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MOUTON

*Lauren Squires (Ed.)*

# ENGLISH IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

VARIATION, REPRESENTATION, AND CHANGE

TOPICS IN  
ENGLISH LINGUISTICS

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# English in Computer-Mediated Communication

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Variation, Representation, and Change

Edited by  
Lauren Squires

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**English in Computer-Mediated Communication**

# Topics in English Linguistics

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## Volume 93

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Lauren Squires

# Introduction: Variation, representation, and change in English in CMC

## 1 Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), once a domain of interaction exciting for its novelty, is now squarely mundane in the business of daily life for much of Anglophone culture. This is at least true in heavily mediatized, networked societies, and it is also true in places where personal computer access is rare but mobile phones afford a widely accessible form of screen-based communication. At the same time as the presence of computing devices has come to seem ubiquitous, the capabilities of those devices have become ever more sophisticated and, in some cases, genuinely surprising.

This fast-paced trajectory of innovation has been accompanied by a steady churn of scholarship devoted to understanding human social behavior with, through, and because of digital media. Centrally in internet studies, communication studies, and sociology, scholars have endeavored to locate the line between the extraordinary and the ordinary. What are people doing with, through, and because of new technology that they were not doing before? What are they doing differently than before? And what are they doing in the same ways, but for different reasons, or with different outcomes? In terms of linguistic behavior, Herring (2013) summarizes these possibilities as discourse *familiar*, *reconfigured*, or *emergent*. But already nearly a decade earlier, Herring (2004) aptly considered the issue in a paper suggesting that CMC may have been “slouching toward the ordinary.” Specifically, Herring (2004: 34) put forth a prediction that the internet would, five years hence, be “a simpler, safer, and – for better or for worse – less fascinating communication environment,” and continue to evolve in that direction.

More than a decade later, it is certainly true that some of the communication happening in CMC has lost its “edge.” But it is also true that in other ways, things have gotten more complex – there are more media available, more configurations of the media that exist, more platforms, more economic complications, more millions of interlocutors, more layers of intertextuality – and there remain risks, both physical and symbolic. Language, of course, continues to be central to our use, negotiation, and understanding of digital spaces.

It is perhaps the ostensible ordinariness of CMC now that has motivated the chapters in this volume to take the approaches they do, in various ways. In

much previous research on language in CMC, more so in the earlier days but continuing up to now, the focus was on how CMC was changing linguistic practice, how CMC created spaces for “new” kinds of language. We have come to a point of acknowledging that in many of the most important ways, language used through CMC is just like language used outside of it. It is thus “ordinary” in the sense not only of being “everyday,” but also in the sense of being typical in the way that it participates in linguistic and social processes. English within CMC, as with English in non-mediated environments, is best characterized by diversity and variety, rather than homogeneity.

As the terms in the subtitle of this book preview, the authors here examine English in CMC as it relates to these ordinary processes of *variation*, *representation*, and *change*, all broadly construed. We take for granted that language in CMC varies; language in CMC is represented and represents; language in CMC changes and is changed. These premises position us to ask the much more interesting *how* questions, approached from a range of analytical perspectives including quantitative language variation, diachronic change, language contact, language ideology, sociolinguistic identity, social networks, and style.

“Computer-mediated communication” is a broad designator that encompasses multiple semiotic/linguistic modes (including voice, text, and image) as well as technological interfaces and platforms (mobile phones, tablets, social media, immersive online games, virtual workplace environments, and more). The term circumscribes communication that is carried out via a mediating interface, and these mediating interfaces produce layers of structure that require linguistic and social negotiation. No matter the environment – whether face-to-face, in a chat room through a computer, or messaging via a phone – where there is human interaction, there is language. As a functional and symbolic system, language is perhaps the ultimate carrier of humanness into the disembodied (though not entirely so) realms of the digital. As we send linguistic material through them, computers become vehicles of interpersonal interaction and all that it entails: social change, identity formation, teamwork, and community creation, along with the very human tendencies toward exclusion, harassment, and misunderstanding. It is language that gives these media their social purposes. And language takes with it to these digital spheres all of its history and possibility, its politics, its social stratification, its structural ambiguities, its mutability. Through the use of language in CMC, cultures are formed, social goals are accomplished, ideologies are shaped, power is contested, and sociolinguistic boundaries are crossed and blurred.

