences (examples 26–27), which is closer to Chafe's (1982: 47) data for speaking (7.7 words per 1000).

(26) <PopeyTheUndead> My computers lagging REALLY badly, and I don't remember the address.

(27) <Tallest_Cat> just thinknig about stuff

Finally, “[v]agueness and hedges are also more prevalent in speaking, and may also express a desire for experiential involvement as opposed to the less human kind of precision which is fostered by writing” (Chafe 1982: 48). The following expressions may add fuzziness to what is being said: *and so on, something like, sort of, kind of, in a way*. These were also found in the analyzed sample, but not to the expected extent. There were 37 occurrences, i.e. 5.1 per 1000 words (examples 28–29), which is much closer to Chafe’s (1982: 48) data for written texts (5.5) than for spoken (18.1).

(28) <ArtZombie> Some sort of giant green head (of some alien I guess)

(29) <oBSeSSioN> if she wern't awy i would say something like hi lakia :)

4. Conclusion

Although electronic chatting is formally written communication and may stay permanently recorded in databases of certain chatrooms, it is interesting to see what its real nature is. The results of the present research have proven that the interactive side of this type of discourse prevails over the written mode. They will be presented in Table 1. below and then shortly commented on.

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Count</i>
Complex sentences	110/1000
Simple sentences/ sentence fragments	890/1000
Clauses in complex sentences	2
Nominalizations	4.4/1000
Participles	8.9/1000
Passive	2 occurrences (1 of which questionable)
First person singular	424/1000
Second person singular	311/1000
Third person singular	193/1000
First person plural	17.1/1000
Second person plural	10.3/1000
Third person plural	44.6/1000
Monitoring of information flow	4/1000
Emphatic participles	6.2/1000
Fuzziness	5.1/1000

Table 1. Summary of the features of the discourse of electronic chatting

Most of the results above confirm the assumption that, due to its interactive nature, the discourse of electronic chatting resembles everyday spoken language more than written language. However, the data for some features shows that there are also aspects of chatting which are closer to writing. This is so because, despite the speed of communication, chatters still have time, no matter how little, to think, rethink and edit, before the message is sent to the chatroom. Basically, the analysis conducted for this paper classifies chatting as a type of discourse which is closer to speaking, but further research is necessary to learn more about its other features.

References:

- CHAFE, Wallace. 1982. Integration and Involvement in Speaking, Writing, and Oral Literature. In TANNEN, D. *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*. Norwood: Ablex, 1982. pp. 35-53.
- CHAFE, Wallace. 1985. Linguistic Differences Produced by Differences Between Speaking and Writing. In OLSON, D, TORRANCE, N. & HILDYARD, A. *Literacy, Language and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. pp. 105-123.
- COLLOT, Milena & BELMORE, Nancy. 1996. Electronic Language: A New Variety of English. In HERRING, S. *Computer-Mediated Communication. Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996. pp. 13-28.
- CONDON, Sherri & ČECH, Claude. 1996. Functional Comparison of Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Decision Making Interactions. In HERRING, S. *Computer-Mediated Communication. Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996. pp. 65-80.
- CRYSTAL, David. 2001. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- FERRARA, Kathleen, BRUNNER, Hans & WHITTEMORE, Greg. 1991. Interactive Written Discourse as Emergent Discourse. In *Written Communication*, 1991, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 8-34.
- FONDACARO, Rocco & HIGGINS, E. Tory 1985. Cognitive Consequences of Communication Mode: A Social Psychological Perspective. In OLSON, D, TORRANCE, N. & HILDYARD, A. *Literacy, Language and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. pp. 73-101.
- TANNEN, Deborah. 1982. The Oral/Literate Continuum in Discourse. In TANNEN, D. *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*. Norwood: Ablex, 1982. pp. 1-16.
- TANNEN, Deborah. 1985. Relative Focus on Involvement in Oral and Written Discourse. In OLSON, D., TORRANCE, N. & HILDYARD, A. *Literacy, Language and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. pp. 124-147.
- TOLMACH-LAKOFF, Robin. 1982. Some of My Favorite Writers Are Literate: The Mingling of Oral and Literate Strategies in Written Communication. In TANNEN, D. *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*. Norwood: Ablex, 1982. pp. 239-260.
- WERRY, Christopher. 1996. Linguistic and Interactional Features of Internet Relay Chat. In

HERRING, S. Computer-Mediated Communication. Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996. pp. 47-63.

*Biljana Radic-Bojanic
Department of English
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Novi Sad
Zorana Dindica 2
21000 Novi Sad
Serbia*

e-mail: brlja@neobee.net