

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Silent Orality”: Toward a Conceptualization of the Digital Oral Features in CMC and SMS Texts

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Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and short messages service (SMS) play an increasing role in contemporary interpersonal communication. Studies on the linguistic style of these means often refer to its hybrid discursive nature, which combines the formal written register and the informal oral features. This article conceptualizes the oral features of digital CMC and SMS text against the background of two previous eras of orality: the residual-manuscript orality of the Middle Ages and the “secondary orality” of electronic mass communication. It argues that digital orality is unique in the silence of its manifestations, as texts are not converted into the audial sphere. This new type of orality is also unique in that it is celebrated: Its users intentionally toy with the language.

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The central roles of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and short message service (SMS) in contemporary interpersonal communication have attracted much recent scholarly attention. Studies on the issue have analyzed, among other things, the linguistic and discursive patterns in chat rooms, instant messaging (IM), and mobile phone texting. These digital means of communication are often described as the kingdom of a new and unique informal language, one that requires new communicative and linguistic skills (Green, 2007; Kessler & Bergs, 2003). A recurring theme in the scholarly work on these messages is the development of linguistic and discursive patterns that involve written and spoken characteristics (Crystal, 2006; Green, 2007; Gunkel, 2009; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). But despite repetitive discussion of these matters and similar conclusions about the hybrid nature of the written-spoken language of CMC and SMS, no in-depth attempt has been made to conceptualize the oral features or to compare oral digital motives with oral influences in past eras. Studies that have attempted this have described the orality of the digital era as part of the “secondary orality” (Ong, 1982) of the radio and television era

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(Kibby, 2005). This reflects the general tendency of scholars of digital orality to rely on Ong's perception, assuming that in both eras the change in literacy and introduction of oral motifs are related to technological innovations (Soukup, 2007).

This article puts forward the argument that although both the secondary orality of radio and television and the orality of CMC have evolved in typographic atmospheres and rely on written texts, the characteristics of these cultures and their manifestation in the written texts differ radically. In light of the special features of the digital era, CMC and texting should be seen as an era of "digital orality"—a new age in the history of orality. The previous four eras of orality can be characterized according to the form and influence of orality within their frameworks: The first was "primary orality," in which no writing technology existed; the second was the "residual-manuscript orality" of the Middle Ages, in which writing was strongly influenced by the hegemonic oral culture; the third was the highly literate era of "print culture," in which the influence of orality decreased dramatically; and the fourth era is "secondary orality," in which texts are written to be read on radio and television (Ong, 1982; Raymond, 1980). "Digital orality" constitutes the fifth, relatively new and diachronically last, era, in which orality is entirely written. However, the conceptual frameworks or technological infrastructures of this era are oral in nature—their main purpose is to allow interpersonal speech-like communication. One needs to only identify the conceptual perception of *chat* or the medium of mobile *phone* in which SMS messages are written to recognize the potential of the diffusion of oral features into the written realm.

The aim of this article is to present and defend the characterization of this communication model of "digital orality" and to compare it with features of orality in previous historical areas. As it will be argued here, digital orality's unique nature emerges on several levels when compared with the secondary orality of radio and television. Although secondary orality is generally associated with mass communication, digital orality relates to interpersonal or small groups; although secondary orality is characterized by the transformation of written to spoken text, this transformation is absent in digital orality (in which silent reading governs); although the oral characteristics of secondary orality are implicit in the textual flow (intended only to draw the audience in), digital orality evinces a much more self-conscious use of its form—the oral nature itself is foregrounded and celebrated. In fact, more correspondences exist between digital orality and the residual-manuscript orality of the Middle Ages than between digital orality and the more contemporaneous secondary orality. Both medieval manuscripts and digital chats exhibit a loose textual structure: The receiver is expected to construct a narrative out of the segmented texts. In both the Middle Ages and the digital era, producers had to find ways to ease the difficulty of the writing of text. In Middle Ages, the difficulties lay in the physical exertion of handwriting; in SMS, they relate to manipulating the mobile phone's miniature keyboard and in meeting the demand for timely and synchronic response in chats or IM messages.

Before discussing the oral characteristics of the various historical eras, however, some clarifications are necessary. The decision to discuss CMC and SMS within the same analytical framework—even though SMS texting is usually not sent via computers—is based on their similarities in writing style and in how orality influences their texts. As Green argues regarding SMS: “Texting is intimately linked to the computer, especially following the rise of the internet” (Green, 2007, p. 126). These two technologies emerged at approximately the same time, and their similarities seem stronger than their differences. A second clarification is with regard to the question of oral communication through the Internet. Because the aim of this article is to deal with *written texts* and the influence of oral features on them, the analysis will not include utterances transferred through the Web in interfaces such as Skype. The focus in this study is on the relationship between literacy and orality.

