

## Instant Messaging: R U ready 4 it?

Speech and writing have usually been seen as two totally different media; the differences between them can be significant in some languages, such as in Chinese and Arabic, whereas in other languages, such as English, the writing reflects speech somewhat more closely. However, even in English, the style, syntax, and wording of the written language are vastly different from the actual spoken language. The distinctions have been eroded by the new-age technology that gives people the power of communication at their fingertips. E-mail, for instance, takes aspects of both spoken and written language to form a new genre; in this new genre, “proper” grammar or punctuation is not enforced for purposes of expediency. Even further melding of speech and writing occur as a result of the new phenomenon of instant messaging (IM). In this paper, I explore the similarities and differences between IM and face-to-face conversations, using data gathered primarily from my IM conversations with members of my singing group that is part of an IM group.

The main instant messaging program that is used among college students today is America Online Instant Messaging (AOL IM, or AIM). According to studies by Thurlow & McKay, 2003), “70% use [the internet] for instant messaging. These statistics are higher for older teenagers at...83%.” I started using this program in 1999 simply because many of my friends were using it at the time to chat. “Recent AOL research on 7,000 young people shows that the internet has in fact become the primary communication tool for young Americans.” (Thurlow & McKay, 2003) It is different from most other instant messaging programs because it allows you to place your buddy’s “screen names” (usually creative identities to be used online, such as HockeyChik03 or BaBygUrL701) on your buddy list. It is safer and more intimate than most other chatting or IM programs because only those who know the exact screen name can IM

that person. When a member on your buddy list is online and available to talk, the screen name will appear on the list and you can IM the person simply by double clicking their screen name and entering text into the IM window. Messages that are already entered will move up on the screen and new IMs will appear at the bottom. IMs are instantaneous—they take less than a second to be sent to the other person, so conversations move as fast as one can type. Furthermore, you can have multiple IM conversations at once by having more than one IM window on your computer screen.

The data used in this study is taken from IM conversations with members of Gimble A Cappella. Gimble is a student-run a cappella singing group that began in 1997 as a part of Arts Chorale. Currently there are 17 members, ranging from freshmen to graduate students from various fields of study; each of these members were selected into the group through a music audition that demonstrates their musical abilities in various areas. I have been in Gimble for five semesters, the last two of which I have been the music director of the group. About 15 members of the group use AIM regularly (though all 17 members do have screen names) and these are the people with whom I talk most frequently via IM, mostly because we have similar interests.

Below is a sample IM text from a conversation that took place about two months ago:

[insert conversation]

The names on the left that appear before each IM line are the screen names, Mallee01 and SunE13. A conversation this size takes approximately five minutes, which can be longer or shorter depending on how much of a pause there was between IMs.

Instant messaging contains aspects of both writing and speech. It is similar to writing in that the discourse has to be written and read in order to be understood, and therefore places a certain importance on spelling and punctuation, while eliminating the focus on pronunciation.

All the intonation, emphasis, and mood must be portrayed solely through the written text. However, instant messaging also resembles speech in that the syntax of the utterances found in IMs are usually incomplete sentences, while it is enriched with exclamations, expressions, and even laughter. Furthermore, IM takes on the reciprocal characteristic of face-to-face conversations; Cook (1989) states that “discourse is reciprocal when there is at least a potential for interaction....The prototype of reciprocal discourse is face-to-face conversation.” Because IM is mainly used for social interaction and is carried on by reading and responding to each other’s message, the level of reciprocity is high. As is the case with face-to-face conversations, what one says on IM depends entirely on the way the person on the other end responds; this leads to a complex system of back-channeling, as we will discuss later in the paper.

Face-to-face and IM conversations both take on the use of subject-initial ellipses, in which the subject of the clause is elided, but understood to be there:

Master0523: eh. Finally got it done, just took me forever.

