Cyber socialising: Emerging genres and registers of intimacy among young South African students

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Abstract

The popularity of digital media networks for socialising among the youth is well documented. Much has been written on the emerging norms of textese, the global shorthand for chatting. However, becoming a proficient user involves more than simply mastering this code: it requires knowing the appropriate genres and registers for chatting. This article aims to explore these conventionalised genres and styles from a discourse analytical perspective. It analyses data collected by first-year students in the Linguistics Department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) who use an application called MXit for chatting with their friends. The analysis shows how, despite the seemingly unrestrained and non-standard nature of MXit chatting, it is highly conventionalised and structured and requires a particular 'register of intimacy' which relies heavily on evaluative language and affective markers. However, it is simultaneously fluid and innovative thereby enabling users to 'style' for themselves identities which combine elements of global sophistication with local situatedness.

Key words: cyber socialising, genre, intimacy, MXit, register, social media, South Africa, textese, youth

Introduction

X: hello engel hoe gaanit? Didn c u in lyk eva n u on mxit! Whas up? Ek mis jo vreslik!
[Hallo angel, how are you. Didn't see you in like ever and you on MXit. What's up? I miss you a lot!]

Y: lol dit gan goed dnki n mt jo? I know its been ages im so bsy i dnt hav tym 4 myslf btwn wrk n clg i cnt gt my mnd round thngs. Ek mis jo ook! I got lts 2 tl u *(shocked face)*
[Laugh out loud. It's going good thank you and with you? I know it's been ages. I'm so busy I don't have time for myself between work and college. I can't get my mind around things. I miss you too! I got lots to tell you. *(shocked face)*]

This is the beginning of a chat on MXit between two young women recorded as part of a first-year assignment in the Linguistics Department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). What struck the researchers about this data (and the rest of the data set of over 1 000 students) is the way in which the information exchange is couched in such tender and affectionate language. In discussions with colleagues and fellow students (in particular, Chris Stroud, Sibonile Mpendukana and Nausheena Dalwai), the researchers began to explore how the language of intimacy suffusing the data is more conventionalised than they had at first realised and how it is an integral part of the conventions of cyber socialising.

The aim of this article is to explore these conventionalised norms and styles from a discourse analytical perspective. More specifically, the researchers were interested in the following research questions: What are the emerging genres and registers that students use when communicating via MXit? How creative and fluid do these seem to be? What kinds of constraints seem to be operating? Which linguistic choices characterise this register? What identity positions do these allow?

In order to answer these questions, the researchers have drawn upon a multi-pronged theoretical framework which combines a number of different notions and traditions. From a genre perspective, it is informed by Hyland (2008), Johnstone (2008) and the work of linguists working within Systemic Functional Lingustics (SFL) (Eggins and Slade 2005; Halliday and Hasan 1989; Martin and Rose 2008). The analysis of register is primarily informed by SFL theories of interpersonal semantics (Eggins and Slade 2005; Martin and White 2005). These theories explore the linguistic and discursive resources which people draw on when negotiating and signalling degrees of solidarity and intimacy in relationships, which is the focus of the current article.

Before presenting the theoretical framework for this analysis, however, there will be a review of some of the literature on social media and cyber socialising, as well as research on how intimacy in interpersonal relationships is encoded in discourse, particularly when participants are separated geographically and have to adapt their language to compensate for the lack of physical proximity.

Cyber socialising

According to recent statistics for social network growth, there has been a phenomenal increase in mobile broadband subscriptions over the past few years: the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Geneva claims that in 2011 there were a staggering 5.9 billion subscriptions worldwide with a 79 per cent penetration in the developing world (ITU 2011). (Note, however, that the number of mobile broadband *users* is almost certainly lower as users may have more than one mobile subscription.) This growth is fuelled in part by young people who use these media for social networking.

While it is common to see articles in the popular press in which parents and teachers lament the effect of these social media on their children's writing skills or the dangers that these media pose with respect to unscrupulous sexual predators, much research points to the importance of these media in the lives of youth as sites for socialising, negotiating identities online and offline, and for affirming bonds with friends and family (Thurlow and Poff 2012). Boyd (2007), for example, argues that these media enable adolescents to socialise despite physical and geographic constraints and that they meet a need among young adults to be socially connected and part of an in-group. They also enable users to construct 'cool' online identities for themselves, thereby 'writing themselves and their communities into being' (ibid., 2). So while cyber chatting on social media enables participants to achieve a number of communicative goals, such as making plans, asking for and offering help and support, and so on, research in this field suggests that the primary reason why youth use these sites is 'relational', not 'transactional' (Thurlow and Poff 2012).

MXit is a South African instant messaging application which was developed by a Stellenbosch based company in 2004. Since then it has grown to become the largest social network in Africa as well as enjoying a presence in Asia, Europe and the United States (US). According to a 2011 report by Fuseware and World Wide Worx, MXit currently has approximately 10 million active users in South Africa, most of whom are aged 17 and above (Wronski and Goldstuck 2011). According to Dalwai (2010), the reasons for its popularity among the youth at UWC are that: it is mobile phone-based (and therefore widely accessible); has an interactive environment; and is very cheap when compared with short message service (SMS) costs. It also gives users access to a virtual community of friends and networks and enjoys a 'coolness' factor in that it affords the 'right' kind of social status and visibility (see also Beger, Hoveyda and Sinha 2011).

