CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The computer has become more than just a tool for calculating or processing text as its power and usefulness increases. It is now a window open to a world of communication through the Internet. People today are being connected to the Internet and are using it as a tool for communication. This electronic communication has given rise to new unique modes and purposes for communication. Each new user, who embarks on electronic communication, needs to know the conversational structure of electronic communication in order to communicate effectively.

1.1.1 Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

With the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC), in which people communicate via computer, a new form of discourse has been generated. Originally, discourse is a dichotomy of writing and speaking. Today, CMC is a hybrid register that resembles both speech and writing and yet is neither (Veselinova & Dry: 1995). CMC is a dichotomy of asynchronous and synchronous communication. Electronic mail (E-mail) is an example of asynchronous communication in which mail can be sent to a single, known person who is not immediately available. In contrast to asynchronous
communication, in synchronous communication, mail can be sent to various unknown persons who are immediately available. Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which comprises private and public chat, is one example of synchronous communication.

1.1.2 Internet Relay Chat (IRC)

IRC stands for Internet Relay Chat. It is a multi-user and multi-channel chat system that allows people to communicate at the same time. This means a message typed by one participant is seen by other participants within a few seconds. Each participant has a nickname and chats with the other participants in a channel. Each channel is like a private room, the other participants who are in the same channel can read the message that is typed in a channel, but participants outside the channel are unable to read the message.

The IRC operates through a server network. This means that a number of machines connected to the Internet send data through linked servers to other computers which are linked to those servers all around the world. The current IRC servers are UnderNet, EFNet, and DALNet.

1.1.2.1 Types of Communication in the IRC

The spanning tree in Figure 1 shows the network of client-server relationships in the IRC communication. There are two different kinds of
communication in the IRC:

i. One-to-one communication.

ii. One-to-many communication.
   a. One to a list.
   b. One to a group (channel).
   c. One to a host/server mask.
   d. One to all

![Diagram of Spanning Tree: Types of Communication in the IRC](image)

**Figure 1: Spanning Tree: Types of Communication in the IRC**

1.2.1.1.1 One-to-One Communication

Clients usually communicate on a one-to-one basis: one client interacts with only one client at a time. To provide a secure means for clients to talk to
each other, it is required that all servers be able to send a message in exactly one
direction along the spanning tree in order to reach any client.

The path of a message being delivered is the shortest path between any
two points on the spanning tree.

Example 1: A message between clients 1 and 2 is only read by server A, which
sends it straight to client 2.

Example 2: A message between clients 1 and 4 is read by servers A and B. No
other clients or servers are allowed to see the message.

Example 3: A message between clients 2 and 3 is read by servers A, B, C and D.

1.1.2.1.2 One-to-Many

The main goal of IRC is to provide a forum which allows easy and
efficient conferencing (one to many conversations). IRC offers several means to
achieve this, each serving a specific purpose.

a. One To a List

The least efficient style of the one-to-many conversation is through
clients talking to a 'list' of users. This is how it is done:

The client gives a list of destinations to which the message is to be
delivered and the server breaks it up and dispatches a separate copy of the
message to each given destination.
b. **One To a Group (channel)**

   If there are multiple users on a server in the same channel, the message text is sent only once to that server and then sent to each client on the channel. This action is then repeated for each client-server combination until the original message has fanned out and reached each member of the channel.

   Example 1: If there is only one client in one channel, messages to the channel go to the server and then nowhere else.

   Example 2: If there are two clients in a channel, all messages traverse a path as if they were private messages between the two clients outside a channel.

   Example 3: If there are three clients in a channel, all messages to the channel are sent to all clients.

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**c. One to a Host/Server Mask**

   To provide IRC operators with some mechanism to send messages to a large body of related users, host and server mask messages are provided. The messages are sent to locations where users are in the same channel.