From primary to secondary orality

Orality is inseparable from the written text. As Ong argues, texts have always been related, in one way or another, to the world of sound—to the spoken word (Ong, 1982). However, the extent to which orality influences the text and its characteristics has varied in different cultural and historical environments, and it depends upon the amount of consciousness in the use of orality as well as its targets. The only type of society in which there would be no link between orality and writing is a purely oral one—a culture in which no possibility of writing exists. Although the written text is always dependent on a spoken text, orality can exist independently of writing technology. Such primarily oral societies have no aids to reconstruct thought or preserve knowledge: It must be repeated aloud or it will vanish (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1981). This results in a slow progress of aggregative thought, characterized by repetition and narrative construction (Thomas, 2000). In this type of culture, spoken communication unites people as listeners in a given physical place, strengthening communal public solidarity (Thomas, 2000).

The transition from a primarily oral society to a literate one is gradual. The medieval preprint manuscript culture clearly demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between oral and literary motives (Innes, 1998). Because of its oral foundations, according to McLuhan (1967, p. 90), “writing, reading, and oratory remained inseparable until well after printing.” Within medieval society, where readers were few and listeners were many (Chaytor, 1950), manuscripts mainly helped to recycle knowledge back into the oral world: Into the world of those hearing and learning. They were often used as aids for memorizing what readers were already familiar with (Thomas, 1992). Manuscripts were read aloud even in private. Reading was thus a physical activity that emphasized the organ of speech—the mouth. In fact, the only way for an author to publish his work was to read it in public (Chaytor, 1950).

The lengthy and difficult process of producing and using handwritten text resulted in a need to ease these procedures through tools such as abbreviations, glosses, and marginal notes (Soffer and Eshet-Alkalai, 2009). As McLuhan (1967)

argued: “Manuscript culture was producer-oriented, almost entirely a do-it-yourself culture, and naturally looked to the relevance and usability of items rather than their sources” (McLuhan, 1967, p. 131). Literature was characterized by loosely constructed sentences, either united by the particles *que* and *si* or put together without any connection at all, so that the audience’s comprehension of meaning depended upon the reciter’s tone and emphasis (Chaytor, 1950; Ong, 1982). Morrison (1990), in his study on the characteristics of the historical texts of the 11th and 12th centuries, argues that they lacked a “narrative of wholeness” (what he describes as “a beginning, middle, and end”). These texts consisted of the accumulation of anecdotes and they “flagrantly defy the canons of proportion and clarity.” Authors and the intended readers filled the gaps within them, presupposing that which was unsaid in the said. Historical writers, such as those of tragedies or comedies, required the intervention of the spectator’s imagination, expecting the readers to include textual elements “that were conspicuously present by their absence” (p. 246).

The end of the hegemony of oral culture was closely linked to the innovation and social effects of print. “As the Gutenberg typography filled the world,” declared McLuhan, “the human voice closed down” (1967, p. 250). Within the manuscript culture, the visual faculty had been accorded only minor importance (p. 99), but the later printed text, which required scanning by individual readers, emphasized the visual aspect. As McLuhan argued: “Print gradually made reading aloud pointless, and accelerated the act of reading till the reader could feel ‘in the hand of’ his author” (p. 125). The availability of an increasing number of book copies led to the improvement of reading skills and to an easing of the reading process, which shifted the emphasis from reading as an oral, communal, and consolidating activity to reading as a silent solitary act. The increasing distribution—and commercial value—of books resulted in a transition from a producer-oriented culture to a consumer-oriented one (McLuhan, 1967, p. 131), in which the intent was to attract as many readers as possible.

According to Ong (1992), within the orality-literacy polarity, the radio and television environment of the 20th century saw the rise of a new oral atmosphere. He distinguishes between “primary orality,” which characterizes societies that have no knowledge of writing, and “secondary orality,” which grows out of high-literacy cultures and characterizes the orality of radio and television. Although the secondary orality of the high-technology culture depends for its existence on writing and print, the text is transformed into spoken words intended for an audience of listeners. As Ong (2002) argues:

Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality. Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But secondary orality generates a sense for group immeasurably larger than these of primary oral culture—McLuhan’s “global village.” (Ong, 1982, p. 136)

The visual elements that were attributed to the written and mainly printed word were challenged by the electronic media—by tapes and loud speakers (Ong, 1967). As McLuhan stated: “The electronic age, by virtue of its simultaneity, has created a universal ‘acoustic’ environment. Having left the Middle Ages by the visual route, we are returning to full medieval awareness by the acoustic route” (McLuhan, 1974).¹ McLuhan referred to the loss in modern print culture of the hegemonic connection between the text and the visual. In the electronic media age following print, texts are written to be read aloud. Radio texts and in many cases television texts are written for the ears rather than the eyes of their audience. Like the texts in the Middle Ages, the texts of electronic media speak out loud: They have to be voiced. However, as Ong (1967) observes, this orality is posttypographical (Ong, 1967, pp. 301–302). This is also true, of course, with regard to CMC and SMS orality. In fact, as it will be argued here, this latter orality does not have any oral or acoustic features as past oral eras did. The influences of the oral features of CMC and SMS are expressed solely within the written sphere.

