Electronic-discourse (E-discourse): Spoken, written or a new hybrid?

ALAGESWARY V A MUNIANDY – Faculty of Language Studies
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The concept of *discourse* has conventionally been thought of and taught in terms of *written* and *spoken discourse*. However, the advent and global use of information technology in the 20th century has seen the emergence of a new discourse – *electronic discourse* found in e-mails, Internet-relay chats (IRC), and homepages – which is used to communicate across time and geographical borders. For the purpose of this paper, electronic discourse is defined as language that is used to communicate in cyberspace, which Yates (2001: 106) refers to as the 'imaginary space created by the Internet in which people interact and form social relationships'. While students seem to be very comfortable and adept at using this new discourse to communicate, teachers appear to be in awe and at times even intimidated by it. One of the reasons for this could be the difficulty in categorising this new kind of discourse because it is neither purely written nor spoken, but shares features of both types of discourse simultaneously. The aim of this paper is to argue that electronic discourse is developing and becoming a new form of communication in its own right, and that teachers should be aware of it in the language classroom. This argument will be supported with examples illustrating electronic discourse, based on an analysis of the language used in e-mails and Internet-relay chats.

Introduction

The increasingly pervasive use of information technology in the 20th century in most parts of the world cannot be ignored. Historically, computers have gone through four discrete phases. In the 1960s we saw the development of mainframes, which were massive, complex machines, followed in the 1970s by microcomputers, which increased computing powers to companies worldwide. In the 1980s personal computers, comparatively small machines used by individuals to do a multitude of tasks, arrived, and the early 1990s marked the arrival of the network: local area networks which linked together computers located in a particular building and wide area networks that connected collectively all the computers owned by a particular company or organisation around the world. The Internet is the information highway for

people worldwide and the global area network. Currently, it is the world's largest computer network, linking together some 20 to 50 million people (Carroll et al 1997). According to International Data Corp (*New Straits Times* 18 March 1999), the number of Internet users in Asia (excluding Japan) is projected to be 35.3 million in about three years' time. This indicates the extensive use of the Internet to communicate with people locally, regionally and internationally. Not only is this new technological tool used for communication, it is also used to conduct research and to update oneself on the latest news and information on practically anything of interest. The users are not just young male adolescents but include a growing number of children, women and seniors from all walks of life.

The advent and global use of information technology has resulted in the emergence of a new discourse – *e-discourse* (e-discourse), as seen in e-mails, Internet-relay chats (IRC) and homepages – which is used to communicate across time and geographical borders. The term *discourse* has been defined in several books and articles in applied linguistics. Pennycook (1994) found that there is a general consensus on the meaning of the term *discourse* as defined in various publications (Brown and Yule 1983; Cook 1989; McCarthy 1991; Hatch 1992). Discourse is defined as 'language in use' (Pennycook 1994: 117). This definition is also reiterated by other researchers, for example, Richards et al (1992), Nunan (1993), Widdowson (1996), Georgakopoulou and Goustos (1997) and Trask (1997). Richards et al (1992: 111) explain discourse as 'a general term used for examples of language use, that is, language which has been produced as the result of an act of communication'. Widdowson (1996: 127) talks about discourse as 'the use of language in speech and writing to achieve pragmatic meaning'. Henceforth, *discourse* as used in this paper will refer to language used in communication.

Aim of paper

The primary aim of this paper is to present an argument for the definition of e-discourse and the *hybridisation* of this new medium of communication. The term hybridisation is used in this paper to refer to the process whereby e-discourse emerges as a composite of features of spoken discourse, written discourse and features specific to e-discourse. My argument will be supported with examples based on a linguistic analysis of a sample of e-mail messages and IRC. The secondary aim of this paper is to make a case as to why teachers should be aware of this discourse in the language classroom.

First, therefore, I will argue for a definition of e-discourse within the established framework of spoken and written discourse. Second, I will justify its label as a new discourse hybrid. The features of this hybrid will be

illustrated using examples of e-discourse, such as e-mails and IRC. Finally, I will discuss the rationale for making teachers aware of this new discourse in the ESL/EFL classroom.

Spoken and written discourse

The concept of *discourse* is conventionally thought of and taught in terms of *written* and *spoken discourse* (Brown and Yule 1983; Cook 1989; Nunan 1993; McCarthy and Carter 1994; Georgakopoulou and Goustos 1997; Carter et al 1998). I will define e-discourse using the basic constructs of medium and mode. Medium is defined as the means by which a message is conveyed from one person to another (Crystal 1991; Richards et al 1992; Trask 1997). McCarthy and Carter (1994) explain medium as the overall distinction between linguistic messages transmitted to their receivers via phonic or graphic means, that is, by sound or by writing. They further add that medium is often discussed in relation to mode, which refers to the features normally associated with speech and writing. For example, in a lecture the lecturer communicates orally with his/her students in a face-to-face interaction. The discourse is spoken discourse, but in the process of giving this lecture, the mode used may have features of both speech and writing. In the introduction, the lecturer may start on a very formal note, and this may sound like it is written. The ensuing discourse may follow in a similar way, especially if the lecture is read out from printed or written notes. Occasionally the lecturer may resort to the spoken mode where his/her sentences are incomplete, fragmented and he/she uses fillers, for example 'er', 'umm', 'hmmm', et cetera.