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**d. One-to-All.**

   The one-to-all type of message is better described as a broadcast message,
sent to all clients or servers or both. On a large network of users and servers, a single message can result in a lot of traffic travelling over the network in an effort to reach all of the desired destinations. For some messages, there is no option but to broadcast them to all servers so that the state of information held by each server is reasonably consistent among servers.

1.1.3 Background to the Malaysian IRC

Internet has been widely used in Malaysia especially among students (Rashid Mohd. Din: 1999). Internet began in 1990 when the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS Berhad) launched Joint Advanced Integrated Networking (JARING) as a main Internet Service Provider (ISP).

Currently, JARING and TMNET are the only two ISPs in Malaysia. The first ISP in Malaysia was JARING. With the installation of a satellite link between Malaysia and the USA in 1992, JARING was connected to the Internet, henceforth providing Malaysians with accessibility to the Internet in more than 140 countries (Seventh Malaysia Plan 1996:458). The second ISP in Malaysia is TMNET, launched by Telekom Malaysia in July 1996 but began operations in November 1996 to complement JARING. Since December 1997, TMNET has had 51 percent of the subscribers' market share while JARING took 49 percent (New Straits Times, 1996).
With the initiation of the two ISPs in Malaysia, Internet surfing has become a fad among the young, partly because of the Government ban on all video arcades. They now turn to cyber cafes that offer Internet facilities such as IRC and a café-like environment, as alternatives to video arcades. They access the IRC which is an Internet application that allows people from all over the world to communicate. IRC has become a favourite because it allows users to interact yet remain anonymous. The anonymity offered by IRC is nothing less than seductive. One can say anything, have a worldwide audience by posting the message on a virtual bulletin board and it would be difficult to track the originator of the message (Dass :New Straits Times, November 1998).

In this study, the researcher will examine one form of CMC, which is the IRC, and more specifically the Malaysian Internet Relay Chat (IRC). The researcher will discuss the language conventions (various typographic and emoticon features), code-switching patterns and its communicative purposes. The researcher also discusses the opening and closing phases of the chat to see if the strategies in the two phases are transferred to the IRC.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

The Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is based on typed text; thus interlocutors in the IRC depend on the typed text which is sent by other interlocutors. Because IRC is typed-text, it has its own conventions, register, structure, forms, and culture and they are important for one to be a fluent interlocutor via IRC.
As newbies (new users of IRC) may have difficulties in understanding IRC discourse, this study hopes to identify the various orthographic features such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization used in IRC and to determine the communicative purpose of chats in Malaysian settings. Early studies of IRC (such as Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire, 1984) argued that IRC systems disregard social-context cues and that this leads to impersonal interaction. Scholars in the 1990's report that IRC resembles socially rich oral chat, despite its typographic nature. Some users are aware of this type of electronic chat discourse and actively participate fully in their production. Other users remain less aware and do not participate in their production. At times, newbies transfer inappropriate conventions from face-to-face communication to the IRC world, resulting in experienced users getting annoyed as they have to read laborious sentences or explain the conventions used. All this is a waste of time to them. Newbies should not be blamed because they lack the knowledge of IRC language conventions and culture.

December (1995) points out that IRC exhibits characteristics of oral discourse as it allows explicit and emphatic sociability. Further, Reid (1996) suggests that IRC can satisfy interpersonal needs and support socioemotional content. This study hopes to point out the features used by Malaysian IRC users to express their interpersonal needs and emotion.

Interaction in IRC in many ways resembles cocktail parties in which there are many simultaneous interactions. Goffman (1959) notes that while people at
cocktail parties can attend to many parallel discourse events, they in fact participate in only one discourse event at a time. This is untrue for discourse in the IRC because users can and do participate in several interactions simultaneously. The newbies encounter difficulties in understanding this new conversation structure especially the opening and closing phases. At times, they are confused among themselves as to who is talking to whom. This failure has caused conflicts when reacting to what a particular person is saying. In 1997, Rintel and Pittam in their study on IRC conclude that IRC has characteristics in common with casual face-to-face conversation. Similarly, this study will see if face-to-face strategies in the opening and closing phases are transferred to the chat context.