The emergence and writing style of CMC and SMS

The emergence of CMC was accompanied by fears about its social influences—in particular, concern about the impact of Internet use on social relationships. Of course, apocalyptic prophecies about the social impact of new communication technologies are nothing new. In the same spirit, Plato warned that writing would erode memory and that written texts could fall into the hands of those who would misunderstand or even defile them (Hyland, 1968, p. 39). The Church perceived print to be Satan’s invention. And in modern times, fears have accompanied the emergence of the telegraph, the telephone, and mass communication broadcasting (Crystal, 2006, p. 2).

Warnings proliferated about the isolation and depression that CMC might cause, as relationships with friends and family were weakened, while relationships with strangers were strengthened (Gross, 2004, p. 635). Early scholarly references to CMC described it as inferior to face-to-face (FtF) communication. CMC was perceived as a limited impersonal tool that filtered out crucial social contextual information and nonverbal cues (physical appearance, body language, voice tone) in interpersonal communication (Ramirez, Zhang, McGrew, & Lin, 2007; Walther, 1996). It was argued that CMC was less suitable for interpersonal relationships than it was for task-oriented relationships and that its use increased negative and hostile speech acts (Walther, 1996). Another fear was how these new digital means would influence language. Both popular and scholarly forums warned that the writing style of these new communication means would destroy the rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008; Thurlow & Bell, 2009). These concerns were all related, in one way or another, to the oral characteristics of these new digital platforms.

This discussion on the discursive characteristics of CMC began with e-mail messaging. E-mail has been around for about four decades, but its broader public

use began in the 1990s. Although scholars have pointed out the speech-like qualities of e-mail writing (Baron, 2003, p. 85), identifying or classifying distinct e-mail discursive patterns is problematic and illusive because of the varied contexts for its use, which influence length, style, and oral characteristics. E-mailing can replace a phone call—writing what was previously said (Danet, 2001)—and therefore might have many informal oral features. But an e-mail can also replace a formal written letter (Crystal, 2006, p. 11; Van Woerkum, 2007, p. 198). Another limiting factor in considering oral influences on e-mail discourse is the a-synchronic nature of e-mail communication. E-mail messages can be edited or written on a word processor, preserving the relatively formal style of writing and allowing the construction of calculated messages, which serves the self-presentation and impression management of senders (Danet, 2001; Walther, 2007).

The mass popularization of the Internet led to further possibilities for CMC. Among these were chats and IM systems. Synchronic chat interfaces, which appeared in 1988 (Herring, 2004), are based on ongoing written conversation conducted in real time. Participants type and send their contributions, which are listed on a scrolling screen (Crystal, 2006). Although early chats allowed messaging only between two users, later programs could include a group (Gunkel, 2009). Chat discourse often lacks discursive coherency (with frequent topic changes and digressions) and overall continuity (Kern, 1995).

In a-synchronic formats, such as e-mail, the time of response may vary highly, but in a synchronic forum, the reaction time is crucial—any delay in response can be disruptive (Walther, 2007), indicating a technical lag or a problem of attitude of the sender. When the chat involves several people, delays can interrupt the linearity and progress of the conversation and undermine the sequence of turns (Crystal, 2006). Making replies as brief and as quickly as possible is thus vital, a fact that is interesting in light of the social information processing theory (SIPT), which argues that CMC occurs at a slower rate than FtF communication. According to SIPT, although CMC can reach or even surpass levels of interpersonal FtF communication (a different view than that of early scholars of CMC), this requires an extended period of time to occur, as CMC is a single channel relying on text only, while FtF is multiple one (Ramirez, Dimmick, Feaster, & Lin, 2008). An important consideration in chat writing is therefore the need to ease the speed of writing. As Danet argues, “chat modes most resemble oral conversation; speed is all important—we cannot type as fast as we speak, but we do our best to type fast—and editing is virtually impossible” (Danet, 2001, pp. 16–17). On such a communication platform, reaction time is much more important than grammatical correctness or spelling and punctuation.

But informal writing style within CMC in general and in chat writing in particular is not only a matter of technological constraints. Written chat interaction takes place in a “*chat room*”—the framework is of an atmosphere of spoken words, even if these words are translated into written expression. The revolt against formal writing rules is also manifested in individuals’ need to express their creativity and uniqueness within

the chat's flow. Because the chat room lacks nonverbal communicational clues, the main tools for self-presentation and impression management are creative language and typography (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Walther, 2007). This creativity can be seen as part of the "hyperpersonal affordances" perception, which assumes that the participants dynamically engage with the features of CMC. According to this perception, the lack of nonverbal cues is not a disadvantage; rather, it can help users develop more positive and desirable relationships (Kim, 2002). Energy that is usually devoted to physical self-presentation can be redirected to the linguistic and typographic sphere (Walther, 2007), resulting in more creative and freer expression. This discursive creativity is encouraged even further given the subculture of youth among the users of such interfaces (a point that will be elaborated upon in a later section of this article).

