

Informal Forum

The use of informal English on web forums

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On the 26th of March, 2009 Lingforum.com had 1200 registered users and 4,947 articles posted. This is just an example of one of the many web forums on which people are communicating in English. On these forums the interactions not only vary widely in topic but also in the social roles of the participants. Users may approach each other in a more formal or informal way, leading to the research question: *How much is informal English used on web forums?* The first part of this paper will look into the English language, specifically 'online English' and 'informal English'. It will then go on to discussing Computer Mediated Communication in general and web forums in specific. Finally, a content analysis of different web forums is examined and conclusions are given.

Looking at English used on-line without any geographical restrictions renders it impossible to determine whether the language user is a native speaker. Moreover, different varieties of English are used simultaneously, making any distinction irrelevant. In its small scope, this research paper is content to forgo such determinations or distinctions and will speak of this 'online English' when referring to English. An overwhelming share of the websites in OECD countries, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, are written in the English language: 78% of all websites and 96% of websites for e-commerce purposes (The Default Language, 1999 in Warschauer et al 2002). Our virtual world is not exclusively English but it is the 'common tongue' of a great number of online communicators.

The term 'informal English' means written English resembling speech. Other features of informal language use are the number of swearwords, informal expressions and the number of spelling mistakes (Montero-Fleta et al., 2008: 4). In their paper on the drift and evolution of English style, Biber and Finnegan (1989) describe how English in fiction, essays and letters has evolved towards more 'oral-styles' over the last four centuries. So the use of informal English in web forums

is not a new development, solely linked to this specific communication type. Written English as a whole has tended towards a more informal style for a long time and the English used on web forums is expected to be in accordance with this development.

Nowadays people communicate in different styles through different media. In this array of communication Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) makes up an increasingly large part of our everyday communication choices. We use social networks, e-mail, chat and online fora to express ourselves via a computer. As Herring (1996: 3) points out, one of the interesting issues of CMC is the language used. It is written text and at the same time "exchanges are often rapid and informal, and hence more like spoken conversation." Moreover, it also has a unique lexicon, use of acronyms and emoticons. CMC is often thought to be a mostly informal way of communicating as Herring describes, but is this the case? CMC is defined in a broader sense by John December (1997) as '... a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes'. For this variety of purposes both formal and informal language would be useful.

Communicating through online forums is one of the many written forms of CMC. Together these different 'new' written varieties continue to blur the distinction between written and spoken communication in the sense that the first is often associated with formal and the second with informal communication but the 'new' written varieties are associated with informal communication. This paper focuses on web forums which are (mostly) asynchronous and used by millions of people everyday on any topic imaginable. As it is asynchronous no immediate response is required, giving a user time to think. This takes away the pressure of conversation-like, synchronous, responses. Crystal (2001: 35) reminds us that the lasting feature of online messaging links the communication on a forum to written communication. The words are held somewhere. Unlike the fleeting effect of spoken conversation, the words online are kept and might return to us at a later, possibly inconvenient time. As the user has time to formulate a response one would expect a high amount of formal language in concise, well thought out postings. On the other hand, most

messages on a web forum are short, creating a conversational dynamic (Crystal, 2001:145). In general long monologues are not found on web forums. On the contrary: 70% of the messages Crystal examined were just one paragraph long. That they are so equal in length signifies another difference between communication on a forum and in a conversation, which varies much more in length of turn. One might also consider that there is no real turn taking on a web forum, a user cannot interrupt a 'speaker' and users try to communicate simultaneously; it is the timing of the server uploading the postings that determines who's turn comes first. Herring (1999) confirms that CMC differs from conversation in its coherence in turn taking. If we were to compare this to a situation of spoken conversation it would be a group of people, all 2 meters apart from each other, all talking about different subjects at the same time and all at the same audio level. Although this would be highly confusing in a face-to-face situation, on a screen it allows for new language play and 'intensified interactivity' (Herring 1999). In conclusion: communication on a web forum shows many similarities to a spoken conversation, indicating informal language use, while at the same time displaying similarities to written communication, indicating a more formal language use.

Another possible determining factor for the use of informal versus formal language is the topic which is discussed. As the technical surrounding of a web forum does not limit the user to one or the other, perhaps additional distinctions between web fora will explain it further.

Montero-Fleta et al. (2008: 7) discovered that an English web forum 'displayed markedly more oral elements' than the Spanish and Catalan web fora they simultaneously researched. The researched football forum even showed aspects of synchronous CMC, the style of communication being close to the synchronicity of spoken conversation. They found activity in sudden bursts with very long pauses in between the active bursts along with very short messages and sentences. In one such burst there were 74 messages in an hour, more than one a minute. This bursting of short communications is very similar to face-to-face communication.

The average number of words per message was 18.36 and the average sentence length was 10.8 words. Crystal (2001: 145) found an average of 3.5 lines per message, which is slightly higher

than the findings of Montero-Fleta et al. (2008). Crystal's research revolved around newsgroups so perhaps the topic or the seven years in between account for the difference in lines per message. Montero-Fleta et al. (2008) further found a generous amount of off-topic postings, with only 41% of the postings being on-topic. Also there was a great semantic dependency between messages: 88,6% of the postings had a dependency on previous messages. All these features are an indication of synchronous, more conversation like interaction.

In addition to this information a topic-related difference in use of styles was obvious from the data; the football forum was found to be more conversational than the forum about politics (see Table 1). As can be seen in Table 1 the communication features all differ between the two topics. On the forum about politics the number of words per message is over six times the amount of words on the football forum. The average sentence length is more than doubled and the dependency on previous messages is almost halved. Looking at the markers of informality they also differ between the two topics. Contrary to intuitive preconceptions the amount of swearwords and use of informal expressions is higher on the forum on politics. However, the amount of spelling mistakes per message is lower for the political forum. So although the football forum has more features similar to spoken conversation, indicating a more informal style, the political forum has a higher amount of markers of informality. In Table 1 it is shown that two forums on two different topics vary in use of formal versus informal language. However, the variation does not allow for a singular direction of the variance.

Table 1 Features of language in football and international politics forums

Comparison of football and international politics forum	
average number of words per message (football)	18.36
average number of words per message (politics)	109.4
average sentence length (football)	10.8
average sentence length (politics)	22.57
dependency on previous message (football)	88.6%
dependency on previous message (politics)	53%
Markers of informality in football and international politics forum	
messages containing swearwords (football)	15%
messages containing swearwords (politics)	37%
informal language (football)	1.2%
informal language (politics)	3.3%
spelling mistakes per message (football)	4.2
spelling mistakes per message (politics)	1.6

From Montero-Fleta, B., et al. (2008: 6-7)

There is no easy technical distinction although informal English is often used on web fora; this is topic-related and context-dependent. Sometimes users stretch the medium into synchronous interaction, creating a more informal style almost like a transcript of a conversation. Users are creating rules and boundaries, a code if you will, as to when and on what web forums certain levels of informal English are appropriate and when it is not proper. Overall there is a large amount of informal language used on the different web forums, but the differences in language use between different topics are too great to ignore. The amount of informal English used on a web forum depends on the topic of the forum and social context in which the participants are interacting. The technical surrounding does not determine the communication.

Perhaps it is time to let go of the distinctions between written and spoken, formal and informal. Instead of a dichotomous choice a sliding scale based on the intended communication purpose of the user would be a more rewarding measurement.

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