BLS 32, No 1 2006. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3765/bls.v32i1.3469 (published by the Berkeley Linguistics Society and the Linguistic Society of America)

Punctuation as Social Action: The Ellipsis as a Discourse Marker in Computer-Mediated Communication

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1. Sociolinguistic Variation in Internet Discourse

The last decade has seen a tremendous increase in the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) within wired societies, and with this increased visibility has come a growing scholarly interest in the linguistic structures of internet discourse. The majority of research in this area has been sociolinguistic in nature, though it has dealt largely with interaction management and the sequential organization of talk rather than the specific linguistic variables used by speaker to constitute online styles and registers. Those studies that take the latter approach have typically presented these variables as features of a more generalized online language, and attributed their use broadly to speakers operating within a certain medium of CMC, such as email or electronic bulletin boards (e.g. Collot and Belmore's (1996) *electronic language*, Naomi Baron's (2002) *email style*, Crystal's (2004) *netspeak*). Even when variation among speakers operating within the same medium or community of practice is noted by a researcher, such as Cherny's (1999) acknowledgment that certain syntactic and morphological phenomena of MUD discourse only occurs in the speech of particular speakers, this phenomenon is often placed in the periphery of the work and the researcher avoids detailed accounts of possible motivations for variation in online discourse (though see Paolillo 2001 and Squires 2005).

This paper does not intend to condemn these prior approaches, as they have produced necessary research on otherwise undocumented linguistic practices. It can be argued, however, that they have left little room for conceptualizing changes in style and register within CMC. This has left a notable gap in the literature of the field, though one that is rapidly being filled by contemporary scholars approaching internet discourse with these processes in mind. This paper aims to not only contribute to this body of work, but to expand the scope of variationist work on CMC by considering the following premises: one, that forms of punctuation, especially when used in ways that stray from their traditional uses in written texts, can be studied as variables that speakers use to signal distinct ways of talking; two, that speakers switch into these ways of talking for reasons

similar to those described in sociolinguistic analyses of spoken discourse, such as situational and metaphorical forms of codeswitching or styleshifting (Blom and Gumperz 1972); and three, that the use of punctuation in non-standard capacities can be attributed to the pursuit of covert prestige (Labov 1972, Trudgill 1974) linked to these forms, to an association with the positive ideologies surrounding the use of a punctuation marker, or possibly to both.

2. IRC and Prototypical Synchronicity

The data used in this analysis is taken from the logfiles of 5 twenty-minute, naturally occurring English conversations held through Internet Relay Chat, with a total of 39 speakers contributing to the corpus. IRC is a chatroom style of what I call *prototypically synchronous* computer-mediated communication; though a brief description of this designation will be provided here, a more thorough explanation of the features of IRC can be found in Werry (1996).

The prototypical synchronicity of a medium, either synchronous or asynchronous, reflects whether the structures of the medium seem aimed at accommodating talk that occurs in approximate real-time or at less immediate intervals. Chatrooms, instant messages, and similar mediums are considered prototypically synchronous because speakers can potentially see the discourse as it unfolds directly into the chatroom or instant message box, allowing for responses to utterances to be constructed immediately after a previous speaker has taken a turn at talk. This process is contrasted with prototypically asynchronous mediums such as message boards and email, where previous talk must first be accessed by actively opening a message thread or email before a response can even begin to be constructed, and future talk will likewise be accessible only by first opening the new email or thread. As spoken discourse seems to be the model for how researchers are defining CMC synchronicity, it can be argued that prototypically synchronous media are better equipped to approximate that model than prototypically asynchronous forms. This is reflected in a general tendency (and in certain circumstances an expectation, though this is not always the case) for speakers operating within prototypically synchronous mediums to interact in approximate real-time with their interlocutors, even if this tendency is by no means universal across speakers or even across interactions. Although researchers are not in complete agreement over whether prototypically synchronous communications use the standards of either spoken discourse or of written text as a model for shaping internet discourse, the present research supports the view that online talk is likely shaped by a combination of the standards of both (Baron 1998).

3. The Ellipsis as Conjoining Marker

The functions of ellipses in internet discourse are varied, and can be simply categorized by whether they adhere to the marker's traditional uses within written English (i.e. to indicate deleted material, to mark hesitation or silence, to suggest unfinished thoughts) or are more innovatively employed by speakers. For the purposes of tracing the origins of use of the ellipsis within CMC, it would also be

helpful to make a distinction between those uses of the marker that have differed from standard uses but have appeared historically in various written representations of speech, such as those appearing in novels, comic books, and closed-captioned television. It would be equally helpful to note cross-linguistic uses of the ellipsis in various written formats, such as its role in Japanese manga to represent speechlessness and implicate surprise, guilt, or incredibility, as potential influences on the use of ellipses within English internet discourse. Due to constraints on space, however, this analysis will consider these latter distinctions best saved for future research, and will focus instead on a wide-spread online use of the ellipsis that can be categorized as straying from its traditional applications within standardized writing practices: as a conjoining marker between grammatical and other constituents.

