

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

With the constant evolvement of information technology and recent development on the benefits of the computer, daily communication for people around the world has become faster, easier and more accessible, even to those who are located in rural and faraway places. The network created by such high technology has enabled people from one end of the world to connect with another at the other end of the globe. It cannot be denied that the computer is now a modern tool used by millions and millions of users and for various purposes, besides the original purpose it was used for: to create documents and texts which used to be at the disposal of the old fashioned typewriter. Previously seen as a forte of publishers and printers, today's computer is also capable of producing a myriad of essential things like graphics, virtual books and journals, editing and designing and many more. The amount of benefits that anyone can reap from the use of the computer today is unimaginable.

One of the main focuses of using the computer is for the purpose of making electronic communication where an individual can be in touch with another individual at the click of the *mouse*. An individual may also resort to communicating with a group of people at the same time. Besides the advantage of the electronic mail also termed as *email*, anyone who is computer literate can also use it to have instant access to others he/she knows as well as total strangers.

One of these communication accesses where people try to correspond with others, irrespective of where he/she may be located is called *chatting*; a process where people try to communicate with one another through the internet. However, instead of using words verbally as in talking, these people resort to typing out words. One of these is called Internet Relay Chat (IRC). In the IRC, language is used in the written mode because the interactants have no access to hearing each other's voice. Instead, words are typed out on the screen and the respondents respond by similarly typing out their responses.

The sections below will attempt to outline a broader perspective on understanding the advantages of the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).

1.1 A General Perception of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

Many of us are influenced by what the computer is able to offer us in today's high tech world. For many, having a computer, especially a notebook or a laptop is no longer a luxury because it has become so much of the individual's way of life who uses it not only for creating documents and texts, but also for the pure benefit of communicating electronically with another who may be five, five hundred, or five thousand kilometers away. Today's lifestyle cannot be divorced from CMC because it is now the source for instant communication across the world for users. To be able to access that kind of communication, it is necessary to discuss what the *internet* is.

1.1.1 The Internet

The term *internet* was derived from a word that was coined from ‘international’ and ‘networking’ which literally means keeping in touch with others who are internationally dispersed. With the birth of the term *internet*, there are currently, new additions of words which go hand in hand. These words are: surfing, websites, cyberspace, chatting, virtual and many more. The word cyberspace literally means space within the computer where the individuals have access to various conveniences almost as if he/she is in the open world but the truth is that the individual is confined within the space of his computer only. While the three alphabets of *www* is not new to any young or old person who is comfortable with the use of computer, it should also be known that when a person is in cyberspace, he/she is also ‘netted’ within the World Wide Web (*www*) which equates with the term, *internet*. When an individual is on the *internet*, it means that the person is actually on the network that the computer has made possible.

The *internet* also refers to a social space which is virtual in nature, but it is in these spaces that relationships are developed and where communities and cultures emerge through the exchange of text and images, either in real time or delayed time sequences. In short, the Internet could be described as a complex network that has many uses. More will be discussed in chapter 2 under literature review.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Currently, people are becoming more and more reliant on the computer and lifestyles have changed. Peoples' use of the language has also evolved due to the advent of the *internet*. As a medium, language has evolved to become quite unlike its conventional form. Users of the computer have in their own creative ways, adapted language to suit their means of communication via the computer. Many studies have been done on how people use language in their communication via the computer because the conventional form of language has changed drastically.

1.3 Objective of the Study

This study attempts to look at the structure of cyberspace communication. It will focus on one of the more advanced methods of communication among various individuals within the confines of cyberspace, by looking at how people respond with each other via online chatting. As mentioned above, CMC communication in current use is text based only but because transmission is so fast online, there is bound to be a kind of structure that will be unlike conventional chatting.

It has been observed that in some aspects of the chatting, incoherence is wide spread but nonetheless, for communication to take place via CMC, some kind of coherence must be in existence. Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate the language conventions of cyberspace communication.

1.4 Research Questions

This research hopes to unfold answers which can help to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the non-language conventions employed in an online chatting environment like the Inter Relay Chat (IRC) setting in Malaysia?
- 2) What turn-taking strategies are employed during chat room talk?
- 3) How is coherence linguistically manifested?

1.5 Significance of the study

It is hoped that the findings of this study can contribute to the world of online chatting by highlighting the unconventional norms or structures of ‘conversations’ that occur in cyberspace. It is further hoped that part of the findings may help to enlighten others about the way people chat online. Invariably the findings may or may not illustrate how the younger generation talk among themselves today.

In addition, the findings may also help us to understand how cyberspace has transformed language use, particularly among ESL (English as a Second Language) students or users of Internet Relay Chat (IRC).

1.6 Scope and limitation of the study

The data drawn from online chatting for the purpose of this study is not comprehensive. Firstly, it was difficult to download cyberspace data that occurs in instant chatting. Secondly, it is highly possible that those individuals chatting online are total strangers to the researcher and this means that there are many

variables which could be responsible for the way the structure of online chatting develops. Furthermore, the limited amount of data extracted for the purpose of this research is contemporary, in that sense; the findings may only illustrate language use at a particular period of time.

Therefore, the main concern of this study is primarily with the written text interaction that takes place with IRC. The focus is primarily on ESL in language communication on IRC rooms, where Code switching such as Malay, English and Cantonese for example, may cause some problems. However the Code switching phenomenon is outside the scope of this study. Another limitation is the availability of chat rooms using English as the medium of interaction in Malaysia. It has been a difficult task to log into local channels other than the two most established chat rooms. The entire corpus used for the analysis is obtained solely from these two: *#alamak* and *#msn* channels, which have been downloaded as conversation takes place.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined some aspects of the research which will focus on how online chatting develops. It has expressed the objective of the study, the relevant research questions, the significance of the study as well as its limitations. The researcher would also like to highlight the overview of the research which encompasses five chapters.

Chapter two will discuss the findings of previous literature on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as well as specific issues including online communities, the Internet as a social phenomena, the Inter Relay Chat (IRC) interpersonal relationship and also some aspects of language analysis on online chatting. In addition, it will provide focus by studying the literature and establishing the specific direction of the study development which covers quantitative dealing of the data.

Chapter three will discuss the theoretical framework used for this study which is drawn from Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). It will also present the methodology used to collect data and how data is analyzed.

Chapter four will interpret and discuss the data through linguistic analysis which focuses on conventions or non-conventions of language use.

Chapter five concludes the study by discussing the implication of chat room language.