Much has been written on the emerging norms of 'textese' or 'textspeak', the global shorthand for chatting on various social media (Thurlow 2003; Thurlow and Poff 2012). These norms include references to 'typical features', such as accent stylisations (e.g. *inie* for 'in die', the Afrikaans for 'in the'); clippings (*hav* for have); number homophones (*2* for 'to'); non-conventional spellings (*u* for you) and contractions (*gna* for gonna); as well as the use of paralinguistic features, such as emoticons and excessive punctuation. However, becoming a proficient user of MXit requires more than mastering this code. It requires knowing the appropriate norms and styles for chatting. Although based on a global 'supervernacular' for texting, these norms are 'localised' in different contexts and the use of these 'localised supervernaculars' index different values and identities for the speakers (Blommaert and Backus 2011; Blommaert and Rampton 2012). In this sense, the forms and conventions of cyber chatting are constantly evolving as users draw on their diverse linguistic repertoires to style new fashionable and marketable identities for themselves (Bauman 2007). Pennycook (2007, 7; 2010) refers to the spread of these global forms as well as the way in which they are localised through

processes of 'borrowing, blending, remaking and returning' as 'transcultural flows' and this notion is useful for understanding the production of alternative cultural forms which this data represents.

Recent research has questioned the extent to which 'textese' can be identified as a recognisable discourse. Squires (2010), for example, argues that textese is a construct based on an ideology of 'standard' language norms which erases considerable heterogeneity in the discourse. Her research shows that features often cited as typical of textese (such as those referred to above) are used more variably than much of the literature suggests. Thus, even the 'global supervernacular of textese' should be viewed as variable and unstable.

Despite the wealth of research on norms of textspeak and cyber socialising among the youth, not much attention has been paid to an analysis of the genres and associated registers of cyber chatting. Thurlow and Poff (2012), in their overview of the literature on texting, propose several 'discursive features' which characterise texting (short length of messages, non-standard typographic markers, small talk content and solidary orientation), but they do not explore the generic text structure or linguistic register of texting. It is this gap which I seek to address in the article.

In the next section, I review some of the research on the language of friendship, particularly those aspects which signal intimacy and closeness, as a background for the discussion of the 'register of intimacy' favoured by users of MXit.

The language of intimacy

The exploration of intimacy in human communication has been approached in many different ways. Research ranges from identifying features of friendship talk that are typical of both men and women, to how participants use these styles of speaking to perform particular context specific identities, to the expression of people's desire for alignment between themselves and others (Cameron 1999; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Harvey and Shalom 1997; Kiesling 2011; Tannen 1990). In much of this research, the term 'intimacy' is used variably, sometimes to refer to expressions of sexual desire and longing, at other times to the more general expressions of friendship, affection or solidarity. Here, I use the term to refer to the range of relationship types, from friendships to dating.

Harvey and Shalom (1997) explore what happens when two people attempt to express their sexual desire for each other through language. Because the motivation for this talk or discourse is 'desire', the affective outcome of the interaction is often more important than the referential one. Thus, lovers will 'play' with the language in all kinds of unconventional and creative ways to find unique and original ways of expressing

their feelings. This language play may include re-namings, unconventional vocatives, coining new lexis and syntactic structures and transgressing taboos.

Channell (1997) explores the expressions of desire across geographic distances in her analysis of a telephone call between two lovers who were unaware that their telephones were tapped. (The transcript was made public through the media.) She explores how the lovers (a middle-aged, heterosexual British couple) use language to establish and maintain intimacy and desire when this would normally, in a face-to-face situation, be accomplished through 'touch and gaze'. She argues that their conversation is characterised by 'feeling-disclosure' talk (supportive talk, expressions of sexual longing) and that linguistic manifestations of this include 'matched pairs' where one speaker picks up and repeats the other's utterances, as well as extended closing sequences. She refers to the role of 'playful talk' (achieved through puns, metaphor, repetition and implicature) as well as shared laughter in establishing intimacy and sexual desire. Channell further argues, from an analysis of the topic management, that the referential content of the telephone call is clearly less important than the intimacy that the telephone conversation allows the lovers to share.

Kiesling (2011) develops the idea that desire (both sexual and non sexual) acts as a continuous motivator for the co-construction of identities interlocutors wish to 'have' or accomplish. He points out that 'desire' is often about how the speaker wants to be perceived by his or her interlocutor rather than how he or she positions the 'other'. He explores the expressions of interpersonal desire in college students' interactions, both within all-male fraternities and in more conventional male-female dating circumstances. Kiesling shows how these expressions index participants' varying efforts towards achieving specific identities for themselves and desired alignments and solidarity with others.

Generally, the establishment and maintenance of intimacy, whether between lovers or friends, seems to require dialogue, reciprocity and vulnerability through the sharing of feelings, secrets or self-disclosure. New social media, such as MXit, enable young people to be socially linked across geographic locations and offer a site for the performance of desirable identities, thereby enabling a feeling of continual belonging and acceptance. These social media may also encourage higher levels of self-disclosure due to the relative anonymity of the mode and the avoidance of embarrassment that may be caused by face-to-face encounters.

Research on language, intimacy and desire further indicates that these are culturally shaped and socially embedded practices (e.g. Harvey and Shalom 1997; Kiesling 2011). They take on particular linguistic forms derived from repeated activity within a particular context; in other words, they take on localised norms and styles. The article explores the genres and registers which have emerged as appropriate norms for cyber chatting among students in the UWC context. The next section reviews the theory on genre and register.

Genre and register

Researchers working with the notion of genre define it as recurring conventional ways of structuring discourse for different purposes in society which emerge as people use language to achieve particular social goals in different contexts (Fairclough 2003; Hyland 2008; Johnstone 2008). Johnstone (2008, 184), for example, defines genre as 'a recurrent verbal form (or 'text type') associated with a recurrent purpose or activity' and genre knowledge as 'the procedural competence required to produce a form and use it'. This view of genre recognises that texts are embedded in and constitutive of social realities as 'it is through recurrent use of conventionalised forms that individuals develop relationships, establish communities, and get things done' (Hyland 2008, 21). These conventionalised norms for 'doing' things in any given society are shaped by and help to create the context, both situational and cultural, against which they are evaluated as either appropriate or inappropriate. However, as Johnstone (2008), Hyland (2008), Fairclough (2003) and others argue, genres are neither fixed nor rigid – rather, they are dynamic and open to creative experimentation, blending and innovation.

