Linguistic Aspects of Synchronous Chat Discourse

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The advancement of computer-mediated communication towards the rapidity and nature of spoken language gives incentive for studying electronic communication discourse. This article focuses on how electronic discourse is manifested in one of major communication modes on the Internet – synchronous chat. Under the 'chat' we understand here text-based synchronous electronic interactions that are taking place in real time synchronously or asynchronously.

There are a lot of definitions for so popular notions as *discourse*. It is impossible to specify every definition. To our thinking it would be more appropriate to differentiate a number of approaches. Thus we can depict three mainstreams of discourse studies. Within the first approach the discourse is considered as language above the sentence or above the clause (Stabbs 1983; Shiffrin 1994; Stenstrom 1994). However a number of scholars think that this approach reflects a high level of abstraction and is improper for study natural language (Makarov 2003). The second approach emphasizes, "... t he study of discourse is the study of any aspects of language use" (Fasold 1990: 65), specifying thatthe analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use (Brown, Yule 1983: 1; Galichkina 2001: 21). This position mainly stipulates the discourse analysis functions through socio-cultural context study. The third approach as D. Shiffrin argues treats discourse as the utterance. The utterance is defined as an array of functionally organized contextual language usages. However the absence of an accurate definition of the word *utterance* presents the weakest point of this position.

We would like to mention that there are four widespread views on discourse in home linguistics. Within *communicative approach* discourse is treated as talk, ver-

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bal behavior, i. e. communication in general sense. *Structural syntactic approach* sees discourse as a fragment of text. *Structural stylistic approach* regards discourse as non-text organization of speech. The last approach – *socio pragmatic* - scrutinizes discourse as a text immersed into conversation, into speaking surrounding (see Galichkina 2001: 21-24).

Although the Internet has become multimedia now, even with the advent of video and audio streaming, typed text continues to reign supreme as the primary mode of conversing on the Internet. In this case as for 'discourse' we accept approach to the concept formulated by Ruth Wodak in 'Gender and Discourse' (Wodak 1997: 6), as "text in context" on the one hand, and "set of texts" on the other'. Ruth Wodak also cites van Dijk, who defines discourse as an action: 'I understand "discourse"... both as a specific form of language use, and a specific form of social situation' (Ibid: 164; Dijk 1997). It is obvious that when we analyze the discourse of chats understanding discourse as action becomes very revealing in this communicative situation. In some cases the terms 'CMC' (computer-mediated communication) and 'Netspeak' are used in this article as alternatives to the notion of electronic discourse, but we argue it is better to differentiate the notions of *discourse* and *communication*. Do specify that under the term *CMC* we mean communication possessing a set of construal peculiarities as:

- Treating electronic signal as a canal for communication,
- Distance as separation in time and place,
- Mediation through technical means,
- High level of penetrability,
- Hypertextuality,
- High creolization of electronic texts,
- Status equality of participants,
- Emoticons;
- The integration of different types of discourse,
- Specific computer ethics (Netiquette) (Galichkina 2001: 55).

The study of CMC permits to depict various modes and formats of discourse: e-mail, chats (synchronous and asynchronous, multi users' domains (MUDs and MOOs)), computer conferences, newsgroups, Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), www-texts. The channel of communication specifies the mode of electronic discourse.

Chats have lately developed into a fascinating style of communication. In some ways, it is strikingly similar to face-to-face dialogue. In other ways, it is quite

unique. Many researchers argue that electronic discourse is neither writing nor speech, but rather written speech or spoken writing, and something absolute unique in the history of human discourse. Studies of interactive CMC over time reveal that research thinking has been changing according to the development of chat environment. In early studies of CMC (such as Kiesler, Seigel and McGuire 1984) it is argued that text presents only CMC systems filter out most social-context cues and that this leads to impersonal interaction. Later works, on the other hand, acknowledge that, given sufficient time, users adapt their communication strategies to available communication channels. Works in the 1990's, therefore, can report that Netspeak readily resembles socially rich oral chat, despite its orthographic nature. As early as 1991, for instance, Reid suggests that interactive CMC systems can satisfy interpersonal needs and support socioemotional content (Reid 1991). Further, in December (1993) he suggests that IRC (Internet Relay Chat) exhibits characteristics of oral discourse in that it allows for explicit and empathetic sociability and rapidity. In 1997, Rintel and Pittam conclude that chats possess many characteristics in common with several oral media such as casual telephone conversation and written media such as casual letters (Rintel and Pittam 1997: 509). And in 2001 David Crystal in his work "Language and the Internet" calls Netspeak "a genuine third medium" (Crystal 2001: 48).