Another important system came to cyberspace following the chat platform—IM. IM emerged in the mid-1990s with the appearance of the ICQ (I seek you) software, which was followed by other systems such as MSN Messenger and AOL Instant Messenger (Crystal, 2006). Although IM systems can be used for group interaction, they are mainly used for one-on-one exchange (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008): Users can check the status of their "buddy's" online (available, busy, away, and so on). IM interaction, especially among young people, is often one of a number of tasks occurring at any one time. This multitasking—often including other social interactions as well as nonsocial activities (Gross, 2004)—intensifies the need for simple and less time-consuming writing. Written messages often have speech-like features, including abbreviations and omissions. The phonetic sound that characterizes a single letter or digits will replace words in CMC writing: *b* = "be," *c* = "see," *8* = "ate," *4* = "for." The phonetic sound of a letter plus a digit can replace syllables: *b4* = "before," *f2f* = "face to face," *gr8* = "great," *o4u* = "only for you" (Crystal, 2006, pp. 91–92; Green, 2007, p. 126). All of these are intended to ease typing and shorten response time (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008). Constraints of the software also often preclude sending a message longer than a certain number of characters (Crystal, 2006). In fact, IM discursive style continues the same patterns found in chat rooms: "[T]he abbreviations, the uncorrected typing errors, the absence of initial capitalization, and the avoidance of full stops (but not of question marks, exclamation marks, or ellipsis dots) in sentence final position—are similar to those which characterize any chatgroup" (Crystal, 2006, p. 255). This use of multiple punctuation, eccentric spelling, capital letters, and comic-book style imitation of sounds—"UGGHHHHH!!": Danet, 2001, p. 18—are all part of writers' efforts to create the experience of spoken words (Danet, 2001).

Accompanying the widespread use of the Internet, another technological means has entered everyday use—the mobile phone and SMS. Although texting is not usually conducted through a computer like chat or IM interactions, it is intimately linked to other forms of computer communication: As Green notes, SMS communication, which he brands "textspeak," evolved from chat room writing and adopted many of its characteristics to accelerate message exchange. In fact, the technological constraints

of texting make some of the characteristics that we can find in CMC even more radical:

The medium dictates its message, and the mobile phone screen undoubtedly sets the rules for the way one uses it. At an average of 160 characters maximum, the screen is definitely not the place for long-drawn-out, polysyllabic disquisitions. What it demands is short, sharp, and to the point. (Green, 2007, p. 126)

Miniature telephone buttons also dictate the use of abbreviations or short messages (Herring, 2004). Text messages are written with one or two thumbs, and punctuating the text is relatively complex and might require several key taps (Ling and Baron, 2007). Although the use of mobile buttons is inconvenient, users usually perceive texting as a near-synchronous communication and expect SMS replies quickly (Rettie, 2009).

Furthermore, the influence of the oral nature of the medium itself—the mobile phone—on SMS cannot be ignored. The speech rules of using a telephone have diffused to written communication over the telephone, as can be seen in the conversation-like characteristics of SMS communication: “Text messages were usually much shorter than social emails, and in SMS conversations short messages alternated rather like verbal dialogue” (Rettie, 2009, p. 434). In the same manner as the chats or IM systems, constraints can lead to creative linguistic solutions meant to ease the writing process:

SMS writers have started to use and conventionalize certain complex iconic and symbolic signs. Adolescents in particular have begun to use their computers and mobile phones very creatively. Thus, the medium (itself) has become an essential part of the message and determines its shape. (Kessler and Bergs, 2003, p. 80)

Although scholars have given different names to these discursive patterns found in CMC and SMS, they all agree on their strong oral or spoken characteristics. Danet, for example, argues that online and oral communication share many qualities (Danet, 2001). Tagliamonte and Denis define IM language as a hybrid register that exhibits a fusion of a formal written register and an informal vernacular one (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Kern (1995) refers to the “chatty” writing environment that integrates aspects of written discourse with an oral discursive style. David Crystal (2006) has branded the language of CMC as part of “Netspeak” (noting that this is an alternative for terms such as “Netlish,” “Weblish,” “Internet language,” and “cyberspeak”) because it is a form of communication that relies on characteristics of both speech and writing: “We ‘write’ e-mails, not ‘speak’ them. But chat groups are for ‘chat,’ and people certainly ‘speak’ to each other there” (pp. 20, 31–32).

It is important to note here (to be elaborated on later in the article) that this new hybrid register is not just an outcome of technology or the use of the digital medium: It is embodied in the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Following Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000) metaphor, this hybrid language can be seen as a “liquid language,” part of the general contemporary mode of “liquid modernity.” Although modernity is identified by

rigid patterns, configurations, and rules, contemporary modernity liquidizes these patterns. They become fluid, individualized, and privatized and cannot easily be kept in the same form for long (Bauman, 2000). In the same manner, CMC and SMS language blurs the distinctions between oral and written registers. The rigidity of linguistic patterns is liquidized through the creative use of individual agents, who create and recreate a new expressive style to match their social targets.