This volume examines the English language in CMC – what it looks like, what it accomplishes, and what it means to speakers. Much of English users’ daily experiences and interactions with the language now occur through some

form of CMC. Therefore, to understand fully the linguistic and social properties of contemporary English and its speakers, we must consider the multiple contexts in which it is found, and how mediating technologies shape or reshape the forms, functions, and meanings of the language. The term *enregisterment* (Agha 2003) is typically used to discuss the metalinguistic construction of language varieties – as in dialects, registers, or styles. Yet “the English language” itself is also constantly being enregistered, figured and refigured as an object of reference, of inquiry, of use, and of contestation. Put simply, the authors here position CMC as relevant to understanding what English is, and what it will become.

The English language has enjoyed a privileged status within CMC, particularly vis-à-vis networked computing and the internet. Networking protocols were designed to transmit symbols specific to the English writing system, and in this way, the language has been graphemically transferred from paper to screen rather unremarkably (Squires 2016). English has also been centered in both public and academic debates about the internet. Some have wondered whether the internet will lead to even more increased worldwide dominance of English (Crystal 2001) while others have stressed that the internet is indeed a multi-lingual, heteroglossic site of practice (Danet and Herring 2007; Androutsopoulos 2011). Yet empirical research that directly investigates how *English in CMC* is to be characterized – as a point of departure, and as a question in and of itself – remains scarce.

Thus, the chapters in this volume take a step back from the novelty (real or imagined) of the technologies themselves and consider connections between how “the English language” is conceived and its modes and media of conveyance. Who is an English speaker (or writer)? What kinds of Englishes are there? How does English change across setting, mode, genre, etc.? How do new(ish) settings, modes, and genres change written English and interact with the spoken language? The search for answers to these questions, necessary for any full definition of the language, must now account for linguistic practice in CMC as a contributing factor.

The goal of this volume is not to provide a comprehensive overview of (socio)linguistic research on CMC generally speaking; several excellent existing volumes contribute to that project (Herring, Stein, and Virtanen 2013; Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2016; Tannen and Trester 2013; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). Nor is it to provide a compendium of all varieties or communities of English users, or all CMC settings. Rather, in their focus on English in CMC contexts, these 14 chapters represent a current set of issues at stake in the intersection of English and CMC research. Namely, they highlight how the diversity of form present in English offline (“in real life,” “F2F,” in “unmediated” contexts) is

transferred to the English found in CMC, as well as how communicative practices that are “indigenous” to online spaces might reconfigure the dimensions of structured and meaningful variation within the language.

Several chapters offer new perspectives on well-worn questions from CMC research, applying these specifically to English in its contemporary linguistic ecology: What is the connection between written and spoken modalities of the language (Childs; Collister; Iorio; Jones; LaFave)? What role does English, among other languages, play in carrying out social action in digital spaces (Cutler; Heyd; Hinrichs)? How are the linguistic structures of English marshaled in the creation of online communities and online identities (Garley and Slade; Squires)? How are we best to characterize the relationship of technological factors to language form (Bieswanger; Bohmann)?

Other chapters treat CMC as a “new” site in which to explore “old” questions: What is the social significance of the choice of English – and written or spoken English – as one code among several possibilities (Collister; Hinrichs)? How do varieties of English manifest in digital written spheres – with or without spoken analogues (Coats; Heyd; Jones)? How does personal style develop using the linguistic resources available in CMC (Callier; Childs; Squires)? How does CMC facilitate processes of linguistic change at both small and large scales (Bohmann; Garley and Slade)? What is the role of digital interaction in shaping language attitudes towards English and varieties of English (Collister; Cutler; Iorio)? And when we are dealing with CMC data, what kinds of evidence for claims about English are we dealing with (Bieswanger; Jones)?