SFL genre theorists have largely focused on describing the generic structure of texts in order to assist practitioners working in language and literacy education (Christie and Martin 1997). According to Hyland (2008), the contribution of the SFL approach to genre has been the systematic exploration of the linguistic patterns which underlie and organise texts in different contexts. Work by Martin and Plum (1997), Eggins and Slade (2005) and others has sought to describe the general frameworks for interactions in terms of the predictable stages which typify them. These frameworks, they argue, are adaptable to the many specific contexts in which they are used and this adaptation or realisation is mediated through the register of a text which 'fills in the details' of the general generic framework.

For SFL theorists, genre and register are constructs that work together to explain how meanings are realised in context. Genre is understood as operating at the broader level of 'context of culture', whereas register refers to the analysis of language patterns at the level of 'context of situation' (Eggins 2004). Whilst genre describes the relatively consistent ways in which texts are structured according to social purpose, register refers to the predictable ways in which meanings pattern across genres in any given context of situation (Martin and Rose 2008). These patterns are organised by Halliday and Hasan's (1989) register framework into three dimensions (field, tenor, mode) reflecting the three 'metafunctions' of language. The field refers to the activity or topic; the tenor to the kinds of roles and relationships played by the participants; and the mode to the role that language is playing in the interaction. Thus, an SFL analysis of the register of these MXit data would include an exploration of the typical topics and contexts for the chats (referred to as 'the field' or 'experiential metafunction'); an analysis of the ways in which participants index or perform their identities, establish and affirm

their relationships and signal their feelings, values and ideologies (i.e. the 'tenor' or 'interpersonal metafunction'); and a focus on the linguistic forms and varieties that participants choose to use (i.e. the 'mode' or 'textual metafunction'). Due to the limited scope of the article, however, this analysis will focus primarily on aspects of tenor (interpersonal meanings) and mode (linguistic code choices), although aspects of field (topic analysis) will be touched on as well.

The current research proposes a multi-pronged theoretical framework for the analysis of this register which draws on a number of SFL theories of interpersonal semantics[1] and includes the following dimensions: an exploration of the typical exchange structure (e.g. question + response + evaluation) and the role played by vocatives and terms of address, slang, swearing and taboo words as well as local dialectal features. Given the importance of affective language in the data, the SFL theory of the language of evaluation, 'appraisal' offers a useful tool for analysing the range of evaluations in the data (affect, judgement, appreciation) as well as the extent to which they are graded (graduation). I have included 'code mixing' as a feature here, although this is not explicitly covered by the 'appraisal' framework, as well as emoticons and excessive punctuation as markers of involvement. (See Bock 2011 for an extended argument for code mixing as an admin.) I have also added 'humour', based on Eggins and Slade's (2005) argument for the importance of this dimension in the analysis of the interpersonal attitudes and alignments. (See Figure 2 for a summary.)

The article presents this framework as a way of describing some of the salient linguistic and discursive choices which constitute the MXit chat genre's distinctive 'register of intimacy'. In the analysis which follows, I illustrate these features from the data and explore their effects in the discourse. Given the limited scope of the article, many aspects cannot be discussed in detail (e.g. the different kinds of evaluations, the role of excessive punctuation), but the article offers this framework as a basis for future engagement and further research.

Methodology and data sample

The study was conducted at UWC using first-year Language and Communication students in the Linguistics Department. UWC has historically served students from more marginal educational and social backgrounds. While the student body of over 19 000 includes students from all over South Africa and, increasingly, African countries to the north, it still comprises predominantly students who are drawn from two provinces in South Africa: the Western Cape (in which the university is situated) and the Eastern Cape. As such, the student population reflects the historical and current social demographics of these regions and the students generally speak English, Afrikaans and/or isiXhosa as well as regional and local (code mixed) varieties of these languages. English is the medium of instruction at UWC and enjoys a status as the language of prestige both in the province and the country.

An assignment was given to students in the first semester of their first year in 2010 and 2011 as part of their introductory Language and Communication module. The assessment rubric asked students to collect, transcribe and analyse a sample of their own SMS/MXit chats in order to answer the question: 'What does your data show about how languages are used in new ways in contemporary communication in South Africa?' As the course co-ordinator of this module, I personally read through several hundred essays whilst moderating scripts marked by tutors, which was when I was struck by the 'language of intimacy' suffusing the data. Nausheena Dalwai, a tutor on the course and the research assistant on this project, helped collect and analyse an initial sample of about 150 essays from the total data set of over 1 000 essays, which we later reduced to a set of 50 essays for close linguistic analysis. Each essay includes one chat which is generally between 12 and 23 turns in length.

We were somewhat limited in our selection of essays for detailed analysis to those which had the signed consent form attached and to those we could either photocopy before tutors returned the scripts or to those left uncollected at the end of term. For our sample of 50, we selected those which consisted of a full chat and which represented a range of users, relationships and linguistic repertoires. For example, we were careful to include chats which took place between female friends; between male friends; between friends in mixed gender friendships; as well as those that took place between people who were dating. (This information was available from the students' introductions to their data.) We also included chats conducted in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa, or a mixture of these languages. In order to protect the privacy of participants, we removed the user names and assigned letters in their places. We also changed the names of the people they mention in their chats. User names in MXit are pseudonyms and users select names for themselves which reflect, it could be inferred, something about their aspirant virtual identities. However, this analysis will not cover this aspect of the data.

The fact that these data were transcribed by inexperienced first-year students as part of a university assignment could bring the reliability of the data into question. While the potential for error exists, we tried to ensure as much accuracy as possible by conducting a tutorial on transcription methodology. Additionally, I worked on the data with student tutors who are also users of MXit as well as speakers of the local mixed varieties of isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English and so relied on their insider knowledge and intuitions with respect to the authenticity of the data that were selected for closer analysis.

The genre of cyber chatting

The chats presented below are typical of the overwhelming majority of chats in the selected data. They are the social media equivalent of 'casual conversation' – what could be referred to as 'cyber chatting'. In the data sample, there was evidence of at least one other genre, namely 'quarrelling between lovers', but given the scope of the article, this genre is not explored.