Given the importance of oral characteristics in CMC and SMS writing cultures, it is necessary to examine these oral features against the background of historical eras that exhibited strong oral influences on writing—the eras of residual-manuscript orality and secondary orality. Although the latter has been considered meaningful with reference to the orality of digital texts, no in-depth comparative analysis exists. As Soukup (2007) notes, scholars have found Ong's arguments on the effect of orality on literacy in the era of broadcast mass communication to be a good module for explaining the impact of technology on the relationship between orality and literacy in the digital era. The historical continuity from the era of electronic mass communication to that of the digital has led to the argument that CMC orality should be considered a phenomenon of secondary orality. Thus, Kibby (2005) argues that “[e]mail communication is a form of secondary orality. Although based on writing, it privileges orality, in that the dynamics of an exchange reflect a participatory event that heightens a feeling of community. And it is firmly based in the present moment” (pp. 771–772). But as we will see, there are marked differences between the oral features of secondary orality and the digital orality of CMC and texting.

Toward silent digital orality

Unlike primary and residual-manuscript oral cultures, both secondary and digital orality are the products of high-technology cultures that depend for their existence on writing and print. In both cases, then, this orality characterizes posttypographical societies. And in the same way that secondary orality encourages, according to Ong, individualism, self-consciousness, reflectiveness, and historical sense (Ong, 1967), these effects are even stronger within the framework of digital orality. However, fundamental differences between secondary and digital orality are also evident, as are striking similarities between the oralities of the residual-manuscript and the digital cultures. Table 1 simplifies and summarizes the comparative aspects of these types of orality. It focuses on the eras of “residual-manuscript orality” and “secondary orality”: the two eras that combine strong orality with literacy. The characteristics of these are presented alongside those of the diachronically last oral culture—the digital one—thus allowing for clear comparative analysis.

What makes each of these textual cultures “oral”? A major aspect of both residual-manuscript and secondary orality is the transformation of written texts into the vocal sphere. However, this conversion does not occur in digital orality. The texts of CMC and SMS are usually manifested *silently*, in the spirit of the modern print tradition. In a distinct way, digital orality affects only the writing itself. Digital orality is strongly

Table 1 Orality Types—A Comparison

Features of Orality	Residual-Manuscript Orality	Secondary Orality	Digital Orality
Conversion of text to aural sphere	Texts are read aloud	Texts are read aloud	Texts are read silently
Level of intentionality	Low intention: oral characteristics are assumed	Relatively high intention: texts are written for “ears” of audience	High intention: oral characteristics are creatively utilized
Narrative construction	Narrative constructed by reader	Narrative contained in the text	Narrative constructed by reader
Motivation for oral characteristics	To ease <i>writer’s</i> difficulty with constraints of media	To benefit <i>listener’s/audience’s</i> experience of media	Mainly to ease <i>writer’s</i> difficulty with constraints of media
Creation of communal solidarity	High	Relatively high	Low
Audience size	Relatively small	Mass audience	Usually interpersonal or small groups
Technological innovation	Writing challenges purely oral culture	Broadcast media challenge silent, isolated reading culture	CMC and SMS challenge boundaries between writing/reading text and synchronic dialog

associated, however, with the technological framework in which writing is taking place: a chat room or mobile phone. Digital oral features are linked to the synchronic dialogic features of chats or IM: Unlike the writing of texts in previous oral eras, digital orality manifests interpersonal, informal spoken conversation in the written sphere.

Another important difference between secondary and digital orality is that of the nature—in particular the size—of the audience. Secondary orality, as part of the mass communication culture, has a mass audience; digital orality occurs in much more limited social frameworks—in interpersonal interactions or within relatively small groups of participants. It should be noted that CMC and SMS blur the traditional dichotomy between mass and personal media. Along with their

interpersonal uses, e-mails, for example, transmit official newsletters and SMS can be used for commercial purposes (Lüders, 2008, p. 684). But among the various genres of CMC, the features of orality are manifested more strongly in the personal use of the digital media, where “individual users are the developers of genre conventions” (Lüders, 2008, p. 688). In other words, it is less likely that strong oral characteristics would be found in newsletters or advertisements.

This link between digital orality and the interpersonal use of CMC and SMS also has significant implications for the issue of social cohesion. The communal nature of oral communication unites people in groups—it brings together audience members in their copresence (Thomas, 2000); on the other hand, the silent writing and reading of modern print are solitary activities (Ong, 1982). Mass communication restores the unifying force of ancient oral communication, functioning as a kind of substitute for the ancient tribal fire. These electronic mass communications offer a shared experience among the hearers, creating an unprecedented sense of immediacy and simultaneity (Thomas, 2000). However, digital orality, by exceeding the individualistic characteristics of modern silent reading, fosters further individual trends. Digital interpersonal communication can be conducted in total social isolation, where the interacting parties are physically distant from each other (Walther, 2007).