The volume is organized into four sections. *Code and Variety* deals with English as a code to be chosen among others, and English varieties as they manifest and are configured through online discourse. *Contact, Spread, and Innovation* explores some sociolinguistic outcomes of the global spread of English and CMC in tandem, as well as the role of CMC in linguistic innovation, whether through language contact or another actuating force. In *Style and Identity*, specific features of English in CMC are investigated for the work they do in constructing sociolinguistic personae. Finally, *Mode and Medium* reconsiders the relationship between language, social factors, and technological or mediating factors, including how language attitudes shape the use of media. Throughout these four sections, *variation*, *representation*, and *change* run as underlying themes fundamental to our holistic understanding of the English language. In what follows, I sketch the contributions of the volume to these three motifs so central to the field of English linguistics.

## 2 Variation

If there is one shared goal of all 14 chapters, it is to present the analysis of the English language in CMC as grounded in the inevitability of linguistic heterogeneity. Variation is dealt with broadly, across a range of settings and variables. When prior research has focused on linguistic variation in CMC, a quantitative approach has tended to examine sets of alternating sociolinguistic variables. These variables are usually on the level of orthographic (spelling) features, some of which correspond to phonological features or processes (such as phonetic spellings like <u> for <you>; e.g., Paolillo 2001; Squires 2012). The chapters here broaden the array of English features considered in CMC, the dimensions of their variability, and their relationship to each other. Graphemic and lexical variables are still present in several chapters, including Callier, Coats, Heyd, Iorio, and Squires. But widening the scope are Garley and Slade investigating morphological processes in subcultural word formation; LaFave discussing morphosyntactic alternation across written and spoken modes; Bieswanger using syntactic reduction as a variable to explore effects of medium versus situation; and Bohmann investigating syntactic change via Twitter. Methodologically, Squires takes advantage of the scale of CMC textual data to robustly show that what is socially meaningful about linguistic variation is often the interrelation of multiple variables, a focus shared by Callier.

Another important contribution the volume makes to variation study is the range of social factors in focus. “Traditional” sociolinguistic factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and social class are included almost by default in most quantitative variationist studies of English. At the same time, this type of quantitative-demographic approach has been recently critiqued for being inadequate in its oversimplification of the social world and social identity (see some discussion in Buchotz 2015; Meyerhoff 2015). Somewhat ironically, these social factors have often been neglected in prior literature on CMC, partly due to the fact that CMC settings are often what Iorio (2009) calls “demographically lean.” While gender has been frequently considered in CMC research (though mostly within discourse-analytic or pragmatic frameworks; for a review, see, Herring and Stoerger 2014), other social factors like race and ethnicity have received less attention. Indeed, there remains a notable paucity of work on language and ethnoracial identity online – something the present volume addresses with chapters by Jones, Childs, Callier, Collister, and Squires, but leaving so much more to be done (and with much to gain from engagement with work from outside of linguistics, e.g., Nakamura 2002).

Importantly, the relationship between social and technological factors in variation is also at issue: while sometimes social factors condition language variation regardless of the medium or mode, they may not always have the same relevance in different media/modes. For instance, LaFave incorporates education, gender, age, and dialect region into his analysis of adjective gradation and finds no difference in the effect of social factors between instant messaging, speech, and formal writing. But Iorio's study of virtual workplace interactions shows that language attitudes toward ethnically-marked variants are more pertinent to written interactions than spoken ones. Relatedly, Collister discusses both the linguistic profiling and linguistic adoration that occur among *World of Warcraft* players who are perceived to inhabit differing identity positions pertaining to race, sex, and language. While these identities are somewhat concealable in the textual mode, they are revealed via voice interactions, thus social factors directly impact one's choice of how to play the game. In sum, the chapters take us beyond dichotomous linguistic variables with clear-cut indexical associations, providing more nuanced understanding of the scope and structure of variation within CMC English and, so importantly, its social parameters.