The experience of first entering a chat room has something in common for all *newbies* (which means 'newcomers' on Netspeak jargon). Chat room banter can seem quite chaotic, especially when there are many people talking (in some chatrooms over 200 people might communicate simultaneously!), or you have just entered a room and immediately dive into the ongoing flow of overlapping conversations. There are no visual cues indicating what pairs or groups of people are huddled together in conversation, so the lines of scrolling dialogue seem disjointed (visual chat environments, where users can move their avatars close to each other, have an advantage in this respect). You have to sit back for a while and follow the flow of the text to decipher the themes of conversation and who is talking with whom. When you read messages sent to a chatgroup, without sending any yourself they say that you *lurk*. Lurking for a long time in a chatroom may be perceived as a rude behavior much the same as eavesdropping in real-life conversation is considered impolite. As David Crystal notes, some manuals on Netspeak etiquette (*netiquette or chatiquette*) refer to lurking as 'spying'. He gives the following definition: "*Lurkers* are people who access a chatgroup and read its messages but do not contribute to the discussion. The motives include newbie reluctance to be involved, academic curiosity (researching some of Internet culture), or voyeurism" (Ibid:

53). But using our personal experience of joining different chat groups we could state that it might be a good idea to lurk for a while before joining the interaction. It helps to choose a topic for discussion, find some people to communicate with, obtain the primary insight into specific jargon, which is appropriate for this chat. In almost all types of chat environments, members consciously and unconsciously set up mental filters and points of focus that help them screen out "noise" and zoom in their concentration on particular people or topics of discussion. Often, they become immersed in one or two strings of dialogue and filter out the others. With experience, they develop an eye for efficiently reading chat messages. Many researchers of CMC describe joining a new chat as an exciting, weird, or sometimes confusing event. They even feel disoriented, disembodied, and adrift in that screen of silently scrolling dialogue. David Crystal compares chatgroup session to a cocktail party in which everyone is talking at once – "except that it is worse, because every guest can 'hear' every conversation equally, and every guest needs to keep talking in order to prove to others that they are still involved in the interchange" (Ibid: 159). But the majority of users (and the authors of this article) love to see how people creatively express themselves despite the limitations. They love to immerse themselves in the quiet flow of words that feels like a more direct, intimate connection between one's mind and the minds of others. Almost as if the other is inside one's head almost as if you are talking with a part of yourself. Without the distracting sights and sounds of the face-to-face world, chats feel like a more pure communication of ideas and experiences. The bare quality of typed text allows for a greater flight of imagination and fantasy.

Creating virtual identity in CMC presents a text – based and whether someone's online communication is successful or not depends to a great extent on this identity. The first stage of creating it is inventing a nick name (or simply –*nick*) for logging in the chart. As David Crystal states "The choice of a nick is a ritual act, demanded by the culture to which the individual aspires to belong, and – as with all naming practices – a matter of great complexity and sensitivity...Owners get attached to them (nicks). The nick is their electronic identity, it says something about who they are, and acts as an invitation to others to talk to them"(Ibid: 159).

We add that the mode of chats permits experimentation with identities in *carnivalesque Bakhtianian* way (e.g. gender-switching), potentially liberating users from traditional restrictions.