As mentioned already, in all three historical cases of orality discussed here, written texts are influenced by the oral atmosphere. In the manuscript era, the governing oral tradition led the reader–performer to order the textual framework and structure the fragmented narrative. In secondary orality, the conversion of texts into the oral/audial sphere strongly influenced the writing style. In the electronic media age, there is a more self-conscious use of the oral features: The author considers the intended audience and constructs the text—taking rhetorical acoustic aspects into account—in order “to catch their ears.” This deliberated use of oral features in the written texts is continued and exceeded in the digital era.

Deliberate and creative personal use of language is one of the unique characteristics of digital orality. Users “toy around with language” (Kessler & Bergs, 2003, p. 82) and coin new expressions, often influenced by spoken language (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004). Oral characteristics are part of the speech play, humor, and anarchic spirit that identifies Internet communication (Danet, 2001). This playfulness and deliberate transgression of words, typography, and spelling are influenced partly by hacker culture (Danet, 2001, 2005). Users can adopt a variety of artful features while formulating a message. They express their emotions through the keyboard symbols—such as winking ;-), laughing :-), or signing that their tongue is tied :-&. Chat and IM program users use sophisticated graphical emoticons out of a readymade software catalogue. These emoticons, reflecting users’ adjustment to the medium characteristics, stand in for nonverbal cues to help emotionally frame the verbal communication (Derks, Bos, & Von Grumbkow, 2008; Lo, 2008; Walther & D’Addario, 2001). Users can also use personalized shortenings, which will be understood only by their addressees (*IU2LUVUBIAON*—“I used to love you, but it’s all over now”; *PLZ4GVME*—“please forgive me”; see Kessler & Bergs, 2003, p. 82).

The introduction of these oral features into the text is often highly intentional—part of a creative act and a way to attract attention.

Michael Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the Middle Ages' carnival emphasizes the lack of distance or hierarchy between human beings; in a similar manner, in chat rooms the socioeconomical hierarchy between participants disappears (Danet, 2001). The unknown participants are equal: Because nonverbal cues are filtered out, they have no external appearance. Age and even the gender of the participants are often faked. In this social environment, the main way to identify other chatters is through their creative verbal and typographic messaging (Walther, 2007; Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005). Creativity in CMC and texting is also a manifestation of youth culture, as adolescents are the dominant group among users. Young people are often considered pioneers in testing out and adopting new technologies and genres (Fornäs, 1995; Oksman and Turtiainen, 2004). CMC has a strong appeal for youth, and "SMS appears to be, more than anything else, a teen form of mediation" (Ling, 2010, p. 288), among other reasons, because it is usually cheaper than voice calls (Ling & Baron, 2007). Texting messaging is more nuanced and diverse among youth than among adults (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004) and gives teens a forum to develop slang and their own linguistic formulas. As Naomi S. Baron (2005) argues:

Adolescents have long been a source of linguistic and behavioral novelty. Teens often use spoken language to express small-group identity. It is hardly surprising to find many of them experimenting with a new linguistic medium (such as IM) to complement the identity construction they achieve through speech, clothing, or hair style. IMs laced with, say, brb [be right back], pos [parent over shoulder], and U [you] are not so different from the profusion of "like" or "totally" common in the speech of American adolescents. (p. 30)

Residual-manuscript and digital oral cultures also resemble each other in how oral features are used to ease the addressers' writing tasks. In this sense, these two eras differ from the consumer or addressee orientation of secondary orality, where the aim is to catch the ears of the audience and improve comprehension. This addresser orientation characterizing both the residual-manuscript and the digital orality resulted in shortcuts aimed to ease the extensive task of writing: In both eras, text is not required to be "closed" or coherent but rather is an accumulation of anecdotes, abbreviations, and initials, and the addressees take an active role in constructing the text out of these.

Digital orality and the postmodern culture

Douglas Biber argues that in the 19th and 20th centuries, popular written genres—such as fiction, essays, and letters—became closer to spoken registers, adopting a writing style that was much more oral than would have been accepted 300 years ago (Biber, 2003, p. 169). The emergence of the secondary orality of radio and television

and, more currently, of digital orality goes hand in hand with the general strengthening of oral trends. Yet digital orality definitely signals a new era in the influence of orality—one that actively involves a wide circle of writers and that manifests extreme integration, often intended, of oral features within the written text. Although secondary orality has a wide social resonance, appealing as it does to a mass audience, it remains part of the “one to many” tradition of mass communication. Even if orality “is in the air,” the audience does not take an active part in writing texts that involve oral characteristics. But digital orality is much more “grass roots” in nature. It emerges from the active users themselves through an interpersonal dialogical process. This orality is not fostered by central discourse agents; rather, the users themselves are the agents of change.