As mentioned above, the purpose of cyber chatting is generally to exchange information; to make social plans; to ask for help or advice; to give emotional support; or to gossip. However, accompanying this referential purpose is its role as an important modality for the affirmation of interpersonal bonds and the maintenance of social networks. For users of this modality, the need to have an online presence is an essential part of being integrated into a real time social network. According to Dalwai (2010), the most frequent topic in the UWC data sample of 2010 related to 'relationship issues' in the sense of 'supporting a friend'; 'discussing one's own or other's relationships'; 'affirming relationships'; and so on. Other frequent topics included school work; lectures and assignments; and social life in terms of weekends, parties and vacation plans. The importance of 'friendship maintenance' as the key communicative objective among young UWC students is supported by a study by Deumert and Masinyana (2008) who examined the use of SMS texting among isiXhosa/English bilingual students at a neighbouring institution, the University of Cape Town. Thus, the main purpose of this communication is usually affective rather than referential and it is the discourse features of this 'affectivity' which the article seeks to explore.

In the analysis which follows, I first present a generic analysis of three MXit chats: Chat 1 between two female friends; Chat 2 between a male and a female friend; and Chat 3 between two male friends. I then use the register framework developed above to analyse the distinctive register of intimacy which characterises this genre. In all these chats, all participants code mix: the two young women use a mixture of English and Afrikaans and the others use a mixture of English and isiXhosa. I have numbered each turn for ease of reference, and rewritten each turn using conventional English, Afrikaans or isiXhosa spellings plus translations.

In the transcripts below, I follow the SFL practice of inserting labels to mark the boundaries between the stages which I propose constitute this genre. A more detailed analysis of the generic structure and its associated register follows each extract.

Chat 1: Two female friends

Greetings

1. X: heya hoe gaan dit gal?
        [Hello, *hoe gaan dit* (how are you) girl?]
2. Y: I'm leka gf,

Establishing contact

> Y: waar j nou?
> [I'm *lekker* (good) girl friend, *waar's jy nou* (where're you now)?]
3. X: inie winkel
> [*In die winkel* (in the shop)]
4. Y: I wil b der nw, w8 4 me . . . wil iets koop.
> [I will be there now, wait for me . . . *wil iets koop* (want to buy something).]
5. X: kewl, sien jo no no!
> [Cool, *sien jou nou nou* (see you now now)!]

Exchanging news item 1

6. Y: omg, I jst saw dat bra 4rm lst nyt
> [Oh my God, I just saw that boy from last night.]
7. X: so did u giv hm a soenchi?
> [So did you give him a *soentjie* (kiss)?]

Evaluating news item 1

8. Y: j mal? He nt my typ, mayb if I was drnk
> [*Jy mal* (You mad)? He is not my type, maybe if I was drunk.]
9. X: he thnk he mooi, bt he nt evn close, lol
> [He thinks he is *mooi* (cute), but he is not even close, laugh out loud.]
10. Y: Ja,

Closings

> Y: bt anyway g2g, c u l8a mwa
> [Yes, but anyway I got to go, see you later kiss.]
11. X: K, ek wag, dnt b long.
> [Okay, *ek wag* (I'm waiting), don't be long.]

In Chat 1, the two young women begin their conversation with a 'greeting'. This first stage of the cyber chatting genre typically includes a salutation consisting of a greeting (e.g., *hey*, *helo*, *awe* and *hi*) plus a vocative or an endearment (where popular choices include *engel*, *angel*, *luv*, *babe*, *swty* ('sweety'), *hun*, *mzala* ('cousin'), *bro/bra/bru* and *gf* ('girlfriend')). This is usually coupled with a very formulaic, 'how are you?' or *hwru* (or *hwa* or *hwau*) and local variants thereof (e.g. *howzt*, *hud* ('how you doing') or *huganit*, a spelling which represents a spoken realisation of 'hoe gaan dit', the Afrikaans for 'how are you?'). The *hwru* element is not an essential component of this stage, although it is very common. Participants do, however, have the choice to proceed straight from the greeting (*hello*) to the next stage, which I have called, 'establishing contact'.

This second stage – establishing contact – is still primarily phatic as an essential function of this stage seems to be the establishment of interpersonal rapport. Additionally, this stage serves the important purpose of ensuring the continuation of the chat as the participants use a number of 'probes' to 'fish' for news. In Chat 1, the probe in turn 2, *waar j no* or 'where you now' illustrates this point, to which Y responds that she will join her friend in a few moments.

Other common 'probes' for this stage include: *wud* ('what you doing'), *watsup* ('what's up'), *wuu2* ('what you up to') and *wmj* ('wat maak jy' – the Afrikaans for 'what are you doing'). Sometimes these probes lead into topic of conversation which trigger a shift to the third stage of the genre – exchanging news – but sometimes they do not. It may take quite a few probes to initiate or extend the interaction as illustrated in the following short extract from Chat 2 between two friends, one male, one female:

Chat 2: A Female (X) and male (Y) f(Y)

Greetings

1. X: hi
    [Hello]
2. Y: hud
    [How you doing?]
3. X: I'm gud n u
    [I am good and you?]
4. Y: m2
    [Me too]

Establishing contact

5. X: wud
    [What you doing?]
6. Y: lib n u?
    [Lying in bed and you?]
7. X: chillin, hw ws yr day
    [Relaxing, how was your day?]
8. Y: waz borng urz
    [Was boring, yours?]
9. X: hectic, wuw ngk
    [Hectic, who you with *ngoku* (now)?]
10. Y: wt ma cznz n u
    [With my cousins and you?]
11. X: aln ndibulise ke to ur cuzins
    [Alone, *ndibulise ke* (I greet then your cousins).]