Nunan (1993) and Georgakopoulou and Goustos (1997) have contributed to debates on the identification and specification of the differences between spoken and written discourse along a continuum. They explain that, although both discourse types are used for basically similar functions, such as getting things done, providing information, and entertainment, the contexts for each differ. Spoken discourse is normally used in face-to-face interactions (including teleconferences), whereas written discourse is used to communicate with those who are removed in time and space or in cases where a permanent or semi-permanent record is required. It is important to note that although there are distinct features in both types of discourse, the differences are not absolute. In fact, naturally occurring texts indicate that features in both written and spoken discourse do overlap and do not fall into neat categories. The standard view is that there are no absolute differences between spoken and written texts; they form a continuum and not the opposites of a rigid dichotomy. These features are tabled below and

categorised in relation to the manner of production, and contextual and linguistic features.

Table 1.1 Differences between spoken and written discourse

	Spoken	Written
1 Manner of production	a) Due to the speed and manner of production, less forethought, planning and prior organisation goes into speech. b) Spoken text is transient unless it is recorded. Therefore, it is imperfect and it is always possible to do on-line editing and negotiate meaning.	a) Writing is a slower activity, thus authors have the time to mould their ideas into a more complex, coherent and integrated whole using complicated lexical and syntactic devices. b) Written texts are relatively permanent and this enables them to be surveyed and consulted. These texts are the products of copious drafts, which involve extensive checking and editing. The relative permanence of written texts also allows them to be portable.
2 Contextual features	c) The interlocutors share the same spatio-temporal context. Communication thus shows an 'on-line' monitoring, which benefits from the addressee's immediate feedback and the abundance of contextual cues (visual clues such as body language and gestures; auditory clues like variation in tone of voice, hesitations, pauses, etc).	c) Written texts are decontextualised or autonomous as they cannot depend on the addressee's contributions or on other contextual clues. There is no common situation, as in face-to-face interaction. The situation has to be inferred from the text. Also, the words need to convey all shades of meaning, which in spoken text are relayed by paralinguistic cues.
3 Linguistic features	d) The syntax in spoken language is typically less structured than that of written language; for example, spoken language contains incomplete sentences, fragments of speech, and little subordination. e) Rare use of metalingual markers. The markers seem to be replaced by fillers, such as 'er', 'umm', 'hmmn', and logical connectors like *and*, *but*, *then*, etc.	d) In written language the sentences are complete, and better structured with embedded clauses. e) Extensive use of metalingual markers to mark relationships between clauses; for example, temporal markers like *when*, *while*; logical connectors such as *besides*, *moreover*, *however*, etc.

(Compiled from Nunan 1993; Georgakopoulou and Goustos 1997)

E-Discourse: A new hybrid

Foertsch (1995: 304) argues that, 'E-discourse is neither here nor there, neither pure writing nor pure speech but somewhere in between … Studying it as one and not the other will force us to exclude certain factors that influence its construction.' One of these factors is articulated in Bhatia (1999), who argues that hybrid or mixed genres (Bhatia 1993) are the products of the ability to 'create, innovate and develop new generic forms to achieve novel communicative goals within the framework of socially accepted generic boundaries' (Bhatia: 36). This exemplifies a 'dynamic use and exploitation of the available generic knowledge and resources to respond to familiar and not-so-familiar rhetorical contexts' (Bhatia: 36). Another factor is the medium used, which I will discuss as part of my argument for e-discourse as a new discourse hybrid which not only has the features of the spoken and written mode, but also certain distinctive features which typify it as a new discourse type.

Discourse has been traditionally divided into spoken and written discourse based on the medium used to convey information. Using medium as the main construct to identify discourse type, an argument can be made for e-discourse as a new discourse-type, since messages are conveyed electronically, that is, through electronic systems, for example, computers and computer networks. According to the *Essential English dictionary* (1997: 231), the artificial environment created by computer networks, where information is made available and electronic communication can take place, is labelled as virtual reality or cyberspace. Yates (2001: 106) refers to cyberspace as the 'imaginary space created by the Internet, in which people interact and form social relationships'. For the purpose of this paper, e-discourse is defined as language used to communicate in cyberspace.

In addition to using medium and mode as the basic parameters to define e-discourse, a comparative analysis between the three discourse types will also be conducted using the following constructs: content, form or structure, context of situation, and language used. Content refers to the subject matter, and structure to the overall organisation or format of the discourse. The concept of context takes into account 'who is speaking to whom, when, where and for what purpose; the physical setting, the social scene in which the discourse occurs; the roles and status of the participants involved …' (Georgakopoulou and Goustos 1997: 18). The language used will be analysed in relation to syntax, punctuation, shorthand, contractions and other conventions used to express feelings and emotions. While content may be similar in all three discourse types – meaning the type and nature of the subject matter communicated remain the same regardless of whether it

is spoken, written or electronic – the structure varies due to the nature of the medium used to communicate the linguistic messages. E-mails are a case in point, since software packages like Internet Mail, Pegasus Mail, and Eudora are used to create the overall format of e-mails. Though most have certain obligatory elements or fields (which in computer technology refer to a set of one or more characters comprising a unit of information), there are also some optional fields, depending on the type of software used. In relation to the context of situation, certain components in the context may remain unchanged, such as the participants involved in the communication, and the purpose of that communication. However, the fact that the communication takes place in cyberspace affects the role of the participants and their status in relation to each other, as in IRC. In the next sections, an analysis of e-mails and IRC will be presented.

E-MAIL

E-mail is a technology that has been around for the last 15 years (Carroll et al 1997). The term is used to describe messages sent electronically from one computer to another via a network. Messages can be sent to individuals or groups of people instantaneously and simultaneously all over the world. The growing popularity of e-mail is evident from the fact that it is given as the contact address in many advertisements, product labels, television and radio programs, newspapers, and business cards, et cetera.