Without language, interaction would be impossible. Thus, it is important for newbies, computer programmers, and future computer-mediated communication researchers to understand the language conventions, language used and conversational structure of the IRC. This study attempts to identify the language convention features, code-switching patterns, the communicative purposes and the opening and closing conversation structure of the Malaysian IRC. Conversational discourse analysis constitutes an area of continuous concern for IRC users since they are repeatedly faced with the IRC language conventions.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study serves three purposes. First, to investigate the language
conventions (various typographic and emoticons features) used in local IRC. The second purpose is to discover the code-switching patterns and its communicative purpose. The third purpose is to discover the opening and closing patterns of conversation organization in the IRC. The objectives of this study are:

i. to reveal the IRC language conventions (emoticon and typographic features) present in Malaysian IRC

ii. to determine the code-switching patterns and its communicative purposes in Malaysian IRC

iii. to examine whether the face-to-face strategies in the openings and closings are transferred to the Malaysian IRC

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the objectives, this study hopes to answer the following research questions:

i. What emoticon and typographic features do Internet Relay Chat (IRC) users employ in an IRC setting in Malaysia?

ii. What are the code-switching patterns present in Malaysian IRC?

iii. What are the communicative purposes of code-switching in Malaysian IRC?

iv. Are strategies employed in face-to-face conversations in the opening and closing phases transferred to the IRC context?
1.5 Definition of Terms and Concepts

Due to many different interpretation opinions on the key terms used in this study, the operational definitions and concepts are explained and grouped in related terms.

1.5.1 Internet-Based Communication

Internet-based communication is essentially human communication via the Internet computer. The process of communication exchange occurs in the context of Internet communication with mediation characteristics, following the server-server model (Figure 2, page 13) for information exchange and regulations. The content can be encoded and decoded using a variety of media types (text, graphics, sound).

1.5.2 Mediated

Mediation in this study is the process of intervening or coming between. The mediated message is via computer, time, and distribution. In IRC, the users participate in nearly real-time text interchange.

1.5.3 Client

A client is anything connecting to a server but not another server. Each
client is distinguished from other clients by a unique nickname having a maximum length of nine (9) characters. Usually users choose a constant nickname although theoretically each time they connect to a server they can use a new nickname. The following example explains how a client connects to a server: irc Nick /SERVER irc.tau.ac.il. This means that a client with the nickname Nick connects to the IRC-server of Tel-Aviv University.

In addition to the nickname, all servers must have the following information about all clients:

i. the real name of the host that the client is running on

ii. the username of the client on that host

1.5.4 Server

The server forms the backbone of IRC, providing a point to which clients may connect to talk to each other, and a point for other servers to connect to, forming an IRC network. The only network configuration allowed for IRC servers is that of a spanning tree where each server acts as a central node for the rest of the net it sees. Figure 2 illustrates the server-server relationship.
1.5.5 Computer Network

The term computer network in the Internet is the relationships among computers that follow the server-server model (See Figure 2 on page 13). This model is a unifying characteristic of the Internet communications where both the client and server collaborate to provide information.

A computer network consists of more than one server and terminal, where digital information can be sent from any terminal to any other terminal within the same network. For instance, IRC networks (Eunet, IRCnet, Undernet, Efnet, etc) have a few servers and users but share the same characteristics. An analogy for this would be people in the same room talking and listening to each other, as
everyone present hears each utterance. Nevertheless, participants can exchange information privately. Anyone can leave a room to join a new conversation outside the room. It is also possible to invite people from other rooms, but not from another building to chat.

1.5.6 Channels

Werry (1996) terms channel as "small-scale electronic communities", because channel enable users to create an infinite number of "chat rooms" where conversation can take place. Thus, joining a conversation means joining one of the thousands of existing channels. A channel cannot exist without any users on it. The name of each channel is initiated with a "#" sign, and is followed by the number of participants who are on that particular channel. In Malaysia, we have a number of channels. Amongst the popular ones are #Mamak, #Bangsar, #Kakilang, and #Indian. This study analyzes extracts from only the #Mamak channel.