The features of digital orality discussed here are part of the general postmodern and poststructural philosophical influences that evolved during the second half of the 20th century, in which a new conceptualization of the written word challenged the modernist perception of text that had been manifested in print culture. Modernist thinkers, reflecting the evolution of scientific discourse, aimed to adopt a uniform disciplined language that would exclude any individual or random terms (Ezrahi, 1974). Language would be transparent—a tool to “put the world on paper” (Olson, 1994). Every single element or “first idea” had allegedly one signifier to represent this idea alone (Knowlson, 1975). The modernist perception of language had a wide influence on many domains, such as that of Western politics (Ezrahi, 1990). And the uniformity of the printed text played an important role in its legitimacy. As Danet (2001) argues: “The text of scientific prose and newspapers, . . . were set in text typefaces—those that enhance readability and legibility, that appear to be ‘transparent’” (p. 1). The modernist perception is also evident in the binary approach to language as a system, evident in the work of structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1959). de Saussure identified language as a system in which the meaning of every word is constructed through its difference from others.

But postmodern and poststructural thinking undermined this systematic and closed perception of language. Reflecting a crisis of representation, postmodernists questioned the relationship between the “representational” and the “real”—and even the existence of reality beyond language and discourse (Kirk, 1994). Poststructuralists rejected the modernist perception of language (Caplan, 1989), aiming to break down and deconstruct texts’ false linearity (Derrida, 1976). As Roland Barthes (1977) argued, a text is not a line of words, but a tissue of quotations reflecting different cultural voices. These perceptions focus on the openness of text and its multiplicity of meanings (Foucault, 1976), and they are much more tolerant toward textual heterogeneity, creativity, and subjectivity (Soffer and Eshet-Alkalai, 2009).

The interpersonal digital communications that developed under the influence of postmodern and poststructural ideas can be evaluated as a kind of reaction—in some ways anarchistic—to the modernist perception of text. It has been argued that the medium itself—more specifically, its oral features—is often intentionally and self-consciously used in digital CMC and SMS texts. This reflects an increasing

awareness of the means of communication—the digital texts—as objects. Written language is being used in circumstances that in the past were reserved for speech, and the result is a playful approach toward the use of language (Danet, 2001).

The case of digital orality provides an interesting distinction between a formal written “high” language and an oral “low” one. Of course, the distinction between written and oral language is not new and can be seen, for example, in diglossic circumstances (although in these, the spoken language can become a written one itself over time). However, digital orality’s innovation is that the “low” oral speech that functions alongside the formal written language is solely written. The emergence of this means of interpersonal written communication within the general tolerance of a postmodern textual atmosphere has resulted in a new form of silent “speech.”

Conclusions

Secondary orality is a public phenomenon that speaks through the media of radio and television. The fact it is often invisible is proof of its efficiency—testament to the adaptation process that written texts pass through to sound “natural” to the ear. Digital orality, manifested silently and mainly through interpersonal digital communication, is less dominant in the public sphere. But even a brief survey of texts expressed through this new form of orality reveals its radical oral features. The characteristics of digital orality are not merely the outcome of technological constraints: They reflect the more general linguistic challenges to modernist perceptions of text. The emergence of the hybrid written-spoken style of digital orality is part of the postmodern and poststructural movements toward textual heterogeneity and creativity of individual agents.

In a comparison with the oralities of the ancient residual-manuscript culture and the electronic age, digital orality reveals some unique characteristics—in particular, its silent manifestation. Digital texts are not intended to be voiced: They are read silently. The oral characteristics of the text are encouraged by the interpersonal dialogical use of the medium and the orientation toward speech of the technological framework: the chat room or the mobile phone. Digital orality is also unique in the highly intentional use of oral features by writers, which stems from, among other things, how users cope with the restraints of the interpersonal digital tools and at the same time how they creatively manipulate the typographic features to manage their self-image—a factor linked to the dominance of the youth subculture in this new oral sphere.

Although these radical oral characteristics are unique to interpersonal digital communication, they at the same time clarify similarities that the residual-manuscript oral culture shares with digital orality. In both cases, texts are usually loosely constructed and the reader is integral in the structuring of the text’s narrative. Both manuscript and digital orality demonstrate writing techniques that aim to ease the medium-related difficulties of the writers’ tasks: the laborious handwriting in the residual-manuscript oral era and the miniature phone buttons or pressure for speed

in the digital era. This producer or addresser orientation differs from the addressee orientation of both the secondary oral and the print eras. The residual-manuscript oral and the digital oral cultures are also similar in their relatively small audiences.

And so, although secondary and digital orality are the products of posttypographical societies, are historically continuous in their development, and exist simultaneously in contemporary society, their similarities are limited. Both are identified by the relatively high intention of the addresser, but they differ in a number of ways: In the matter of the text's conversion to the audial sphere; in the level of explicit narrative construction that the text contains; in the size of audience they appeal to; in their role in strengthening communal solidarity; and in the motivation (for the benefit of listeners or of writers) behind the use of oral characteristics. These fundamental differences must be taken into consideration when referring to the oral characteristics of CMC and SMS as if they were part of secondary oral culture.

Notes

- 1 My efforts to locate McLuhan's article in its original printed form in several university libraries around the world failed. I am therefore using an electronic copy of this article, not in the original paging format, found in Camosun College (Canada) electronic sources (downloaded September 16, 2004).