12. Y: thy cy ewe
          [They say *ewe* (hello).]
13. X: k, . . .
          [Okay, . . .]

At this point in the chat, X asks Y whether he (Y) is still going to school which elicits some exchange of news about how boring school is, the upcoming exams and some extra classes that Y is attending. In the extract quoted above, however, X has worked hard to get Y to engage by employing three very common probes for this stage: *wud* ('what you doing'), *hw ws yr day* ('how was your day'), and *wuw ngk* ('who you with *ngoku*', the isiXhosa word for 'now').

It seems that a further important function of this stage is to establish a sense of the physical and social context of the interlocutor: where and with whom he or she is at the time of texting. A not uncommon response to the question, *wud*, is *lomb wtv* ('lying on my bed and watching tv') or, as in Chat 2 above, *lib* ('lying in bed'). The formulaic status of these probes and responses is indicated by the fact that the abbreviated forms are already well recognised within the user group and can be used as shorthand without explanation. Knowing something about your interlocutor's social and physical context is clearly important to participants for whom, despite the fact that this is a virtual chat, the primary communicative intent is the maintenance of real world social networks.

The greetings and probes are a way of establishing a communicative context for the third and most central stage of the genre, the 'exchanging news' items. The probes may lead into the beginning of the first news item or the first news item may be introduced by a separate question or statement, such as, *omg, I jst saw dat bra 4rm lst nyt* ('Oh my God, I just saw that boy from last night') in Chat 1 above. This third stage can be described as both 'obligatory' – in the sense that it is the heart of the MXit chat – and 'recursive' – in the sense that any one chat may consist of one or more news items (Eggins and Slade 2005).

The news item stage is typically structured as an exchange in the form of *question/ statement – response – evaluation*, where evaluation plays a centrally important part. Evaluation is typically embedded throughout the genre, but tends to cluster towards the end of each news item, sometimes forming what could be described as a separate stage. As for Labov's (1972) framework for narratives of personal experience, evaluation is what gives the genre its significance. For example, in Chat 1 above, the news item stage (turns 6–10) is initiated by Y's statement in turn 6 ('Oh my God, I just saw that boy from last night') which is followed by X's responding question in turn 7 ('so did you give him a kiss?') and Y's exclamation which serves as both a denial of X's suggestion and a negative judgement of the '*bra*' in turn 8 ('You're mad!'). This then leads into an extended evaluation of the '*bra*' which could be analysed as a separate

stage: turn 8 ('he's not my type, I would only kiss him if I was drunk' i.e., not in my right mind) and turn 9 ('He thinks he's cute but he isn't at all').

The evaluation in these chats is the predominant way in which participants signal their attitudes and negotiate their interpersonal positions. The evaluations in the entire data set range from statements of affect ('I'm bored') to judgements ('he didn't deserve you') to appreciations ('that was a cool party'). Graduations which intensify or diminish the emotional content are also common. For example, the use of the diminutive form of *soen* in turn 7 is very typical of spoken Afrikaans; in this context, the effect of the diminutive is to 'de-intensify' the meaning (Coetzee and Kruger 2004). This adds the semantic value of 'innocence' to a potentially sexual act thereby inviting self-disclosure and interlocutor intimacy.

The final stage in the genre is the 'closing' which may be very short but is typically structured with a 'rounding off' or 'wrap-up' such as *g2g* ('got to go'), *brb* ('be right back'), *c u l8a* ('see you later') or *cht lata* ('chat later') often followed by a final salutation: *bye*, or the slang variants, *safe* or *sharp,* and the ritualistic kiss, *mwah*, or variants thereof (*mwa*, *mwaz*, *mwatjies*). Often this stage is also characterised by a number of affectionate exchanges such as *I mic u* ('I miss you') or *lovies* and emoticons such as 'smileys' and 'winking faces' even when the interlocutors are not engaged in a romantic relationship, as illustrated by the following closings from the data (the platonic nature of the relationship was indicated in the students' introductions to their essays):

Extract 1: Male – female friendship

X: I gotto go nw bt stay in touch
        [I got to go now but stay in touch]
Y: k ndathand shp yev
        [Okay *ndiyamthanda sharp yeva* (I love you OK do you hear?)]
X: m2 c u ne
        [Me too see you okay]

Extract 2: Male – female friendship

Y: I realy g2g nw duty cals. sien v jo mwh *(Smiley face)*
        [I really have to go now duty calls. See you mwah *(Smiley face)*]
X: Ok ang mwatjies
        [Okay angel kiss]

Extract 3: Female – female friendship

X: mwah cht lata! *(Wink)*
        [Kiss chat later! *(Wink)*]
Y: kwl mwah!
        [Cool kiss!]

Thus, within this genre of cyber chat, the closings, together with the greetings and establishing contact stages constitute a conventionalised frame for the exchanging news item(s). The affectionate personal language characterised by endearments (*babe*, *angel*), signals of affection (*lovies*, *mwaz*) and highly evaluative language are part of a register of intimacy which is normative for this genre.

The extent to which the gender of the participants and the nature of their relationship influence the chat is worth considering. Dalwai (2010) argues that although all participants use the same register of intimacy, the chats between lovers tend to reflect more of the following: direct expressions such as 'I love you', 'I miss you', pet names, endearments and pepperings of *mwah*. The chats between male friends show a lower ratio of these features with no incidences of 'I love you' or *mwah* and a higher usage of swearing and taboo words. Despite these differences, the generic structure of the chat and its associated register of intimacy are still practiced, even between males, as illustrated by Chat 3 below:

Chat 3: Two male friends

Greetings

1. X: Hey Sam hw u doin?
        [Hi Sam how are you doing?]
2. Y: I'm doin gr8t man wena?
        [I am doing great man and you?]
3. X: K cool mfe2

Establishing contact

    X: wuup2?
        [Okay cool man what are you up to?]
4. Y: Nha jst wtv an u?
        [Nothing I'm just watching television and you?]
5. X: Studng man ndiyabhala mare
        [Studying man I am writing tomorrow]
6. Y: K gud luk 4 de test
        [Okay good luck for the test]
7. X: Tnks man I wil nid it
        [Thanks man I will need it]

Exchanging news item 1

8. Y: Akonto uzoyenza kule wikend?
        [*Akonto uzakuyenza kule wikend?* (Anything special that you will be doing this weekend?)]