The advantages of using e-mail have been found to outweigh other means of communication, such as faxes, courier services and telephones. Carroll et al (1997: 108–9) discuss these advantages, and highlight six main advantages.

1 E-mail saves money: for example, sending a message to one person will cost the same as sending it to a hundred people.

2 It has gained acceptance: that is, more and more people realise the value of adding their e-mail address in their business cards, their products, advertisements, et cetera.

3 It is easy to use, because currently composing, sending and receiving messages is simple. All it takes is to click on certain icons and one can write any kind of correspondence, such as notes, memos, letters, et cetera.

4 It saves time, since e-mails can be sent within seconds to any corner in the world where there are computers linked to the Internet. This also saves time, money and paper, compared to sending letters in the post, or by courier.

5 It transcends time zones and geographical boundaries. Unlike the telephone, whose use necessitates careful consideration of time-zone

differences, one can compose and send an e-mail at any time and it will be there when the person opens his/her e-mail.

6 It is a good business strategy. More and more companies are realising the intrinsic value of using the e-mail to communicate within the organisation as well as making new business contacts and maintaining potential clients.

E-mail is used in all sorts of personal, social, business, and organisational communication. The level of formality used in e-mails varies. For example, personal and social e-mails between friends would be more informal and sound like spoken discourse as compared to business e-mail correspondence, which is more formal and would follow the structure of a formal letter, memo, et cetera. Having said this, however, e-mail has its own distinguishing features, which mark it as a new discourse hybrid. This will be made apparent in the comparative analysis below.

Samples of formal organisational communication are shown in Texts 1a (Appendix 1) and 1b (Appendix 2). Text 1c (Appendix 3) exemplifies social communication. (My thanks to those of my undergraduate students who provided me with samples of text.)

In Text 1a, the message content is framed by the overall structure or macrostructure of the e-mail. The title bar, menu line at the top left-hand corner of the frame, and the icons at the bottom and top right-hand corner signify a unique feature of e-mails which is absent in conventional written correspondence.

The e-mail message has several distinct parts. For the purpose of our discussion, each message is segmented and numbered based on the main parts in its organisational structure.

The main parts are:

Part I: Basic Fields

Part II: Salutation

Part III: Message Proper

Part IV: Signature

Part V: Basic Fields

Text 1a is a formal e-mail in response to my query regarding a journal. The message content and language used correspond to that communicated in a formal letter. The context of situation also resembles the context in formal correspondence. The participants, the level of formality imposed by the relationship between the participants, and the purpose of that communication

determine the type of language used. In Text 1a, the sentences are grammatically correct and short forms are not used. Nevertheless, the structure of the e-mail varies due to the nature of the medium used to communicate linguistic messages. As messages are transmitted electronically in cyberspace, the structure of the e-mail is dependent on the software package used to compose the overall format of e-mails.

As seen in Text 1a, while the e-mail seems to be very much like a formal letter, it nevertheless differs in several distinctive ways. It is similar in that Part II: Salutation, Part III: Message Proper, and Part IV: Signature, resemble the basic components in a formal letter. One distinguishing difference, however, is in Part I: Basic Fields, where some components are similar to those found in a formal letter, but there are certain distinctive components which make the e-mail a unique type of e-discourse. The format of this part is set by the software program, which specifies the basic fields. As evident in Text 1a, the basic fields are the date and time the message was composed by the sender, the name of the sender, the sender's e-mail address, the recipient's address and the topic of the subject matter. The date, name of the sender, and subject matter are similar to those found in a formal letter, but the time the message was created, and the sender's and recipient's e-mail addresses are features specific to an e-mail. The time, in particular, is specific and relevant to e-discourse, because messages can be conveyed in a matter of seconds, and because messages can be updated, and communicated back and forth throughout the day. The speed at which messages are sent and received is one of the main advantages of the e-mail compared to the other more conventional systems of disseminating information.

Another unique feature which typifies e-mail is Part IV: Signature. This part subsumes the complimentary close as well as the closing (sender's name, designation and name of organisation), which are normally distinguished in written correspondence. In addition, in the e-mail the signature is printed, unlike in written correspondence where it is signed. Part V: Basic Fields indicates the company/institution and its address in cyberspace, that is, the website. Parts I and V: Basic Fields function to frame the message proper and enhance its format.

Text 1b is an invitation to an inaugural lecture by a professor, which was sent by the office administrator of a language teachers' association. As in Text 1a, the message content, context of situation, and language used corresponds to that communicated in a formal letter. Apart from one apparently typographic mistake (the sentence, 'The details of the workshop are as follow' should read as 'follows'), the rest of the message is grammatically correct, for short forms are not used.

One difference between the two messages is the absence of the complimentary close in the signature in Text 1b. One reason for this could be that the sender may have forgotten to add this part, or this may actually be optional in the software program used. Another difference is that the organisation's website is missing in Text 1b, perhaps because the organisation does not have a website.

The message content, context of situation, language, and structure used in social communication e-mails differ generally from that found in formal organisational e-mails. While it may be argued that the first two constructs seem to be similar to those of informal spoken discourse, yet the medium used to convey the message predetermines the language and the structure used.