In the first clause the subject *I* is elided, and in the second clause the impersonal *it* was left out. This type of construction is typical of speech and is a frequent syntactic element in instant messaging. Similarly, contractions such as “gonna,” “wanna,” and “kinda” that are common in speech also appear often in IM. This shows how instant messaging closely reflects the elements and style of spoken language.

Although instant messaging greatly resembles face-to-face conversation, due to the special text-based manner of conversation and the growing need for expediency in the age of technology, differences do arise. For instance, IMs tend to have shorter conversational turns—in fact, almost a third of the turns are one-word responses. IM conversations look to express things in the simplest ways possible to minimize typing; if a message is going to be a long, complicated

utterance, the person doing the messaging (or IMer) will break the utterance into parts. Consider these two samples from two different conversations:

UofMbaby819: *and haha I was thinking of the excuse i would have  
when i would have when I told them I didn't have  
the notes*

UofMbaby819: *almos like "the dog ate my hw"*

UofMbaby819: *I think I may have snorted laughing about it*

UofMbaby819: *don't know why it wa so funny to me*

SunE13: well, I right-clicked on the file (the movie) and clicked "send to CD"  
SunE13: or something like that  
SunE13: or you can do it the same way you'd put regular files on a CD  
SunE13: thru the cd burning program

Both of these IMers used multiple lines<sup>1</sup> to separate what would have been a long strain of words. This is often done in order to simplify the utterance and make it easy to read and process; typing a long paragraph may turn the other person off from reading the message. Also, by cutting the utterance into parts, it keeps the interest of the reader because he/she knows that another message is on its way.

Face-to-face (F2F) conversations differ from IM in that the turns can be dominated by certain individuals, whereas turns and flooring in IMs are fairly equal most of the time. Example

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<sup>1</sup> Every time one types a message and presses "send" or "enter," the messaging program will start a new line headed by the screen name. The IMer has control over when to begin a new line by deciding when to send the message.

1 is a perfect example of this; the first part of the conversation is Mallee01 discussing her plans, while SunE13 listens and sympathizes: “ahh” and “is that why you can’t make it to the gig tomorrow?” In the second half, they reverse roles so that SunE13 is now complaining about her schoolwork, while Mallee04 supports by prompting, “are they in hard classes?” and “those are always time consuming.” Neither person dominates the conversation, but they take turns speaking and listening in an equal, complementary way.

Often times in casual speech, many of the articulated sounds and syllables (particularly those that are most frequently used) are shortened or combined for speed and ease of pronunciation. For instance, the utterance “I’m going to class” may be shortened from [aim goɪŋ tu klæs] to [aŋgoɪnə klæs]; most native English-speakers would have no trouble understanding the latter articulation of the utterance. Similarly, in instant messaging, frequently occurring phrases or words are often abbreviated or take on acronyms, and they are mutually understood by those who are familiar with instant messaging. Some are fairly obvious and easy to decipher:

thru, mtg, ok, k, prob, lil, btw, cuz, u, diff

Some are a little more difficult:

brb (be right back), omg (oh my gosh/god), lol (laughing out loud), bc (because), ttyl (talk to you later), btw (by the way), ppl (people)

Others take a considerable amount of imagination:

rofl (rolling on the floor laughing), freal (for real<sup>2</sup>), wtf (what the f\*ck)

UofMbaby819: *the tag said he/she was from kalamazoo*

UofMbaby819: *i was like wtf*

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<sup>2</sup> Used by itself, “freal/for real” is a general statement of agreement or sympathy.

Generally, these abbreviations and acronyms arise to save time in typing everything out; rarely will you see anyone writing out “be right back” when the simple “brb” can be used. Expert users of IM can usually tell if the person to whom they are talking is new to IM when he/she types out phrases and words that are typically abbreviated, or if he/she hyperextends by shortening a word that is usually not abbreviated (or using the wrong abbreviation), such as “ty” for “thank you.”