Leveling up, so to speak, several chapters ask how (non-standard) varieties of English transfer to computer-mediated spaces. Included here are African American (Vernacular) English (Jones; Callier; Childs), Nigerian Pidgin (Heyd), Finland English (Coats), Indian English (Iorio), and Scottish English (Cutler). While obviously not comprehensive in scope, the range of varieties discussed should be beneficial to others interested in understanding how English varieties move across mediated spaces. In particular, this interest departs from an assumption implicit in much earlier work, that when Standard Written English is deviated from, the deviations are markers primarily of the technology itself (see Squires 2010). Rather, nonstandard manifestations of the language online are often grounded in the varieties in use offline, though with additional social meanings potentially accruing because of the mediated environment. For instance, Heyd shows that "little words" in Nigerian Pidgin are used in an online forum to index authentic local speaker status, but simultaneously can be used to index a more global "nonstandardness" which carries international prestige (and which has developed in part through CMC). Similarly, Coats shows that the English in use on Twitter by users in Finland has distinct characteristics, including preferences for which vowels to prosodically lengthen by orthographic means, which are different from the tendencies in Twitter English originating in other locations. To the extent that there is a digital English "supervernacular" (Blommaert 2012), it is clear that the features which mark it often mark more localized meanings as well.

### 3 Representation

Essential to understanding the use and/or emergence of varieties in CMC come questions of *representation*. These questions are both material and symbolic. Materially, how are spoken varieties to be represented in text-based spaces? The other way around, what do the representations we see in text-based spaces tell us about spoken varieties? Part of Heyd's contribution is to show that through internet communication, spellings of the vernacular become *de facto* standards with little apparent contestation (compare to cases of overt projects for spelling vernacular varieties, e.g., Schieffelin and Doucet 1994). Jones' chapter – one of the few extant pieces of scholarship to examine the phenomenon of “Black Twitter” from a linguistic perspective, despite the sphere's strong cultural relevance – takes language on Twitter as a window onto phonological patterns in African American English (and potentially, by extension, other dialects). Jones argues that orthographic nonstandardisms are often intentional, rooted in phonological correspondence; and, just as philologists had to triangulate between forms of written evidence to reconstruct Vulgar Latin, sociolinguists may find Twitter data useful not only for its own sake, but for what it indicates about spoken variation.

Orthographic representation of spoken features is also central to the chapter by Callier, who shows that a feature strongly associated with African American English, DH-stopping, is itself “packaged” with another variety feature – post-vocalic /r/-lessness – as well as with a feature more associated with the internet itself, initialisms like OMG. These two packagings appear to be done by different sets of speakers, to effect different stylistic personae. Childs also discusses the representation of /r/-lessness, showing that speakers whose spoken variety does not tend to be /r/-less can use /r/-lessness orthographically in order to identify stylistically with speakers of an /r/-less variety, in this case African American English. Representing linguistic features is thus not a matter just of directly rendering speech in text, but also of representing *oneself* through features that signal desired indexical associations. The representation of desired social personae in CMC is also the focus of Squires' investigation of differing femininities being performed through clusters of textual features.

In addition to individuals' use of language to represent themselves, representation is fundamental to language ideological processes that configure attitudes about English in a mediated world. What/who does English represent when it is used in CMC? The status of English is not always straightforward. For instance, in Hinrichs' work, we see that in multilingual contexts, dominant symbolic status is not always at the fore of the choice to use English; sometimes code choice is



merely functional. As Facebook users seek to represent themselves as certain types of people, the use of English is a way to achieve maximal understanding across audience members, and to achieve faithfulness in intertextuality when relevant; the positive associations of English as a prestige language are less relevant. The status of English is important, however, in the community studied by Collister: English enjoys a privileged position within language ideologies about players in *World of Warcraft*, with non-English speakers being stigmatized. As mentioned above, the social meanings of particular kinds of English motivate players to use one mode of play over another.