Text 1c is an example of social communication between a trainee teacher (who is on her teaching practice in one of the secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur and is referred to as the mentor), and one of her students, J. The mentor is 23 years old and J is 16. According to the participants in this interaction, both of them are outgoing, friendly and extroverted and, more importantly, feel they are close enough in age to be able to communicate informally with each other. In Text 1c, J replies to the mentor's earlier e-mail in which she had written to enquire whether J knew how to attach files with the e-mail. Both J's reply and the mentor's query are illustrated in Text 1c. J's message is on top of the page whereas the mentor's is at the bottom.

In analysing the language, not only were there several differences between formal (Texts 1a and b) and informal e-mail messages (Text 1c), but also several unique features which typify electronic discourse. First, while the formal e-mail sounds very much like written discourse, the opposite is true for the social e-mail. On the surface level, the language in social e-mails simulates that of spoken discourse; for example, the sentences are not as well structured as those in the formal e-mails. Also, incomplete sentences and fragments of speech, such as 'what topic then???? dunno yet …' as well as contractions, such as 'don't', 'i'll' and 'i'm' indicate the spontaneous nature of speech (Nunan 1993; Georgakopoulou and Goustos 1997).

The second difference between formal and informal e-mails is the lack of capitalisation to begin sentences as in J's reply. This is a feature that appears to be due to time and financial constraints and peculiar to informal e-discourse since, in many situations, the more time one spends on-line, the more one pays. Thus a desire to get the message across quickly seems to have resulted in this unique feature. Although the non-use of capitalisation seems to simulate usage found in transcribed formal and informal spoken discourse conventionally used for research purposes, it is different in that it is a naturally occurring feature of electronic discourse. Formal discourse seems to observe

written discourse conventions and informal discourse those of spoken discourse. While J did not use capitalisation, the mentor used it appropriately in her message. This, according to the mentor, was because, as the teacher, she was trying to be a role model for J and therefore made sure she did not take liberties with the language. But she does use informal language as in 'hmmmmmm', 'grin', and 'bye'. The use of capitals in the middle of sentences to signify the writer's emphasis is similar to that in written discourse. This is illustrated in 'NOT' and 'SORT' in J's message.

The third difference between formal and informal e-discourse is the use of short-forms in the latter type of discourse. This is evident in J's message, where 'abt' (about) is used three times, and in the mentor's message where 'u' (you) is used twice. The use of these short forms, as well as the abbreviation ASAP (as soon as possible), suggests the speed at which these messages were written. This could be attributed to the fact that money is a very pragmatic constraint on e-mail use.

Another difference between formal and informal e-mails is the use of symbols to show physical action. This refers to the use of asterisks and brackets to isolate and highlight the word and the physical response it encapsulates. A case in point is *wink wink*, and the other, ((((hugs)))), to manifest paralinguistic cues. In Text 1c, J's salutation to her mentor begins with, 'dearest mentor *wink wink*', and the mentor ends her message to J with lots of ((((hugs)))). Both these show the close relationship between J and the mentor. In spoken discourse (except in the case of telephone conversations), the participants share the same spatio-temporal context and the use of paralinguistic cues is predominant in responding to each other's response. However, this is not so in written discourse where, due to the physical absence of the reader/s, the onus is on the author to use words to communicate all shades of meaning. In e-discourse, conveying paralinguistic cues can be taken over by *emoticons*, which are a distinguishing feature of e-discourse. This is another technique employed to convey feelings and emotions. This will be discussed and illustrated in the analysis of IRC in the next section.

Besides analysing the language, the structure used in the informal e-mail (Text 1c) will also be analysed in order to distinguish the features between spoken, written and e-discourse. The structure is almost similar to that in the formal e-mail in Texts 1a and b with a few exceptions. One is that in Text 1c, the field 'Reply-To' is absent whereas it is present in Text 1b. This is due to the type of software program used to organise the message. *Yahoo* mail has been used in Text 1c as compared to *tm.net* in Text 1b. The second difference is the insertion of the previous e-mail, in this case the mentor's query, which begins with the mentor's e-mail address. However, it should

be noted that the insertion of previous messages may also be found in formal e-mails.

In summary, the analysis of formal and informal e-mails shows that although the e-mails observe certain conventions in spoken and written discourse, yet there are certain unique features, which are the result of the electronic medium used to convey the messages. These features include the structural formatting of the message content, linguistic conventions like non-use of capitalisation, the use of short forms and symbols to convey meaning. Some of these features as well as other novel ones are also evident in another type of e-discourse, that is, IRC, as shown in the analysis below.

IRC

IRC is an application that permits one to chat in 'real time' (unlike e-mail where you can chat in real time only if you are logged on at the same time) via computer keyboards with others all over the world. In short, it is an electronic form of chatting. Any number of users can participate collectively at the same point in time. As the discussion progresses, all the comments made by all the participants in that discussion are shown on the computer screen. Unlike e-mails where the identity of the person at the other terminal is usually known, in IRC, participants have the prerogative to select nicknames and assume whatever persona they want, which in turn allows them to say whatever they want.

IRC is an example of social communication. A sample of an IRC is given in Text 1d (Appendix 4). The interaction occurs in a Malaysian IRC channel between ten Malaysian participants. However, five participants are the most active. It is not possible to provide any specific description (age, sex, race, et cetera) about the participants due to the 'faceless' nature of IRC. The electronic medium via which chats are conducted in the IRC plays a significant role in affecting the context of situation, message content, structure, and language used in these chats, as will be illustrated in reference to Text 1d in Appendix 4.