9. X: Nha mfe2 ndzawbona
         [No *mfethu ndizakubona* (my brother I will see).]
10. Y: K den ndzawjikela apho kuwe emzini
         [Okay then *ndizakujikela apho kuwe emzini* (I will come around this weekend
         at your place).]

Closings

11. X: K c u then
         [Okay see you then.]

In Chat 3 above, the exchanging news item stage does not generate any extended in-
formation exchange, gossip or lead to a plan, and so the chat ends after one brief news
item. There is also very little evaluation besides the formulaic 'I'm great' and 'cool'
and the chat is more referential in focus than those quoted above. However, there are
still a number of features that serve to build interpersonal rapport, such as the use of
vocatives which express solidarity (*man* and *mfe2*, *mfethu* is the isiXhosa for 'my
brother' or 'friend') and X's supportive wishes for the test as well as Y's desire to
meet up with X on the weekend. The effect of these choices is to express friendship,
solidarity and support for one another.

The above analysis has sketched the generic structure of MXit chats. However, it is
worth adding that despite the regularities referred to above, the generic structure is still
flexible and variable. For example, the establishing contact stage may be excluded or
merged with the first exchanging news item, as in Chat 4 below. Additional probes may
be included later in the chat after several news items as a way of extending or prolong-
ing the chat. The chat may also be summarily truncated due to a disruption in one of
the interlocutor's environments (e.g. the arrival of a third party). Evaluation may be a
separate stage or simply embedded throughout. Despite this variation, I would argue
that there is sufficient regularity for cyber chatting to constitute its own recognisable
and predictable genre as summarised in Figure 1 below.

- Greetings
  - *Hello* + terms of endearment + *hwru*
  - \> phatic function
- Establishing contact
  - probes (*wud, wmj, wuu2, sup, wuw,* etc.)
  - \> phatic but also 'fishing for news'
- Exchanging news items (recursive)
  - Q & A, Intro of new topic + response
  - exchanging info, news, gossip
  - making plans
  - offering help or support
- Evaluation = can be a separate stage, but also embedded throughout.
- Closings
  - Wrap up (*g2g, brb, cht lata)* + final salutation (*bye, sharp, kwl, k)* + kiss (*mwah, mwaz*, etc.)

Figure 1: Generic structure of a MXit cyber chat

A register of intimacy

Being a proficient cyber socialiser, however, requires more than simply knowing the generic structure of chatting. It also requires knowing the highly affective personal style of chatting or what the article proposes as a 'register of intimacy'. In the generic analysis above, some aspects of this register were discussed (vocatives, markers of affection, evaluative language, formulaic greetings, probes and closings, etc.). In the remainder of the article, other aspects of this framework will be explored.

What is immediately noticeable about the language of the above chats is the way in which they reflect a localised supervernacular (Blommaert and Backus 2011) which draws not only on a globalised textspeak of abbreviations, emoticons, and so on, but also a rich multilingual heritage which forms part of the repertoires of the participants in this data. Chat 1 above contains examples of mixing from Afrikaans and English, both standard and non-standard varieties of the languages. For example, in Chat 1, turns 6–9, the code, while based on a relatively standard variety of spoken English, includes a number of borrowings from Afrikaans (*soentjie*, *jy mal*, *mooi*) as well as the globalised slang term for 'man' or 'guy', *bra*. The (mis)spellings of *soentjie* as *soenchi* and *jy* as *j* also reflect local dialectal pronunciations of these Afrikaans words. The refashioning of aspects of the global supervernacular and its blending with local forms enables

these users to index their identities as local, Western Cape, 'coloured' youth[2] who are simultaneously part of a global network of social media users and transcultural flows.

The participants in chats 2 and 3 also use a mixed code, but this time one based on isiXhosa and English. In Chat 2, the code is based on English syntax and lexis with a mix of isiXhosa words, phrases and clauses:

9.   X: hectic, wuw **ngk**
          [Hectic, who you with *ngoku* (now)?]
10. Y: wt ma cznz n u
          [With my cousins and you?]
11. X: aln **ndibulise ke** to ur cuzins
          [Alone, *ndibulise ke* (I greet then your cousins).]
12. Y: thy cy **ewe**
          [They say *ewe* (hello to you too).]

However, in Chat 3, the conversation shifts into a mixed code which is predominantly isiXhosa with embedded English words and phrases (e.g., the borrowing of *wikend* in turn 9). Informal or spoken pronunciations are indicated by unconventional spellings such as the contracted spoken forms of isiXhosa clauses, *ndzawbona* and *ndzawjikela*. The use of the supervernacular forms, *nha* for 'no' and *den* for 'then' further index a global sophistication. For these participants, the proficient mixing of local varieties of isiXhosa and global varieties of English enables them to perform identities as urbanised multilingual youth who are 'educated', 'sophisticated' and 'cool'. In the extract below, the English based lexis is marked in bold:

9.   Y: Akonto uzoyenza kule **wikend**?
          [*Akonto uzakuyenza kule wikend* (Anything special that you will be doing this weekend)?]
10. X: **Nha** mfe2 ndzawbona
          [No *mfethu ndizakubona* (my brother I will see).]
11. Y: **K den** ndzawjikela apho kuwe emzini
          [Okay then *ndizakujikela apho kuwe emzini* (I will come around this weekend at your place).]
12. X: **K c u then**
          [Okay see you then.]

The contractions, non-standard forms and unconventional spellings of the isiXhosa lexis make the data different to that of Deumert and Masinyana (2008) who argue that in their sample of SMS textspeak, only standard isiXhosa forms were used. However, this is almost certainly due to the fact that their data were collected in 2006 and 2007. Since then, new practices and norms for texting in isiXhosa have emerged and abbreviations have become more commonplace (Deumert, personal communication).