In the realm of language attitudes, Iorio shows that an international virtual workplace is an environment in which there is contact between speakers of different English varieties. Some represent their spoken variety in text, and others do not; language attitudes surface in this multimodal setting in ways that influence the efficacy of teamwork. And Cutler shows that the multimodality of YouTube makes it a rich setting in which language attitudes about varieties of English are forged through representational play. Videos portraying Scottish English are circulated and commented on, and the spoken is re-represented in the written, with orthographic resources deployed to codify and exaggerate what are perceived to be variety-specific features, in layered intertextual processes. Cutler's work also provides a good example of how the representation that happens in CMC can have implications for speakers offline: the ideologies about Scottish accents being negotiated on YouTube presumably hold for people whether or not they are interacting on YouTube. This shows us one reason that CMC interactions must be viewed as a part of the total ecology of English in the 21st century.

## 4 Change

The final macro-level theme of the volume is *change*, which has had something of a fraught relationship to both research and public discourse about English-language CMC. Earlier work hypothesized that CMC might lead to dramatic changes in linguistic practice and the language itself (Baron 1984; Crystal 2001), and public discourse about language online has frequently served to heighten anxiety about the long-term consequences of supposedly new trends (Thurlow 2006; Squires 2010). These sentiments seem to suggest that we should be expecting wholesale differences in the language itself several decades post-CMC as compared to before it. Yet we are still likely not in a position to do such analysis; any structural changes to "the English language" due in part or whole



to CMC will take yet more decades to be realized. Rather, what this volume deals with is better conceived of as *sociolinguistic change* (Androutsopoulos 2014; Coupland 2014), a notion that encompasses many types of change in many types of elements, both linguistic and social.

Coupland (2014: 67) defines *sociolinguistic change* as “a broad set of language-implicating changes that are socially consequential, even though particular forms or ‘states’ of a language may not themselves change as part of the process.” Here, we treat change in the language, but also change in how language works within specific communities of practice, and change in language attitudes and ideologies. The chapter most directly concerned with a “traditional” kind of language change is that of Bohmann, who brings empirical treatment to a phenomenon framed in public discourse as both “new” and internet-specific: non-clausal complementation of *because*. This is perceived among many speakers to be a change in progress, and Bohmann takes a novel approach to investigating the plausibility of the feature as such. He incorporates other factors associated with change in written English in the Late Modern period, finding that density is a good predictor of the *because* structure, and hence the innovation follows a more general densification trend in current English. This historicization is an important check on our assumption of novelty, and positions perceived change in CMC as being part of processes of change already going on in the language – in CMC and out of it. LaFave likewise hypothesizes that his finding of a gender-based pattern in adjective gradation may be related to a change in adjective choice in progress in English, unrelated to the use of language in different media.

Another study of innovation comes from Garley and Slade, who outline the morphological processes underlying word formation in a diffuse, “digitally native” subculture that is emblematic of some of the social meanings of technology: cyberpunk. Garley and Slade show that the use of a marked lexis is a symbol of engagement with the media of cyberpunk, and they demonstrate that CMC settings are fertile ground for the innovation and diffusion of neologisms. Looking back over a long history of online data among cyberpunk fans, Garley and Slade are able to show the role of lexical innovations in the diachronic continuity of this diverse community. Linguistic change and continuity work hand in hand to forge and maintain community identity. Relatedly, Coats positions CMC as a factor in the emergence of a distinctive English register among users of Twitter on Finland; here, the change-related concept of *spread* is pertinent to thinking about both English as a global language and Twitter as a global technology. Heyd also investigates the registers and varieties that emerge from processes of linguistic and technological spread. Characteristically, some of these emergent varieties are heavy in features recognizable from the spoken