Since participants operate in cyberspace, where it is literally not possible to have face-to-face interaction, it is difficult to postulate the context of situation in terms of the roles and status of the participants involved: who is speaking to whom, when, where and for what purpose. The purpose may be speculated to be social interaction, and the physical setting to be the computer terminals, but other information such as who is speaking to whom, when, and where and the relationship between the participants may be one that can, at best, be only approximated. In Text 1d, the participants seem to be all teenagers as seen in a) and some even seem to be 'old friends' as in b).

a) [22:18] <InSaNe> Any 13 to 14 teenz here pls msg me !!!
b) [23:00] <siLvErSan> hi there again …
[23:00] <reef^^> hi again silversan

The informal nature of their social interaction is shown in the participants making and sharing jokes, and teasing each other. The language simulates that of informal spoken discourse. The sentences are incomplete and fragmented. The use of short forms, contractions and the non-use of punctuation are also indicators of the nature of e-discourse where participants do not edit their speech due to time and financial constraints. The overriding factor appears to be speed and there is a sense of urgency especially in IRC, where participants want to have as many turns as possible. Some of these points will be illustrated in the following paragraphs.

The structure of a session and conventions used in IRC differ markedly from any type of text exemplifying spoken and written discourse. Due to space and time constraints, a general analysis of Text 1d, which runs into six pages, will ensue instead of a detailed one. To facilitate the following discussion, Text 1d is segmented into two main parts: Part I: Basic Fields and Part II: Chat Proper. In Part I, the first four lines at the top of the page: mIRC, Logging! Channel: #malaysia, and Server: Undernet, provide general information regarding the basic fields. Part II begins with the time in square brackets [22.17], which shows the time the comment was keyed in. The comment, *** Now talking in #malaysia #malaysia created on Wed Feb 28 18:03:08, forms the introduction to the chat. The time after that [22: 18] is followed by the name of the first chatter <^InSaNe^> and then the message, 'Any 13 to 14 teenz here pls msg me !!!.', which means '*Any 13 to 14 year old teenagers here, please message me*'. This then continues with the same time and message twice. The rest of the comments are more organised physically, with the time in Column 1, the name of the chatter in Column 2, and the message in Column 3.

The conventions used are linguistic as well as non-linguistic. The linguistic conventions include the use of computer-generated messages, typography, short forms and contractions. Computer generated messages comprise computer commands and computer-generated responses. An example of a computer command is 'ping' (a and b), which indicates the time taken for a comment to be sent from the sender to the receiver. When this command is issued, the time lag is shown at the receiving end. An example of a computer-generated response is CTCP PING, which is the computer's response to the ping command c). In Text 1d, the ping command is displayed when the chatter feels that no one is responding to his comment. This command appears to function as an 'attention getter' when the person feels ignored.

a) [22:20] <idoncare> ping me pls :)

b) [22:21] <DukeHell> ping!

c) [22:21] <DukeHell> CTCP PING reply from idoncare: 4.56 seconds

The typography is used to signify three ways of sending a message in IRC: chatting, whispering and shouting. Lower-case letters are used to indicate chatting and whispering, whereas upper-case letters are employed for shouting. The use of lower-case letters as seen in example a) below indicates that the message is for public consumption, that is, meant for everyone participating in the discussion.

a) [22:27] <pretty21> anyone wanna to talk to me?

When this message is directed to one person in the chat-room, then lower-case letters are also used but the recipient is identified as in b) below. This is known as whispering.

b) [22:35] <pretty21> dukehell: i am bulat 2 ah!

Shouting is exemplified in example c) below. This is done to highlight or emphasise one's comment. This is also done in cases where the chatter may be angry at a certain comment made, and therefore resorts to shouting to make known her mental state.

c) [22:47] <Mscabbage> BIG SCARS.

The use of short forms and contractions in IRC is prevalent. The main reason for utilising these is similar to the prevalent use of short forms in e-mails, that is, to save time and money. Furthermore, there is the urgency to respond to a comment as soon as you can, failing which you may not have the chance to get into the discussion. This in a way is similar to turn-taking in conversations. Some of the most frequent short forms in Text 1d are:

brb – be right back	msg – message
lol – laughing out loud	u – you
ic – I see	r – are
pls – please	4 – for

Some common examples of contractions are:

i'm – I am

let's – let us

howza – how is it

Besides linguistic conventions, symbols are also used in IRC to convey paralinguistic cues and to state a fact. This is indicated in IRC by the use of

asterisks in front of the comment, as seen in the examples below. The analysis of Text 1d shows that asterisks seem to be used generally to indicate an action or a statement. This function is also similar to that as seen in Text 1c, where the function of the asterisk appears to isolate and highlight the word and the physical response it encapsulates.

[22:44] * DukeHell sees silversan and jumps into her lap, "Hi Babe!" *Action*

[22:46] * <reef^^ scratch scratch *Action*

[22:34] * DukeHell is still known as DukeHell *Statement*

(Please note that these examples individually illustrate the points made above).

In addition to symbols, certain sequences of characters on the computer keyboard are also employed to show emotion. These are known as *emoticons*, (that is, icons showing emotions), or *smileys*. The character when turned on its side represents a smiley face as in :-) or ;-) a *winky smiley*. Examples of *smileys* in Text 1d are shown below.

[22:20] <idoncare> ping me pls :)

[22:21] <idoncare> cheers :)

[22:21] <NucVi^sfx> :)))))) ➔ indicates many smiles

The list of *smileys* is endless as users have come up with ingenious ways of expressing emotions. According to the *Unofficial smiley dictionary* (http://paul.merton.ox.ac.uk/ascii/smileys.html), there are all types of *smileys*: basic *smileys*, widely used *smileys*, midget *smileys*, mega *smileys*, usenet *smileys* and emotional *smileys*. Some of these are exemplified in Appendix 5.