A distinctive feature of the data is the chatty dialogic nature of the exchanges which in many ways resembles casual spoken conversations (Eggins and Slade 2005). The conversation-like discourse patterns are an important part of the way in which participants negotiate their interpersonal alignments and intimacies: for example, the *question/ statement + response + evaluation* sequences as well as the role of probes in initiating and establishing the chat were referred to above. Another element of this 'chattiness' is the spoken interjections and affirmations which characterise these chats. This aspect of the register, as well as the role of humour, is discussed in relation to the fourth chat below, of which the first two turns were cited at the beginning of the article. The genre analysis is marked for interest but is not discussed.

Chat 4: Two female friends

Greetings + Establishing contact

1. X: hello engel hoe gaanit? Didn c u in lyk eva n u on mxit! Whas up? Ek mis jo vreslik!
   [Hallo angel, how are you. Didn't see you in like ever and you on MXit. What's up? I miss you a lot!]
2. Y: **lol** dit gan goed dnki n mt jo? I know its been ages im so bsy i dnt hav tym 4 myslf btwn wrk n clg i cnt gt my mnd round thngs. Ek mis jo ook! I got lts 2 tl u *(Shocked face)*
   [Laugh out loud. It's going good thank you and with you? I know it's been ages. I'm so busy I don't have time for myself between work and college. I can't get my mind around things. I miss you too! I got lots to tell you. *(Shocked face)*]

Exchanging news item 1

X: tl me ales lmk bt w8 hws brandon? N hws ur momi, dadi n sista?
[Tell me everything. *Lag my klaar*. [Laugh me finished.] But wait how's Brandon? And how's your mommy, daddy and sister?]

Y: **ag** liefie Brandon n I broke up ls wk momi dadi sista k
[Ag love Brandon and I broke up last week. Mommy, daddy and sister OK.]

X: **DTK**?? Hw cm . . . w.t.h. u bn gng owt 4 lyk 10yrs ok lik 3 bt stil wat hpnd?
[Don't talk kak [shift]? How come . . . what the hell you been going out for like ten years ok like three but still what happened?]

Y: **jy wet mos!**! D sam old **sheet**! Gt tired of it tld hm 2 mak lika tree n leave **lmao**. Ok it wsnt dat easy bt it sent somthng lyk dat
[You know!! The same old shit! Got tired of it told him to make like a tree and leave. Laugh my ass off. Ok it wasn't that easy but it went something like that.]

Evaluating news item 1

X: im sorry2hear d 2 of u wre gr8 2gda bt he was an ass he didn desrv u!
     [I'm sorry to hear the two of you were great together but he was an ass, he didn't
     deserve you.]
Y: tanx, u kno hw we do. **Lol** ny bt its hard u gotta vist we gt@ paaarty it uit! U wys!

Exchanging news item 2

     Yor u no wu I saw yday??? Jus gues . . .
     [Thanks, you know how we do. Laugh out loud. But its hard, you got to visit, we
     got to party it out! You understand! Wow you know who I saw yesterday? Just
     guess . . .]
X: Joel? Chad? Big d? Mark? W8 r we talkn guy/grl?
     [Joel? Chad? Big d? Mark? Wait are we talking guy or girl?]
Y: even better Wayne!!!!
     [Even better, Wayne!!!!]
X: sexc wayne with d big brain? **Lol**
     [Sexy Wayne with the big brain? Laugh out loud.]
Y: hahaha he asked me out 4 lunch n askd hw u . . . misde me blah blah al dt jaz
     [Laughing. He asked me out for lunch and asked how you . . . missed me etc., etc.
     all that stuff.]

Closings
X: brb
     [Be right back]
Y: k
     [Ok]

In Chat 4 above, expressions such as *ag* (an Afrikaans particle which signals listener
involvement, with the meaning of something like 'oh' in 'oh dear'), *yor* (local variant
for 'wow'), *DTK* ('don't talk *kak*' or 'shit') and *jy weet mos* ('you know then') all func-
tion to acknowledge the contribution of the interlocutor and to indicate that the sender
is still engaged. Sometimes these expressions have evaluative content and indicate
surprise, disgust or excitement as with 'yor' and 'DTK' above. However, sometimes
they simply function as acknowledgements of the previous turn or expressions of
agreement, as is the case with 'cool' and 'OK' in the extracts below:

Extract from Chat 1:

4.   Y: I wil b der nw, w8 4 me . . . wil iets koop.
          [I will be there now, wait for me . . . *wil iets koop* (want to buy something).]
5.   X: **Kewl**, sien jo no no!
          [Cool, *sien jou nou nou* (see you now now)!]

Extract from Chat 4:

    X: brb
         [Be right back]
16. Y: **k**
         [Ok]

The use of *lol* (usually to mean 'laugh out loud') and its local variants is interesting in this data. While *lol* and *lmao* (laugh my ass off) are part of a global supervernacular, our data shows a range of local Kaaps or non-standard Afrikaans variants including ones which draw on colloquial sometimes transgressive expressions: *lmk* (*lag my klaar* or 'laugh me finished'), lmimc (*lag my in my chops* or, literally, 'laugh me in my chops'), lmj (lag my jas or 'laugh me horny/crazy') and lmimp (*lag my in my poes* or 'laugh me in my fanny').

Noticeably, these abbreviations appear only at the beginning or end of a turn or clause (see turns 2 and 11 in Chat 4 above) where they function (like *cool* and *Ok* above) as an acknowledgement from the sender that he or she has received the message. However, they also mark the end of a thought unit (clause) or turn thus playing an important structuring function in the discourse. On some occasions, they seem to signal delight or an appreciation of the humour in the previous turn (as in turn 11 above). However, probably their most important effect is to help create an irreverent and playful register which serves to strengthen the bonds of solidarity and informality between participants and establishes a creative and potentially transgressive space in which linguistic in-novation and hybridity can flourish. This alignment is often reinforced by the use of taboo words and expletives, for example, *DTK* and *Da sam old sheet* in turns 5 and 6 above. Taken together, these features signal an alignment with an alternative 'cool' reality and a dis-identification with the dominant mainstream reality and its norms of standard language. As Pennycook (2010) argues in relation to hip hop, the appropria-tion and refashioning apparent in these transcultural flows is part of the way in which users express resistance to the prevailing dominant cultural forms.