The first use of an ellipsis as a conjoining marker functions to connect two grammatical constituents within the same utterance, acting much as a "replacement" for a lexical conjunction or relative pronoun. Similarly, ellipses can be used as a replacement of sorts for other forms of punctuation, such as commas and periods, so as to connect any number of other constituents within an utterance.

(1) <marine> thats scary foreman...I hope its not that big
(2) <yahoo> you mean to tell me cutie...you don't have any old shoes
(3) <modern> lets get ice cream…pickles…soda :)
(4) <wolfen> I usually go for a slght undrstatement myself...thats jst me…

In fragment 1, for example, an ellipsis is used in place of what would likely be a comma or period used to connect the two clauses spoken by marine. Fragment 2 shows an ellipsis standing in for what would likely be a relative pronoun used to connect the clauses. In fragment 3, the first ellipsis can be read as functioning as would either a comma or a coordinating conjunction, while the second ellipsis likely functions as a coordinating conjunction; in this case, these conjunctions would most likely be read similarly to *and* by other speakers. The first ellipsis of fragment 4 appears to also function in place of a conjunction to join the two clauses, though this would likely be read as *but*. The second ellipsis is used here as end punctuation similarly to how a period might function. Although this might be read as one of the standard uses of the ellipsis, that of representing unfinished thoughts or speech, wolfen does not speak for another 23 lines after this utterance, and that is in response to an unrelated topic. Similarly, other speakers from the data would frequently use an ellipsis as end punctuation without orienting to the marker's possible interpretation as leaving the speaker with more to say.

While the above examples lack a specific pattern based on the syntax of an utterance for determining how frequently an ellipsis would be used rather than a conjunction, relative pronoun, or other form of punctuation, there are specific types of utterances that the data show to be vastly more likely to contain an ellipsis than any other.

(5) <pumpkin> babez...your so damn mean
(6) <rockout> lol..you better kick Carol out first
(7) <mareena> hey just kidding...huggles
(8) <lovely> w00t....thanks grey

As IRC is a multi-user medium where conversations can potentially involve dozens of speakers talking at once, users have adopted practices of addressivity in which they overtly address the recipient of their message within the course of their turn. Addressivity typically occurs at the beginning or end of an utterance, and as fragment 5 illustrates, speakers within the corpus frequently separate their addressivity terms from the rest of their utterances through the use of an ellipsis. Similarly, fragments 6 and 7 show examples of speakers separating various forms of textual play, such as written representations of laughter ("lol" or "laughing out loud") or of actions such as hugging another speaker ("huggles"), from the utterances that precede or follow the play. If we conceptualize that the speakers in these examples are at least partially patterning their discourse after spoken interactions, it seems likely that they are using the ellipses to separate what would be the spoken portion of an offline interaction from what would be the extralinguistic features. In the case of addressivity, a parallel can be drawn to gesture, eye gaze, or similar actions used in face-to-face interactions to select the recipient of an utterance; in the case of textual play, a parallel can be drawn to those actions that the play represents within the chat, such as laughing or hugging. By using an ellipsis to separate the two types of constituents within an utterance, it can be argued that there is a conceptual split for a large number of speakers from the data between the communicative content of an utterance and the *metadiscourse* that accompanies it.

4. Motivations Behind Non-Traditional Use of the Ellipsis

What still remains unanswered is why the speakers cited above use conjoining marker ellipses rather than lexical constituents or more traditional pieces of punctuation, as well as why they have chosen to use an ellipsis to separate the communicative content from the metadiscourse of an utterance. While there are likely numerous answers to these questions, and even more likely a number of them that work together in determining the frequent use of the ellipsis in these capacities, this analysis offers the possibility that the ellipsis has become a discourse marker among the speakers of many online communities of practice, and that it has grown to carry various types of prestige among these speakers. It can be argued that the positive ideologies surrounding the use of the ellipsis, then, contribute to its frequent use among the speakers from the corpus.

To discuss how these ideologies came about, it is first necessary to consider the widespread variation in ellipsis use that exists among speakers in online settings. Though the previous data fragments perhaps hint towards a universality of their use among all speakers operating in both IRC or in other CMC mediums, this is far from the case. In the uses of the ellipsis cited above, variation could be

seen in at least three situations that occurred throughout the data: an increase in ellipsis use could be seen as correlative to a decrease in the formality of an interaction, and vice versa, signifying a shift in register achieved through the degree that ellipses were included or excluded within one's speech; an increase in use was tied to a type of metaphorical styleshifting, such as that used in a *sympathetic speech style*; and an increase in use was tied to a type of situational styleshifting, such as a shift into an ellipsis-heavy speech style when entering a specific online environment, likely used to signify membership within a particular community of practice. It is likely that the motivations behind these shifts in speech style are somehow linked, at least diachronically, and future research beyond what is posited in this analysis is certainly necessary to more accurately determine these motivations.