As argued earlier, the electronic medium used to convey information plays a significant role in determining the language and structure used in IRC. The same was found to be true for e-mails as well. While IRC and e-mails observe the modes of both speech and writing, yet there are certain special features which typify e-discourse.

Pedagogical implications

Gupta et al (1997), who investigated teachers' perceptions about using computers to teach writing, found that 53 per cent of the 127 English teachers in 24 schools were literally afraid of the computer. In response to the question why they had not learnt to use computers well, 89 per cent said that they had no time, 62 per cent that they found it confusing, 53 per cent that they were afraid of computers, and 46 per cent that they had no incentives to

learn how to use them. Nowadays more and more students are becoming global travellers just by staying at home and communicating on the Internet via e-discourse. Their interest and enthusiasm is attested by the countless number of hours they spend in front of their computer screens. As teachers, the onus is on us to optimise the learning potential and opportunity for our students. One way of doing this would be to channel their interest and enthusiasm into meaningful language activities to enhance and improve their communication strategies. Students can be encouraged to communicate with their peers, friends and instructors using e-mails. Taking part in IRC can also be part of a class project in that they can be asked to join their own discussion groups to collect participants' opinions on a topic of interest. The unique features of the e-discourse used can be highlighted to make them more aware of different discourse types. In addition, the context for producing different discourse types for different target readers can also be emphasised. This can also include observing different levels of formality in writing the messages as well as the type of language used. This will not only be meaningful to them but also will give them an incentive to improve their writing abilities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted a definition of e-discourse using the basic constructs of medium and mode within a framework of spoken and written discourse. My argument that e-discourse is a new discourse hybrid is supported by an analysis of samples of e-mails and IRC. While e-discourse observes the conventions of both speech and writing, there are also special features which typify it as a new discourse type. These features include structural and linguistic features, which are the result of the medium used to communicate this type of discourse.

Research on e-discourse is still in its infancy. The scope of research in this area is endless as the different types of e-discourse have yet to be formally described and analysed. Although the findings in the present study are based on an analysis of only four samples of data due to the exploratory nature of the study, further research should be carried out to add to our information and knowledge base about discourse.

REFERENCES

Bhatia, V K 1993. *Analysing genre: Language use in professional settings*. Longman: New York

Bhatia, V K 1999. Integrating products, processes, purposes and participants in professional writing. In C N Candlin and K Hyland (eds). *Writing: Texts, processes and practices*. Longman: New York

Brown, G and G Yule 1983. *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Carroll, J, R Broadhead and D Cassel 1997. *1997 Internet handbook*. Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada Inc

Carter R, A Goddard, D Reah, K Sanger and M Bowring 1998. *Working with texts*. London: Routledge

Cook, G 1989. *Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Crystal, D 1991. *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Essential English dictionary 1997. Singapore. Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd

Foertsch, J 1995. 'The impact of electronic networks on scholarly communication: Avenues to research'. *Discourse Processes* 19: 301–28

Georgakopoulou, A and D Goustos 1997. *Discourse analysis: An introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Gupta, R, R Hvitfeldt and V Saravanan 1997. Implementing the use of computers in the teaching of writing. In G M Jacobs (ed). *Language classrooms of tomorrow: Issues and responses*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre. 91–104

Hatch, E 1992. *Discourse and language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

McCarthy, M 1991. *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

McCarthy, M and R Carter 1994. *Language as discourse: Perspectives for language teaching*. London: Longman

Nunan, D 1993. *Introducing discourse analysis*. England: Penguin English

Pennycook, A 1994. 'Incommensurable discourses?'. *Applied Linguistics* 15, 2: 115–38

Richards, J C, J Platt and H Platt 1992. *Dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. England: Longman

Trask, R L 1997. *A student's dictionary of language and linguistics*. London: Arnold