In this study we analyzed nicks of 180 members of a very popular Kharkiv chat group "Tachanka" and noticed that a nick may reflect musical tastes and preferences ('smoke_on_the_water'), sometimes – person's character ('Mad_Gosha', 'Lo-

nelyRain'), appearance ('barbi'), profession ('lawyer'), hobby ('WindSurfer') or be taken from fantasy world ('Gandalf', 'green_hamster'), be simple names ('Nicka', 'Dima'), correspond some sexual ('NightLover"), humoristic ('BigPig') or intellectual ('IQ', 'Zaratustra') context. There are some nonsense names ('...') but they are not very many (less than 1%). Some users elaborate and decorate their name with any variety of keyboard characters that fingers can tap. Names may range from a highly ornate: ^^^^UP'n'down....BoYy=== to a quasi-auditory: # $ # % * !)&!) PISSSEDoFF!!!!, to a stark, abstract, preverbal:[__||_] . So we can make a conclusion that the primary purpose of a nick is to attract attention and then goes giving some information of owners' identity (or their *virtual avatars*[1]). Here we should note that nicks reflecting gender (female/male names, for example) usually play an important role in 'getting the floor' in a chatroom. Adoption of a female persona usually guarantees extra attention from male users. David Crystal also emphasizes a discourse value of nicks as they "provide a crucial means of maintaining semantic threads in what is otherwise a potentially incoherent kinky situation. When interactions become complex, members name each other – usually before, sometimes during or after the body of their message – as a discourse signal to the intended recipient. ... the use of nicks in direct address thus becomes an invaluable means of linking sets of messages to each other" (Ibid: 161-162). The author gives analogy between the role of nicks in a chat and the role of gazes and body movement in face-to-face conversation involving several people. We can hardly underestimate the value of nicks in chats discourse.

One of the most important stages of chat discourse is the beginning of conversation. Interactants of a chat usually, but not always, mark their entrance by an informal greeting. Depending on its topic and time of the day a chatroom can be very crowded. Just as in a real-life conversation with many people, it is not necessary to greet everybody personally. Accordingly, one "Hello!" or an equivalent is enough. Also, users do not expect everybody to greet them back. But personal greetings (with indication of the addressee's nick) are usually noted and answered to. Some authors (for example Pioch 1993) state that greeting too many people in the chatroom is rude to everyone because even saying 'Hello!' to 20 people would mean one

1 Avatar chat presents a variety of Internet Relay Chats (special software) when conversations take place in a shared virtual environment – a spatial metaphor and an architectural motif. Each user is represented by an avatar (cartoon character, a photo or other image) and the environment in which communication takes place is programmed space that resembles environments well-known to people – based on reality or science fiction.

screen of hellos. And the same applies to goodbyes. After all chat is presented as text and text takes up space – a feature peculiar to written communication. From the very start it is important not only to attract other members' attention but also to sustain presence in a chatroom. Different means serve this role. Very often it is useful to bring a fresh element of fun. Trolling can do it. This term derives from fishing (the trailing of a baited hook to see what bites) and has a meaning of attracting ignorant responses from new Net users, for fun. Trolls usually contain false information like 'Have you heard that cats could talk?' Of course reliable interesting information can also be provided to the members of a chat (no matter – connected or not with the previously discussed topic). In some chats members do not approve of trolling. David Crystal considers trolling as the sending of a message specifically intended to cause irritation to others (Ibid: 52). In such a case trolls become deliberately provoking *flames,* messages, which are always aggressive and related to a specific topic. As far as such a behavior contradicts netiquette it is either disapproved of by other chat members or punished by *moderators* (people, having managerial powers in a chatroom). To avoid being kicked off the chatroom users can look through some rules of proper chat conduct that are called netiquette or sometimes chatiquette. Some of these rules reveal the typically spoken nature of the communication; suggesting chatters behave as they would in any normal real-life conversation. Chatiquette, as well as netiquette, usually consists of witty, but vague, regulations that encourage 'friendly' behavior and discourage 'harassing' and 'annoying' statements and actions. At best, chatiquette reminds users that people in a chatroom form their opinions about others only by their actions, writings and comments. In other words, to put it linguistically, chat does not convey all the extra-linguistic and social cues that normal conversation does, and users need to be aware of this. "Think before you type" is a common advice in chatiquette. "If you use offensive words, you will be frowned upon" (Pioch 1993). Users are discouraged to *dump* or *spam* (send large amounts of unwanted information) to everyone in the chatroom or to a particular user. Spamming is likely to get a user kicked off the chatroom or just warned by a moderator (it depends on the type of a chat). Such attitude is caused by the opinion that chat is meant for short, interactive contributions to a common topic, and not for long, thought-out verbalizations. Analyzing interchanges in Kharkiv chat 'Tachanka' we found that the majority of messages (more than 70% of 200 contributions) were only one line long. Certainly we take into consideration that this is mostly a teenage chat, it does not contain professional or academic group discussions. But the general tendency for chat contributions length is obvious – it tends to be short as much as possible. We find similar judgment by