As heavy uses of the ellipsis that stray from the marker's traditional uses in written English are seen as marking an informal style of speech in internet discourse, illustrated through the correlative relationship between an increase in formality and a decrease in ellipsis use, it can be argued that the standards of written discourse are being held as formal, acrolect-type standards for talk online. This notion is also supported by prescriptivist language ideologies held by numerous speakers that place the standardized writing practices of written English higher than the more innovative uses found in certain types of internet discourse; these ideologies are noted, for example, in the abuse of certain players of online games who make use of "CMC-specific" features in talk that veer from the standards of written English (Iorio 2005). However, the construal of these types of features as informal and non-standard may also lead to a type of covert prestige attached to their use, and it is perhaps this covert prestige that speakers are tapping into in their use of ellipses in the examples discussed here. However, there are certainly other CMC-specific features which would be construed by prescriptivist language ideologies as non-standard and could therefore provide this same covert prestige, such as orthographic practices that make use of alphanumeric homophony (i.e. "cu l8r") or heavy use of emoticons, and it is likely that these features are used in concert with ellipses to reflect a particular register or style within internet discourse.

There is likely another reason, then, either apart from or working in conjunction with the covert prestige afforded to speakers using ellipsis-heavy styles, why the ellipses serve in the capacity that they do. The adoption of a sympathetic speech style through metaphorical styleshifting is one of a number of ways that speakers can show empathy with another speaker in an interactional environment where pitch, physical gestures, and other extralinguistic features of the talk are not available to convey such emotions. One of the style's most notable and constant features across interactions is its increased use of ellipses in non-standard fashions, especially as a replacement for standard punctuation (such as periods, commas, and semi-colons), and its inclusion before question marks.

(9) 148 <genova> yeah pumpkin, pass it over

169 <genova> yum yum its gooooooooood. lol
317 <genova> oh honey...are you goign to be all right...?
324 <genova> I know...i'm just sososo sory to hear that... :(
330 <genova> yeah...
336 <genova> well...you kno my number if you need it...

The data in fragment 9 illustrates the progression of genova's speech into a sympathetic speech style, a response to news about one of the other speakers in the chat recently being dumped by her boyfriend occurring during lines 310-314 (omitted for privacy of the speaker). The obvious changes in genova's speech style can be seen when comparing lines 148 and 169, which make use of both a comma and period, to lines 317, 324, and 336, which all make use of ellipses to connect the grammatical constituents in each utterance as well as to end each sentence (or to precede the use of a question mark as end punctuation, as seen in line 317).

The use of an ellipsis in such a style can be attributed to some of the ideologies surrounding its use, described through interviews with speakers from the IRC data who claimed it showed that the speaker adopting the style was attentive and listening to his or her interlocutor, and that users generally felt more comfortable with a speaker who adopted this style. The interviewed speakers unanimously agreed that this positive effect on the perception of a speaker using this style also carried over to speakers who did not switch into ellipsis-heavy style due to a metaphorical styleshift, but who frequently made use of ellipses in non-standard ways as a part of another type of register or style. These ideas about ellipsis use can likely be traced back to one of the standard uses of an ellipsis, to represent silence, as a perception of silence achieved while still engaging in conversation could likely convey the idea that the speaker is actively listening to his or her interlocutor. Since speakers from the data hold the idea that these qualities carry over to speakers who make use of ellipses in non-standard ways, even without switching into a sympathetic speech style, it is likely that the frequent use of the ellipses in the non-standard ways illustrated in fragments 1 through 8 can be tied not only to the possibility of seeking covert prestige among other members of the chat, but to the pursuit of appearing as conscientious speakers to their chat partners or even to an association with the positive ideologies surrounding the marker that originally sprang from this type of perception.

5. Conclusion

There is still a great deal of work to be conducted on the study of linguistic variables and sociolinguistic variation within online discourse; the brief analysis offered here is intended as an exploratory work into the use of only one such variable, and barely scratches the surface in the documentation of its variation in use among speakers. It should be noted that the data discussed here was taken from but one online community of practice, and that the examples shown above were largely from core members of this group rather than peripheral members or

first-time visitors to the chatroom. The exclusion of non-peripheral members in the analysis was not explicitly the choice of the researcher, but the result of ellipsis use in the capacities described above occurring almost exclusively in the speech of the chatroom's regulars. Though this variation in use was noted indirectly in the attribution of increased ellipsis use to possibly signify membership in a community of practice, it is deserving of much more detailed attention in further research than could be provided here. Additionally, discussions of the use of ellipsis in other IRC communities, as well as broader studies grounded in data taken from similarly prototypically synchronous mediums and in prototypically asynchronous mediums are viable and quite necessary directions for future work. It is also the hope of the researcher that studies of punctuation other than the ellipsis and discussions of their role within the discourse of speakers operating in all areas of the online sphere will be conducted by linguists interested in the workings of internet discourse.

6. Acknowledgments

I am extremely grateful to Kira Hall, Nichole Hansen, Lauren Squires, and Jenny Davis for their time spent providing generous feedback on previous drafts of this paper. Any remaining weaknesses are solely my responsibility.

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