Unofficial smiley dictionary. http://paul.merton.ox.ac.uk/ascii/smileys.html

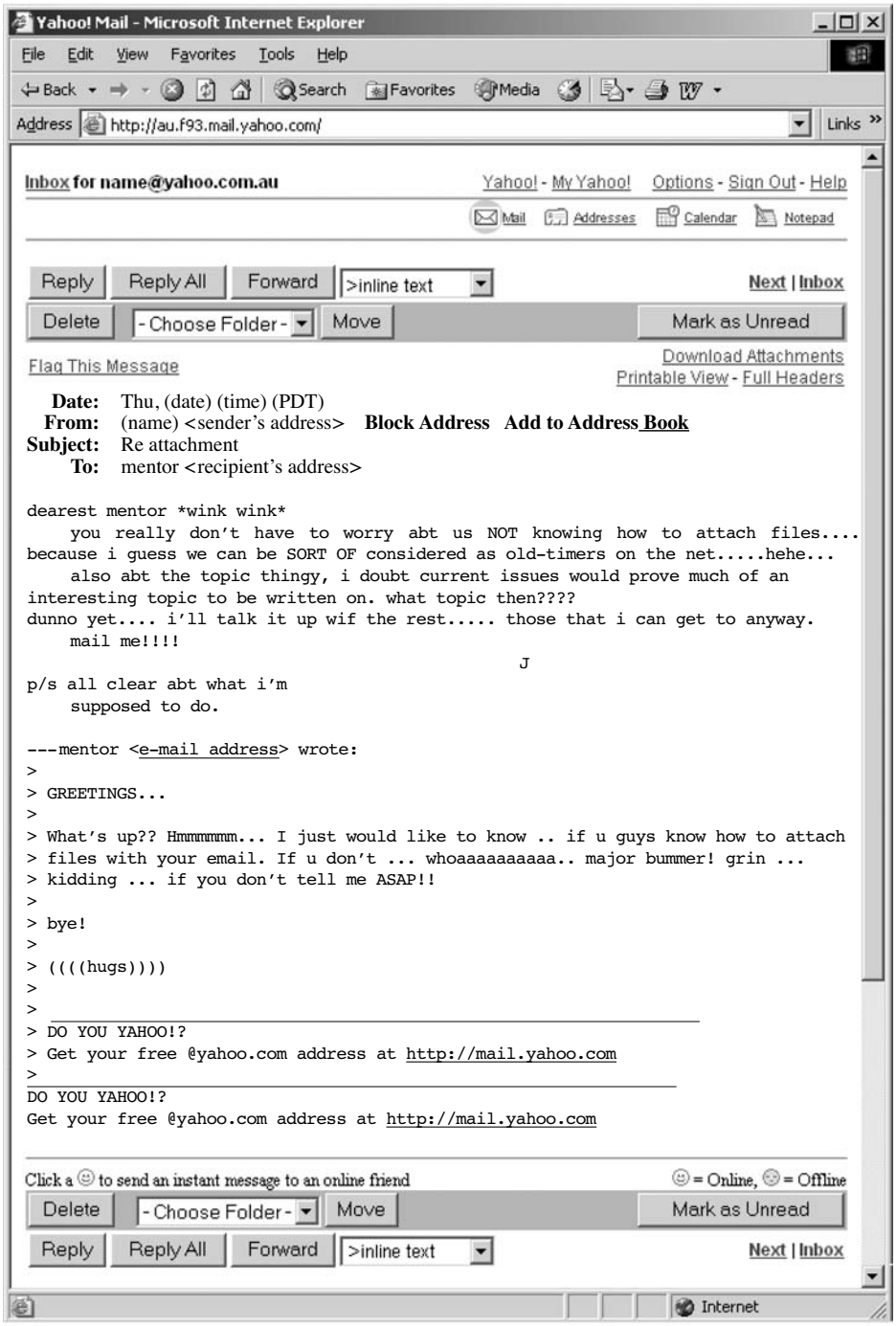
Yates, S 2001. English in cyberspace. In S Goodman and D Graddol (eds). *Redesigning English: New texts, new identities*. London: Routledge

Widdowson, H 1996. *Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Appendix 1: Text 1a

Appendix 2: Text 1b

Appendix 3: Text 1c



Yahoo! Mail - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Search Favorites Media

Address http://au.f93.mail.yahoo.com/ Links

Inbox for name@yahoo.com.au

Yahoo! - My Yahoo! Options - Sign Out - Help

Mail Addresses Calendar Notepad

Reply Reply All Forward >inline text Next | Inbox

Delete - Choose Folder - Move Mark as Unread

Flag This Message

Download Attachments
Printable View - Full Headers

Date: Thu, (date) (time) (PDT)
From: (name) <sender's address> **Block Address Add to Address Book**
Subject: Re attachment
To: mentor <recipient's address>

dearest mentor *wink wink*
you really don't have to worry abt us NOT knowing how to attach files....
because i guess we can be SORT OF considered as old-timers on the net.....hehe...
also abt the topic thingy, i doubt current issues would prove much of an
interesting topic to be written on. what topic then????
dunno yet.... i'll talk it up wif the rest..... those that i can get to anyway.
mail me!!!!

J

p/s all clear abt what i'm
supposed to do.

---mentor <e-mail address> wrote:
>
> GREETINGS...
>
> What's up?? Hmmmmmm... I just would like to know .. if u guys know how to attach
> files with your email. If u don't ... whoaaaaaaaaaa.. major bummer! grin ...
> kidding ... if you don't tell me ASAP!!
>
> bye!
>
> ((((hugs))))
>
> _____
> DO YOU YAHOO!?
> Get your free @yahoo.com address at http://mail.yahoo.com
>
_____
DO YOU YAHOO!?
Get your free @yahoo.com address at http://mail.yahoo.com

Click a to send an instant message to an online friend = Online, = Offline

Delete - Choose Folder - Move Mark as Unread

Reply Reply All Forward >inline text Next | Inbox

Internet

Appendix 4: Text I d

I

mIRC
Logging!
Channel: #malaysia
Server: Undernet

Session start: Tue [date] [time] [year]

II

[22:17] *** Now talking in #malaysia#malaysia created on Wed [date] 18:03:08 [22:18] <^InSaNe^> Any 13 to 14 teenz here pls msg me !!! [22:18] <^InSaNe^> Any 13 to 14 teenz here pls msg me !!!	Teenz = teens, Pls = please Msg = message
[22:18] <^InSaNe^> Any 13 to 14 teenz here pls msg me !!!	
[22:19] <^InSaNe^> Any 13 to 14 teenz here pls msg me !!!	
[22:20] <idoncare> ping me pls :)	Ping : a command to know how long is the lag between the sender of the message and the receiver. CTCP PING: a computer generated response showing how long is the lag. :) = emoticon : smiling face u = you, r = are
[22:21] <DukeHell> ping!	
[22:21] <idoncare> cheers :)	
[22:21] <DukeHell> CTCP PING reply from idoncare: 4.56 seconds	
[22:21] <NucVi^sfx> :))))))	
[22:27] <pretty21> anyone wanna talk to me?	
[22:27] <pretty21> u r very welcomed to do so	
[22:27] <pretty21> so boring lah	
[22:28] <pretty21> anyone got any nice topic to talk?	
<GeMuK> anybody got a nice joke to share ?	
[22:29] <pretty21> let's see	
[22:27] <pretty21> tell me	
<GeMuK> Err.. kay	kay = okay
[22:30] <pretty21> a no teeth old lady and one single eye blind man fight	
[22:30] <pretty21> who will win?	
<GeMuK> Hmm.. no one ?	
[22:31] <feeny> wow!!	
[22:31] <pretty21> think lah	