Younger IM users tend to utilize more abbreviations in order to be “hip” or unique:

r (are), 4 (for), b (be), y (why), 2 (to/too), wuz (was), sry (sorry), wut (what), thanx

In fact, some of these are not much shorter in abbreviation form, but rather they are alternate spellings of the original word to make the statement look more interesting. By college, these types of abbreviations are considered to be too childish, flighty, and superficial; they are generally avoided and used only in mocking or joking.

An interesting phenomenon that occurs exclusively in instant messaging is the ability to have overlapping conversations, or talk about two different topics at once with the same person.

Consider the following IM conversation:

- 1 SunE13: i have a class from 4-5:30
- 2 tiger2: i dont think ill like it after this course though
- 3 SunE13: = no good
- 4 tiger2: yeah, how often though?
- 5 SunE13: MW
- 6 SunE13: i guess i could work between 1-4
- 7 tiger2: oh yeah, you upper level people with your no classes on fridays
- 8 SunE13: cuz I have class 12-1
- 9 SunE13: nope, I have a class on F
- 10 tiger2: i HATE those breaks in the day like that
- 11 tiger2: i have 4!
- 12 SunE13: i'll probably work on MW
- 13 SunE13: oh EW!

Due to the fact that while one person is typing, the other person can't see what he/she is saying (until the message is sent), often times the conversation topics will overlap. Lines 1, 3, 4, 5, 7,

and 9 discuss having Friday classes, and lines 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 13 discuss breaks between classes; one can see the two clearly distinct topics by reading the lines in the two groups mentioned above. Although overlapping conversation topics such as this can technically occur in speech, it is a much more common trend in instant messaging as a result of the way the timing of IM conversations take place: a few seconds to read the other person's message, a few seconds to type a response, and a second to send the message. Given that in IM these steps do not happen all at once, double conversations can easily occur.

In instant messaging there is a difficult task in establishing a balance so that "speech" can be converted in writing form and still retain the essence of conversation. Without being able to see or hear each other, the IMers are not able to express or discern the sense of intonation, emphasis, or mood behind the utterances, which play a significant role in F2F conversation. However, to overcome this possible communication block, text-based manners of expression have manifested themselves in IM. For instance, repetition of letters signify the elongation of the sound:

bid410: it's soooooooooo funny!

SammyD05: it's okayyy

Capitalization is used for emphasis, or to show yelling:

RedSatinShoes: OMG OMG!!

RedSatinShoes: i'm in SUCH huge trouble

The use of ellipses indicate pauses, unfinished thought, uncertainty, or keeping a statement open-ended (usually a sense of drifting-off when used at the end of an IM):

Phantastic: you best never do it to me....or we'll be in a fight

tiger2: hmm...I just figured out that one of the only ACTUAL classes offered summer term here is ling 211...hmmm....

Nirone83: hmmm...i'm not sure...

Although IMs are not as laden with stuttering and false starts as speech tends to be, typing errors are a common occurrence in IM. After making a mistake in an instant message, the IMer will type the correct spelling again with an asterisk (\*) before or after the corrected word.

torigirl15: heheh  
torigirl15: tes  
torigirl15: yes\*

The asterisk indicates a self-correction of a mistake and is comparable to the act of going back and correcting oneself in speech.

Also in response to the impersonal nature of communicating via internet, users of instant messaging often try to express their individuality and style by the creative use of fonts, sizes, and color in the text. One person may use 12-point bubbly font with a yellow background, while some may use 10-point green script with a gray background; these choices usually reflect the creativity and personality of the user. Still further expression of individuality can be shown through the buddy profiles, buddy icons, and away messages. Buddy profiles are basically there to provide others with personal information, but many people use it for other creative purposes; profiles can contain telephone numbers, famous quotes, song lyrics, links to websites, shout outs to friends, inside jokes, or even daily updates about one's life in general—a heart-to-heart of the day, perhaps. Buddy icons are small pictures that appear on the bottom left corner of the IM window that can be used to individualize oneself. Away messages are selected when the IMer has to leave the computer but wants to stay signed on so that he/she can still receive messages. Away messages range from simple (“at class, leave a message”) to elaborate (“SO much to do today, class 10-1, work 1-5, meeting 5-6, dinner 6-7, then out to study for the rest of my



life...kill me NOW”). With the use of fonts, sizes, color, as well as buddy profiles, icons, and away messages, IM users can express their different style and personality without voice or physical appearance.

