Use and Adaptation of Written Language
to the Conditions of
Computer-Mediated Communication

Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to investigate how written language is used and adapted to suit the conditions of four modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Texts from email, web chat, instant messaging and mobile text messaging (SMS) have been analyzed. The general human ability to adapt is deemed to underlie linguistic adaptation. A linguistic adaptivity theory is proposed here. It is proposed that three interdependent variables influence language use: synchronicity, means of expression and situation. Two modes of CMC are synchronous (web chat and instant messaging), and two are asynchronous (email and SMS). These are all tertiary means of expression, written and transmitted by electronic means. Production and perception conditions, such as text input technique, limited message size, as well as situational parameters such as relationship between communicators, goal of interaction are found to influence message composition.

The dissertation challenges popular assumptions that language is deteriorating because of increased use in CMC. It is argued that language use in different modes of CMC are variants, or repertoires, like any other variants. Contrary to popular assumptions, results show that language use is adapted creatively and is well suited the particular modes of CMC. A number of linguistic features are shown to be characteristic of the modes of CMC investigated in the present study. Strategies such as syntactical and lexical reductions are employed to reduce *time, effort* and *space*. These techniques often appear to serve multifunctional purposes, by expressing interpersonal intimacy by the choice of words and phrases, while reducing keystrokes. This clearly indicates linguistic awareness. Texts in email, web chat, instant messaging and SMS are found to contain unconventional and not yet established abbreviations based on Swedish as well as words from other languages, unconventional or spoken-like spelling, unconventional use of punctuation and use of non-alphabetical graphical means (emoticons, asterisks). Thus, written language is found to have been developed and enhanced to suit the conditions of computer-mediated communication.

KEY WORDS:
computer-mediated communication; human adaptability; email, web chat; instant messaging; SMS.

The thesis is written in English.