David Crystal 'Chatgroups are unlikely to be a domain where lengthy monologues or balanced dialogues – speeches, lectures, commercial presentations, formal debates, and suchlike – are found. Or, putting this another way, it would be pointless for anyone to try to use in this way a medium which is designed to provoke and accept short messages and multiple reactions' (Crystal 2001: 134). Nevertheless not all spam is equally harmful for chat discourse. Charles Stivale identifies three spam types common in CMC: playful, pernicious, and ambiguous (Stivale 1996). Sometimes spam can be a matter of taste; as Lee-Ellen Marvin says: 'one participant's spam is another's entertainment' (Marvin 1996). The role of spamming depends on every particular chat situation but it is to be regarded as an integral feature of chat discourse, where people are free to experiment with different forms of communication and self-representation.

The terse style of talking in chat environments can result in either superficial chat, or a very honest and "to-the-point" discussion of personal issues. One does not have the verbose luxury of gradually leading the conversation to a serious topic, so self-disclosures sometimes are sudden and very revealing. The safe anonymity resulting from the lack of face-to-face contact – as well as people not knowing who you "really" are – also contributes to this honest and open attitude. In the following excerpt, both superficial and very personal conversations are occurring simultaneously. Dan and Diamond sense the seriousness of Helen's distress and try to address it. On the other hand, LostBoy tends to speak inappropriately because he is unable to detect the seriousness of this discussion – partly due to the fact that he can't see or hear Helen's depression, and partly due to his lack of interpersonal sensitivity (the lack of face-to-face cues probably amplifies the interpersonal insensitivity of some people). Arriving in the middle of the discussion, Yabada also cannot sense the serious atmosphere in the room – which, in the face-to-face world, most people would pick up almost immediately. He decides to leave – rather ungraciously abrupt by real-world standards, though acceptable in cyberspace – when he finally realizes what is happening in the room and what Helen wants and needs: an understanding stranger to listen to her anonymous self-disclosures about her problems. It's a need that brings some people to chat rooms, e.g.:

Dan:
Helen, you sound depressed :-)
Helen:
I am forever depressed :=(
LostBoy:
If you traveled back in time and killed yourself, you wouldn't be alive now so you could-

n't go back in time to kill yourself'. A paradox! ;-)
Diamond:
I was like that a lot.... now I am doing better ...Time is a great healer!
Dan:
Helen, why are you depressed?
Helen:
my heart hasn't healed from life yet
Diamond:
I have a family of depressed people :-(
Yabada:
hi folks!!!
Diamond:
and .. like I said... am doing better
Yabada:
hi Diamond!
LostBoy:
Helen, I have almost no self-confidence...but I never let it get me down.
Diamond:
hi Yabada
Yabada:
I pale to see myself typing this...but how old are you Helen?
LostBoy:
Yabada, are you hitting on poor Helen? :-(
Dan:
Helen, did you just break up?
Helen:
no he's being very nice
LostBoy:
I have never officially had a girlfriend before.
Diamond:
I am in therapy now
Helen:
I have a psychiatrist
LostBoy:
Never been on a date. Never done the hunka chunka
Helen:
actually a good listener is all I need right now
Yabada:
Gotta go. See you all later.