II

```
[22:31] <pretty21> sure got one person win one
[22;31] <pretty21> and it is about some dirty stuff one
[22:33] <BB-Tom> hi all
[22:34] * DukeHell is still known as DukeHell
[22:34] <Mscabbage> good 4 u dukehell...
[22:35] <Mscabbage> still know u
[22:35] <pretty21> dukehell: i am bulat 2 ah!
[22:35] <DukeHell> hey bulat
<GeMuK> any body got a nice joke to share?
[22:37] <DukeHell> 50 Fun Things to Do in an Elevator #30. Ask
each passenger getting on if you can push the button for them.
[22:38] <terry> hi everybody...
<GeMuK>hahhaa  :)
[22:41] <reef^^> hi ppl
[22:41] <Sarawak> hi reef
[22:41] <reef^^> hiya sarawak ..
[22:41] <reef^^> kewl nick .. hehe
[22:42] <Mscabbage> hi reef
[22:42] <reef^^> hiya ms cabbage..
[22:42] <feeny> helo reef
[22:42] <reef^^> mscabbage you were here since this evening rite
??
[22:42] <reef^^> hiya feeny ..
[22:42] <reef^^> howza goin everybody ?
[22:42] <feeny> hi mscabbage
[22:42] <Sarawak> reef you the great barrier reef?
[22:42] <Sarawak> hehehe
[22:42] <reef^^> hahah .. sarawak .. kinda
[22:43] <feeny> helo gigifans
[22:43] <Sarawak> are you great?
```

```
* = message showing action, response or
making a statement. u = you
```

```
hiya = how are you
kewl = cool

hiya = hi you all

rite = right

hiya = how are you
howza = how is it, goin = going
```

II

[22:43] <silversan> hi ppl..... [22:43] <reef^^> sarawak , me ?? [22:43] <silversan> samseng of kl.....where are you [22:43] <reef^^> hiya silversan .. [22:43] <asjk> hi silversan [22:43] <Sarawak> i tot great barrier reef supposed to be great mar [22:44] * DukeHell sees silversan and jumps in her lap. "Hi Babe ! " [22:44] <silversan> hi..... [22:44] <silversan> how are you guys? [22:44] <reef^^> yeah .. I'm great .. use to .. but not now .. haha [22:44] * reef^^ just feeling better . [22:44] <silversan> hey guy here lh duke [22:44] <DukeHell> i know lah! [22:44] <Sarawak> reef the crown of thorn star fish ate you up is it [22:44] <Sarawak> heheheh [22:44] <silversan> fotgot oledi kah duke	ppl = people hiya = how are you tot = thought * = shows action * = shows statement fotgot = forgot

Appendix 5

The *Unofficial smiley dictionary*

Basic smileys

Widely used smileys

Midget smileys

Mega smileys

Usenet smileys

Emotional smileys

This *Unofficial smiley dictionary* is only one of many different collections by various 'editors' you'll come across at many places on the Net, eg you can get 'The smiley-file' from:

http://paul.merton.ox.ac.uk/ascii/smileys.html

and even a complete booklet has been written on smileys and is available as:

David W Sanderson (ed), *Smileys*. O'Reilly and Associates, Sebastopol, CA. 93 pages. ISBN 1-56592-041-4. Price $5.95 (US).

BASIC SMILEYS

:-) Your basic smiley. This smiley is used to inflect a sarcastic or joking statement since we can't hear voice inflection over e-mail.

;-) Winky smiley. User just made a flirtatious and/or sarcastic remark. More of a 'don't hit me for what I just said' smiley.

:-(Frowning smiley. User did not like that last statement or is upset or depressed about something.

:-I Indifferent smiley. Better than a :-(but not quite as good as a :-)

:-> User just made a really biting sarcastic remark. Worse than a ;-)

>:-> User just made a really devilish remark.

>;-> Winky and devil combined. A very lewd remark was just made.

WIDELY USED SMILEYS

(-: User is left handed.

%-) User has been staring at a green screen for 15 hours straight.

:*)	User is drunk.
[:]	User is a robot.
8-)	User is wearing sunglasses.
B:-)	Sunglasses on head.
::-)	User wears normal glasses.
B-)	User wears horn-rimmed glasses.
8:-)	User is a little girl.
:-)-8	User is a big girl.
:-{)	User has a moustache.
:-{}	User wears lipstick.
{:-)	User wears a toupee.
}:-(	Toupee in an updraft.
:-[	User is a vampire.
:-E	Bucktoothed vampire.
:-F	Bucktoothed vampire with one tooth missing.
:-7	User just made a wry statement.
:-*	User just ate something sour.
:-)~	User drools.
:-~)	User has a cold.
:'-(	User is crying.
:'-)	User is so happy, s/he is crying.
:-@	User is screaming.
:-#	User wears braces.