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“沉默的口语”：CMC 和 SMS 文本中电子口语特征概念化

【摘要：】

以电脑为媒介的传播（CMC）和短信服务（SMS）在当代人际传播中发挥着越来越重要的作用。对这些传播方式语言风格的研究往往是指其结合正式的书面记录和非正式的口头语言风格特点的混合话语性质。本文在以往的两个口述时代，即中世纪残留的手稿口述和电子大众传播的“次口语化，”的背景下使 CMC 和 SMS 文本的口头语言特征概念化。本文认为电子口语化及其沉默的表现是独特的，因为文本没有被转换到听觉领域。这种新的口语化也是独一无二的：其用户是故意玩味这种语言的。

« L'oralité silencieuse » : pour une conceptualisation des caractéristiques orales numériques de la CMC et des messages SMS

La communication médiée par ordinateur (CMC) et les services d'envoi de messages courts (SMS) jouent un rôle croissant dans la communication interpersonnelle contemporaine. Les études menées sur le style linguistique de ces moyens de communication font souvent référence à sa nature discursive hybride, qui combine le registre formel de l'écrit et les caractéristiques informelles de l'oral. Cet article conceptualise les caractéristiques orales de la CMC et du SMS avec en toile de fond deux ères de l'oralité précédentes : l'oralité résiduelle-manuscrite du Moyen Âge et l'« oralité secondaire » de la communication électronique de masse. Il soutient que l'oralité numérique est unique dans le silence de ses manifestations, puisque les textes ne sont pas convertis dans la sphère auditive. Ce nouveau type d'oralité est aussi unique en ce qu'il est célébré : ses utilisateurs jouent intentionnellement avec la langue.

„Stumme Oralität“: Zu einem Konzept digitaler oraler Eigenschaften in computervermittelten Texten und SMS-Nachrichten

Computervermittelte Kommunikation und SMS-Nachrichten spielen eine zunehmend wichtige Rolle in der heutigen interpersonalen Kommunikation. Studien zum linguistischen Stil dieser Mittel weisen oft auf deren hybride diskursive Natur hin, die das offiziell geschriebene Register und informelle mündliche Eigenschaften kombiniert. Dieser Artikel konzeptualisiert die mündlichen Eigenschaften von digitaler computervermittelter Kommunikation und SMS-Texten vor dem Hintergrund zweier vorangegangener Epochen von Mündlichkeit: die residuelle Oralität des Mittelalters und die ‚sekundäre Oralität‘ der elektronischen Massenkommunikation. Es wird argumentiert, dass die digitale Oralität hinsichtlich ihrer Manifestationen einzigartig ist, da Texte nicht in die audiale Sphäre überführt werden. Dieser neue Typ von Oralität ist auch dahingehend einzigartig, da er gefeiert wird: Als des Nutzers absichtliches Spiel mit der Sprache.

“Silent Orality”: Towards a Conceptualization of the Digital Oral Features in

CMC and SMS Texts

침묵의 구술문화: CMC와 SMS 텍스트에서의 디지털구술현상의 개념화를 향하여

요약

컴퓨터 매개 커뮤니케이션 (CMC)과 짧은 메시지 서비스 (SMS)는 현대사회의 개인간 커뮤니케이션에서 갈수록 중요한 역할을 하고있다. 이러한 수단에서의 언어적 형태에 대한 연구들은 종종 공식적 서류형태와 비공식적 구술형태의 혼합인 혼종추론본능으로 언급되어진다. 본 논문은 이전에 나타난 구술문화시대의 배경에 반하여 디지털 CMC와 SMS 텍스트 구술형태를 개념화하였다. 본 논문은 디지털 구술문화는 텍스트들이 청각범위로 변환하지 않는다는 점에서 독특하다고 주장하였다. 이러한 구술문화의 새로운 형태는 이것이 축화된다는 점에서 또한 독특한 것인데, 한 예로 사용자들은 의도적으로 언어를 가지고 유희하고 있기 때문이다.

La “Oralidad Silenciosa”: Hacia una Conceptualización de las Características Orales Digitales de
los Textos de la CMC y los SMS

Resumen

La comunicación mediada por la computadora (CMC) y el servicio de mensajes cortos (SMS) juegan un rol creciente en la comunicación interpersonal contemporánea. Los estudios sobre el estilo lingüístico de estos medios se refieren a menudo a su naturaleza discursiva híbrida, que combina el registro escrito formal y las características informales de lo oral. Este artículo conceptualiza las características orales de los textos digitales de la CMC and los SMS contra los antecedentes de 2 eras previas de la oralidad: el manuscrito residual de la oralidad de la Edad Media y la ‘segunda oralidad’ de los medios electrónicos de comunicación masiva. Discuto que la oralidad digital es única en el silencio de sus manifestaciones, dado que los textos no son convertidos a la esfera auditiva. Este tipo nuevo de oralidad es único también porque es celebrado: sus usuarios juegan intencionalmente con el lenguaje.

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