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When users interact in chat, their syntactic and semantic choices make up almost the entirety of their interaction. IRC presents the conversation between mutually acquainted experienced users bristles with orthographic analogies to nonverbal behavior and spoken discourse. Frequent use of smilies, or emoticons, may to some extent serve as the analogy to nonverbal cues of face-to-face communication. Another is to develop a distinct writing style. (On the other hand distinct writing styles are identifying features in casual letters as well). In online communication one of the most important features is that it must be fast. To keep up with sometimes the frenetic pace of multiple interactions, the typing must be a nearly automated process. Occasionally, the pace of the electronic discourse in chats literally corresponds to the speed of spoken language. Typed words, however, take longer to decode than spoken words and chat interlocutors use certain strategies to compensate for this. Certain abbreviations and acronyms are common in the discourse. Different reference sources and vocabularies give lists of abbreviations and smilies used in Netspeak. David Crystal gives very detailed lists and descriptions of frequently used above-mentioned types. Certain abbreviations and acronyms have become conventionalized in chats and all users recognize and frequently use them (both upper and lower case can be used). LOL (or lol –for *laughing out loud*) is often encountered, and so is BRB (*be right back*), PTMM (*please tell me more*), HHOK (*ha ha only kidding*), CU (see you), CUL8R (*see you later*), M/F (*male or female?*), X! (*typical woman*), Y! (*typical man*), ROTFL (*rolling on the floor laughing*), T2UL (*talk to you later*), U2 (*you too*) and BTW (*by the way*) (Crystal 2001: 86). Other means that speed up the chat conversation, making it emulate normal speech rate, are personalized tropes and schemes for greeting or bidding goodbye. Some chats software may be personally preset with a number of different scripts, signatures and messages of which the user has disposal at his/her discretion. Often these messages consist of applied graphics, some very artistic, conveying a certain mood or help convey the tone of a person's other messages.

By typing a certain command followed by an action one can convey a third person statement that indicates one's current actions or thoughts. It is a distinctive feature of a chat conversation when someone (named 'Green_Hamster', for instance) gives such a contribution * *Green_Hamster is quietly singing his favorite song and pouring himself some coffee**. There may be several reasons for such *action-messages*. The most important of them is to sustain someone's virtual presence, holding the floor in a chatroom. And of course such contributions add new features to someone's virtual identity, being a building brick in creating virtual avatars. There may be other action messages like *Green_Hamster waves at Carlos*

and eyes GhostRider warily*. And this is another example of adding analogue of nonverbal cues into electronic discourse.

Researching materials on Netspeak in different Internet situations we came to a conclusion that such action-like contributions came to chats by inheritance from MUDs – role-play fantasy virtual games, which are text based and are becoming less popular lately. Action lines often reveal the pubescent atmosphere prevalent in certain chatrooms but they also convey the high level of informality.

Newbies to chats often use rigid grammar in their typing – their sentences have initial capitals and end with full stops, personal names have initial capitals, and all their spelling is immaculate. Apparently orthographic conventions acquired over years of schooling are difficult to discard. With increasing experience, however, most users adapt their language to the medium of chats. Experienced users, tacitly and yet out of obvious necessity, have developed a particular style that acts much like nonverbal behavior while at the same time increasing the speed of delivery. The grammar and punctuation in chat messages created by experienced users represent a standard that is at once very quick to type and readily identifiable to new users. Lower-case letters are an evident feature, as is abbreviation. Rintel and Pittam note that there is one major guideline for the creation of abbreviations – "use the shortest, easiest-to-type, 'phonetic' equivalent of a word" (Rintel and Pittam 1997: 524). This leads to contractions based on slang speech patterns such as "Io!" for "Hello!" and "sup?" or "Wassup?" for "What's up?" It also leads to single letters representing whole words, such as "how r u" for "How are you?" Frequent use of expressions like these may indicate a user's long experience of the medium. But irregular grammar, punctuation and spelling may sometimes show that the user is a teenager or not highly educated person and thus lead to disruption of communication. It is very important to distinguish between 'cool' uses of grammar, punctuation, special changes in spelling (appropriate to certain chatgroups or chat lexicon in general) and ordinary illiteracy, which are of no good to a virtual identity of a user. The similar caution may be expressed for overuse of smilies, acronyms and chat jargon. When chat communication becomes more personalized, gets to a higher level, the user's identity is recognized and used to in a chatroom environment, all above mentioned features tend to decrease in number of manifestations. We do not take here some professional or academic chats as an example, because in these cases above described features may be totally absent.

