

## **Online extensions of the offline speech community: Orthographic variation in two French-language chat communities**

Much research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has focused on the differences between online and offline communication, because CMC offers new possibilities for communication that "go beyond what is available in speech" (Herring, 1999, Introduction, ¶ 3). At the same time, CMC, which is largely text-based, has often been associated with the written language, although orthographic variation is a hallmark feature of online discourse (Crystal, 2001). While research on many aspects of CMC continues to advance, the amount and type(s) of linguistic variation present in CMC environments remains a widely unexplored area of investigation. In addition, given the global reach of networked technologies, it remains to be seen whether the Internet will prove to be a "standardizing" force, leading to a rather homogenous variety of "electronic language" (Collot & Belmore, 1996), "netspeak" (Crystal, 2001), or "e-discourse" (Muniandy, 2002) shared by a single monolithic Internet community.

This presentation explores and compares orthographic norms and variation in two French-language online synchronous (i.e., real-time) chat communities, one based in Montreal and the other based in France. The corpus includes approximately 50,000 words from each chat community. Following a brief overview the various approaches to analyzing "community" in cyberspace (Bishop, 2007; Paolillo, 2001; Rheingold, 2000), we will turn our attention to an analysis of the amount and type(s) of orthographic variation found in the corpus.

The findings show that while both communities have developed norms for "standard" orthographic variants, not all variation operates in the same way. As a case in point, the letter "c" (pronounced /se/ in French) can be used to represent the subject-verb sequence *c'est* 'it is'. Although the *c* variant is widespread in the France-based chat community, it is less common in the Montreal community. It was found that when an indefinite article (i.e., *un* or *une*) follows the *c'est* variable, another variant—*stun(e)*—occurred more frequently in the Montreal data. However, the *stun(e)* variant is markedly absent from the France data. It is argued that much of the variation observed in the France and Montreal data is linked to phonological and morphosyntactic variation found in the respective (offline) speech communities. Thus, while new technologies present many new communication affordances, orthographic variation in online communities operates within the constraints of variation found in offline communities.

Although the exact motivations for and/or the constraints on orthographic variation within and across online communities remain unclear, this research provides important evidence against viewing the Internet as a global, standardizing force, in favor of a view whereby more locally-based norms and variations—grounded in offline language resources—serve to distinguish and demarcate individual online communities.

## References

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