1.5.7 Given Status of Participants

Once a person joins or quits the channel, the server to the other participants will notify his or her presence or absence. Thus, the given status of participants appears automatically once a person joins or quits the channel. This information is initiated by three asterisk marks. For instance, the given status of participants appears in this form:
i. *** tomoko (daniel@brk-21-117.tm.net.my) has joined #mamak

ii. *** kendy (kendy@klj-228-153.tm.net.my) has left #mamak.

The format of the given status of participants is as shown below:

*** tomoko  (daniel@brk-21-117.tm.net.my) has joined #mamak
     ↓  ↓  ↓  ↓  ↓
    nickname participant's entry name terminal address participant's status channel name

1.5.8 Experienced Users

Experienced users are those who are familiar with the IRC language conventions while interacting. Based on the findings on the types of users from the questionnaires, the researcher discovered that users who chatted 3-4 hours in one session (one day) over 3-4 years are able to understand the IRC language conventions and are therefore considered as experienced users in this study.

1.5.9 Newbies

Newbies are new users of the IRC, those who have used the IRC less than two hours in a session and for less than two years. They are those who have problems deciphering the language conventions used during interaction.

1.5.10 Language Conventions

The term language conventions in this study refers to the emoticon
features and typographic features such as punctuation, spelling, and capitalization which are used during the on-line chat.

1.5.11 Emoticons

Simple strings of alphanumerical characters and punctuation symbols, which symbolise facial expressions, or resembles emotions. For example :>, ☺, ☹, and etc. Refer to Appendix A for a list of common emoticons and their meaning.

1.5.12 Typographic Features

Typographic features refer to the capitalization, spelling, and punctuation style used by the Malaysian IRC participants.

1.5.13 Eccentric Spelling

Eccentric spelling is a term used by Reid (1996) that refers to extended spelling, for example *yaawn*, which has communicative purposes.

1.5.14 Adjacency Pairs

Adjacency means being next to; where one turn is related in predictable ways to the previous and next turns. Schegloff (1968) says that summon-answer
(S-A) sequence, a minimum of one exchange, is a specific type of adjacency pair. For example, a question suggests that the next turn will be an answer, and a greeting suggests that the next turn will be a greeting.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to create awareness that IRC is a new mode of communication that has its own communicative purpose which in turn shapes the language conventions and conversation structure of the IRC.

Furthermore, IRC which is a type of synchronous communication, has added variety to human communication patterns and culture. This study hopes to provide insights among the readers on the uses of certain language conventions (emoticon and typographic features) to reduce apprehension while communicating via IRC. Moreover, it also provides initial information or knowledge on IRC communication to newbies so that they will be more aware and understand the IRC better.

This study is also beneficial to computer programmers to write more effective, interesting yet user-friendly on-line systems. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of language in attracting, initiating, and maintaining on-line users while interacting.
1.7 Assumptions and Limitations

This study is based upon three assumptions. The first assumption is that the users in the sample are a mixture of experienced and newbies users. The second assumption is that the conversation is held amongst participants whose ages probably vary between 16 and 22 as the researcher had logged into the IRC in the afternoon, which means that the users are probably students. The third assumption is that the extracts will continue to be produced in a similar and comparable format in the future.

Due to time constrains, a slight setback was encountered in selecting a wider range of subjects from different channels. Thus, the sample in this study was confined to one channel in the IRC: Mamak channel. Furthermore, the exact total number of users is unavailable. Neither is it possible to verify the users with regard to age, sex, location, profession, cultural background, and social status.

Though this study has limitations in terms of the selection of the sample and the anonymity of the users, it is hoped that similar studies in the future would look at wider samples from different local IRC channels.