One of changing features of chats is their anonymity and impersonality. The tendency here is to make interactions more personal. As the result of it is growing popularity of newly developed chat that was born in Israel – ICQ (read: *I seek you)*. As

the name indicates, ICQ enables the location of individuals on the Internet; in other words, the program indicates when friends or associates are online. Integrated in the program are functions that, among other things, enable personal chatting. A conversation in ICQ resembles to a great extent a telephone call in that previously acquainted users deliberately initiate it. Therefore, ICQ conversation is more personal and goal-oriented than regular chat conversation. ICQ also makes it possible for users to speak at the same time. The flow of text is immediate. The ability to speak at the same time speeds up the conversation tangibly compared to regular chats. A matter of peculiar interest is that in ICQ speaking at the same time is not impolite or annoying, as in real-life conversation. Rather it is occasionally desirable in order to speed up the conversation. A subjective remark regarding ICQ conversation is that it tends to entail less use of emoticons than regular chats. Possibly previously acquainted interlocutors are not afraid that their orthographic messages will be misinterpreted, since they are already familiar with each other's personalities. On the other hand, abbreviations are more frequent – previously acquainted users more rapidly begin to share the norm of abbreviation-creation. A conversation in ICQ is normally carried out between two or three users and each user has a number of synchronous functions at hand in addition to chatting. One of these, *file transfer*, is particularly interesting since it brings an evidently non-verbal dimension to the chat. By transferring files (or URLs (Uniform Resource Locators)) to each other, users can view the same documents at the same time, in other words they can share the same virtual space. When users share the same virtual space and chat about what they see, they sense a peculiar proximity which bridges the geographic distance between them (as very frequently they communicate from very distant regions of the world).

To summarize all said above we state that chat is a highly interactive means of text-based 'oral' communication. Analogies can be drawn between chats and natural spoken discourse in that all users are present at the same time; messages are usually answered with little time delay. Analogies can also be drawn between chats and written discourse in that it allows for written text messages to be transmitted, personal writing styles may reveal a person's character, age, gender, cultural level and experience with the medium. Most importantly, however, chats display new forms of communicative practice which conform to neither oral nor literate behavior. We know so far that chats, and other CMC, challenge our assumptions about the socially defined differences and boundaries between written and spoken discourse. Perhaps, reading and writing practices in the future will display entirely

new structures in response to ever more complex and dynamic developments in communication technology.

If we think of main communicative role of chats the general view here is that it is socializing, emotional exchange rather than informational one. David Crystal reaches the following conclusion: "Chatgroups provide...a person-to-person interaction that is predominantly social in character...And it would seem that, even in the most countless and incoherent interactions of the synchronous setting, the social advantages outweigh the semantic disadvantages" (Crystal 2001: 168). The author points out the recreational atmosphere of chat and relations of rapport among its participants. He calls the chatroom an ideal place for getting off emotions and obtaining opinions, but not the place to find the facts in. We cannot agree more with this evaluation of social value of chats. But we must say that from our point of view the cognitive and informative value of chats is definitely underestimated. There are specialized chatgroups in which participants share similar interests (on literature, sports, professions, music etc). And it is the search for particular information that attracts their members. Even in a non – specialized chat someone can ask any questions (even if it is a question about places good for skiing at the current period of time) and there always be someone who knows the answer and readily gives it. Such informational exchange in chats reveals a higher level of communication, gives additional incentives to participate in discussions, serves as a fresh flow in chat discourse. And we would like to state that this combining of emotional and informational exchange in chat discourse makes chat invaluable tool for educational purposes. We are convinced that chats represent enormous potential for language teaching methodology of present and future.

Summarizing the impact of electronic discourse on language we permit to cite the frequently mentioned by us D. Crystal "What is truly remarkable is that so many people have learned so quickly to adapt their language to meet the demands of new situations and to exploit the potential of the new medium so creatively to form new areas of expressions" (Ibid: 242).

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Językowe aspekty synchronicznego dyskursu czatów

Komunikacja za pośrednictwem Internetu podważa tradycyjny podział na język mówiony i pisany. Atrykuł omawia podstawowe cechy dyskursu elektronicznego, analizowanego w oparciu o materiał czatów synchronicznych. Autorki omawiają kluczowe prace dotyczące tego typu dyskursu i proponują nowe spojrzenie na trendy panujące w dyskursie czatów. Celem artykułu jest dostarczenie praktycznych wskazówek, które mogą być wykorzystane w edukacji komputerowej i metodyce nauczania na odległość.