Also as a consequence of not being able to see or hear each other, it is often hard to tell whether the person is listening to what the other is saying. In speech, back-channels, such as “yeah” and “uh-huh” is often used to signify that one is listening while the other person is telling his/her story. Similarly, a text-based system of back-channeling has developed in IM; not only does it let the other person know that you are listening, but it also ensures that you get a message back. There are six major types of back-channeling that occurs in instant messaging. The first method is through the use of smilicons, small faces that can be used within an IM conversation that convey expressions and emotions. There are 16 standard smilicons available to use on AOL IM: the smile, frown, laughing, crying, embarrassed, innocent, foot-in-mouth, lips-are-sealed, surprise, kissing, money mouth, sticking-out tongue, cool, wink, angry, and undecided. Usually, a ☺ is used to respond to something pleasant, and a ☹ for something sad or disappointing. The smilicons can be used in isolation to indicate that you’re listening:

SunE13: yeah, i don’t think it’s gonna work  
 SunE13: i never got any file transfer msg  
 Nirone83: ☹  
 SunE13: I’ll just have to come over and watch it sometime

Here, the frown indicated to SunE13 that Nirone83 is listening and sympathizes her, and prompted SunE13 to continue speaking.

The second method of back-channeling is through laughter, as is also common in speech. The standard laughs are “haha,” “hehe,” or “lol,” which occur in almost every IM conversation. There are also some alternate types of laughs, such as “muahaha” (evil laugh) and “hee hee hee”

(giddy laugh) that convey slightly different feelings of laughter<sup>3</sup>. Expressions of laughter are not necessarily in response to something humorous, but rather as a friendly comment indicating light-heartedness:

SunE13: wow  
 SunE13: you're my hero  
 homerjs9: haha  
 SunE13: how did you conquer it?

Other common classes of back-channels used in IM are affirmative responses (such as yeah, yup, good, yes, sure, sweet, cool, yay, and okay), sympathetic responses (such as oh man, awww, dang, that sucks, and that's craziness), and neutral responses (such as ahhh, oh, and hmm). These types of back-channels reflect the content and mood of what has just been said, which indicates to the speaker that the listener is paying attention.

UofMbaby819: *kelly clarkson is singing a cappella*

UofMbaby819: *people love it*

SunE13: hahah  
 SunE13: sweet

SunE13: in fact, i'm writing the gimble email  
 SunE13: the pre-rehearsal email  
 ZeusMS7: ahhh

The last type of back-channeling used in instant messaging are questions that are used to prompt the speaker to keep talking, such as “why’s that?” or “what did she want?” It encourages the speaker to elaborate on what he/she has just said with the knowledge that the other person is listening and is interested in what he/she has to say.

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<sup>3</sup> The degree of humor can also be expressed; the more repetition of sounds used, the more funny the comment was (“haha” vs. “hahahahahahaha!!”).

Instant messaging has become more than just another mode of communication—it is one of the primary ways that college-age students in the United States keep in touch with one another. Due to the ease and efficiency of communicating with multiple people with the tips of your fingers, more and more college students use IM for social interaction. Through frequent use, instant messaging has become a genre of its own, an offspring of writing and speech with its initial roots in e-mail; users of IM have found creative ways to get past not being to see or hear each other in order to emulate the complexity and personal nature of face-to-face conversation, but retain the speed and accessibility of instant internet communication.