Humour, as Eggins and Slade (2005, 155) argue, is used for strategic effect to 'negotiate attitude and alignments and provide a resource for indicating degrees of "otherness" and "in-ness"' in casual conversations. In other words, it is an important resource for signalling alignment and solidarity. Humour may take the form of teasing, ironic remarks, anecdotes or pithy sayings, word play, rhymes or jokes, as in Chat 4, where Participant X jokes about 'Wayne with the big brain'. Here the play on the diphthong [ey] found in both 'Wayne' and 'brain' enables the participant to display her linguistic creativity and playfulness thereby styling for herself an identity as an artful, slick user of the linguistic repertoire at her disposal. This, together with her mastery of the ap-propriate genre and register of MXit chatting, enables her to display her presence in the world of cyber socialising and ensure her integration into a significant social network.

The above analysis has focused on linguistic and discursive choices which serve to build interpersonal closeness, solidarity and in-group identities, which I have termed, a 'register of intimacy'. The range of choices which constitute this register are summarised in Figure 2 below:

- • Dialogic 'chatty' exchanges
    - question and answer routines / 'probes'
- • Informal 'spoken' interjections
    - *ok, yor, jy wet mos, nê*
- • Terms of address / endearments
    - *mfe2, bru, liefie, angel, babe, sweetie*, etc
- • Expressions of affect
    - *i mic u* [I miss you], *i luv u* [I love you],
    - *im sorry2hear* [I'm sorry to hear]
- • Judgements
    - *d 2 of u wre gr8 2gda bt he was an ass he didn desrv u*
- • Appreciations
    - *bt its hard* [breaking up]
- • Intensifications (graduations)
    - *Didn c u in <u>lyk eva</u>… Ek mis jo <u>vreslik</u>*
- • Swearing, expletives and taboo words
    - *D sam old sheet, DTK, w.t.h*
- • Emoticons, formulaic abbreviations, excessive punctuation
    - emoticons: smileys ☺, shocked faces, winking faces
    - formulaic abbreviations e.g. *lol, lmk, lmj, lokl, mwah, hahaha*
    - excessive punctuation: *LOL!!!! ON A FRIDAY????? HELL NOOOO!!!! :O*
- • Humour
    - *sexc wayne with d big brain? Lol*
    - *drs 2 imprs! / dey dnt cl mi brbi 4 nuthn lmao!* [Dress to impress/They don't call me Barbie for nothing. Laugh my ass off.]
- • Slang
    - *wat a <u>spaaaz</u> he turnd out 2 b* [what an idiot he turned out to be]
- • Code switching and local dialectal features
    - *Cn I go wth u coz <u>andanto ykwnza</u>* [Can I go with you because I have nothing to do]
    - *<u>Yor dik swt</u>.. Dats nyc <u>man</u> at least he decent* [Wow how sweet.. That's nice man, at least he's decent.]
    - *<u>dnt stress</u> <u>ima be dne</u> b4 u come* [Don't stress I *maar* (but) be done before you come]

Figure 2: Register of intimacy – framework of features

Conclusion

The article set out to explore the highly conventionalised nature of MXit chatting and presents a framework to describe both its generic structure and associated register. It shows how participants use a range of predictable stages to initiate and establish contact as a preparation for the 'exchanging news' which forms the kernel of the chat. It explores how the globalised features of textspeak (abbreviations, non-standard spellings, emoticons, and so on) together with localised features, such as code mixing, local dialectal features, colloquialisms and slang, constitute a highly personalised and predictable register of intimacy.

The article further argues that despite the conventionality and predictability of this genre and register, they are also fluid and hybrid. They establish a creative and potentially transgressive space in which linguistic innovation and creativity can flourish. Participants use the full range of their linguistic repertoires to 'style' (Coupland 2007) for themselves identities which combine elements of global sophistication with local situatedness. This enables the participants to index their identities as youth who are simultaneously users of a global supervernacular of texting as well of members of a local regional (Western Cape) and institutional (university) context. They allow users to signal solidarity and alignment with an alternative 'cool' reality shared with their peers and to 'dis-identify' with the dominant mainstream reality and its norms of formal standard written English.

The data in this article provide a clear example of how linguistic forms may move across borders and contexts as part of global transcultural flows of language and other cultural forms. They further show how more marginal groups (globally) may select and innovate from more dominant global cultural forms through processes of 'take-up, appropriation, change and refashioning' (Pennycook 2007, 6), thereby enabling them to express new and distinct identities which index both an identification with local values of authenticity and belonging and global values of urban sophistication.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. SFL theories of interpersonal semantics include the systems of 'negotiation', 'involvement' and 'appraisal', as developed by Eggins and Slade (2005) and Martin and White (2005). 'Negotiation' refers to the interactive aspects of text, such as the exchange structure; 'involvement' refers

to the non-gradable resources for negotiating and establishing tenor relations (e.g. vocatives, slang, dialectal features and swearing); and 'appraisal' to the lexis used to give a text attitudinal colouring (Martin and White 2005).

2. During the apartheid era, South Africans were classified into the following racial categories: White, Coloured and Native by the Population Registration Act of 1950. 'Asian', as a fourth category, was added later. During the years of opposition to apartheid which followed, these labels were rejected by the opposition movements which chose to refer to all oppressed people in South Africa as 'black'. Although the term, 'coloured', is now much more acceptable as an identity marker, notions of coloured identity and the use of this term are still contested. The participants in this study, however, overwhelmingly used the term for self-identification and pointed to the English-Afrikaans dialectal code mixing in their data as linguistic indices of their 'coloured' identities.

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