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Instant Messengers

Redefining the written word.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
1 Computer Mediated Communication CMC	5
2 Speech and Writing, historic antecedents	7
3 Oral and Written Language and their differences	8
3.1 Permanence	8
3.2 Context	9
3.3 Non-Verbal communication and the creation of Context.	11
3.3.1 Visual talk	11
3.3.2 Emoticons	12
3.4 Sequential conversation and turn taking	13
3.5 Speed and Acronyms	14
4. Conclusion	16
5. Bibliography	23
6. Further reading	24
7. Webography	25

Abstract

Instant text messenger devices are an absolute phenomenon in the areas of the development and use of the Internet and Human social interaction.

The analysis of the theoretical characterizations of Oral and Written systems of communication, applied to the use and discourse generated in messenger conversations, gives us elements of discussion for the classification and understanding of the type of interaction, causes and consequences of the way we use and adapt language and technology.

The use of written text to have synchronous conversations, affects the inherent structures related with speech and writing, this structures have to be studied now, more than in any other period of the development of human interrelation, communication and conversation, as changeable and interrelated entities.

Introduction

Never before was the distinction between speech and writing so difficult to establish. Up to very recent times, theorists “have been considering ‘speech’ and ‘writing’ as if they were the mutually-exclusive poles of a clear-cut dichotomy”. (Jahandarie, 1999:131) But, what happens to these definitions when the essence of one (written words) is used to accomplish one of the most characteristic modes of use of the other? (Conversation). This is what current technology and human inherent need for interrelation have turned our lives into.

A big percentage of the users of the Internet, access it with the purpose of talking to other people, “People who chat online are among the heaviest users of the Internet, according to research by [NetValue](#), which found that chatters generate twice as many online sessions as the general Internet user.” (http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/traffic_patterns/article/0,,5931_582491,00.html)

Starting from its predecessors the bulletin boards, to the current instant messenger programs, text based conversations have gained and continue to gain adepts every day. Instant messaging has grown faster than any other technology-related communication phenomenon. “By way of comparison, it took radio 38 years to reach 50 million users, 13 years for television, and five years for the Internet to reach the 50-million-user mark. AOL's chat services reached the first 50 million users in 2.5 years, according to AOL CTO Marc Andreessen.” (http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/traffic_patterns/article/0,,5931_162541,00.html)

In this memoir I will analyse the different elements of text-based computer mediated conversations, studying them under some of the categories that have been used for the theoretical definition of conventional written and spoken language, as well as applying the methodology suggested by the researchers of conversation analysis in their studies of “everyday situations of human interaction: *talk-in-interaction*.” (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 13). In this way I intend to bring clarity to the technological, social and linguistic aspects that characterizes this new way of social interaction and will totally change our conception of the relationship between oral and written modes of communication.

1 Computer Mediated Communication CMC

At the beginning of the history of personal computers, our relation with the machine implied from us a total individualistic attitude; it was always us alone with the computer. In the last decade the development of the system of networks now known as internet, permitted us to access information from other computers, our machines where connected and as a consequence of that, we were also connected to other people, we started talking to this other people and virtual communities emerged. People experienced the changes in technology and used them to meet their own interests.

“Computer conferencing emerged, also somewhat unexpectedly, as a tool for using the communication capacities of the networks to build social relationships across barriers of space and time. A continuing theme throughout the history of CMC is the way people adapt technologies designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different communication needs.” (Rheingold, 1994:5).

CMC is classified in two forms, non-synchronic (e.g. e-mails), and synchronic communication. The later includes, MUDs and MOOs (Multi-User Domains, Multi-User Domains/Object-Oriented), and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) with the highly popular instant messenger programs like AOL Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, MSN messenger or ICQ, this programs allow you to interchange instant text messages with one or more people, “Synchronous modes of CMC enable individuals simultaneously logged on to ‘chat’ by typing messages to each other in real time” (<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb/srb/computer.html>).

At the beginning instant messengers were used mainly by home users, but now messengers form part of our everyday life as a students or at work, “AOL has the most users at work, but MSN and Yahoo! are the fastest growing. AOL had 8.8 million unique users in September 2001, up 17 percent from September 2000; MSN had 4.8 million users, up 88 percent; and Yahoo! had 3.4 million users, up 83 percent.” (http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/applications/article/0,,1301_923701,00.html)

It doesn't imply necessarily that you chat all the time you are online, but that the fact is that you "are online" and your friends or contacts can see you and you can see a list with their names and their current state, and you have the possibility, at any time, of starting a conversation or ask something, or tell a joke or conduct a work meeting, is a sense of immediacy, regardless of time or place, that has never before been experienced in human intercommunication.

Each conversation opens a new application window, a simple interface where you can control some of the visual aspects of the conversation, like the settings of fonts and colours. You open a conversation by clicking on a name from the list of friends in the main messenger window, where you also have access to some more functions and information. To change or personalize your current status (busy, available, be right back, etc.), check the status of your friends, find and add new friends, and send files are some of the features of Messenger devices. (see fig. 1)

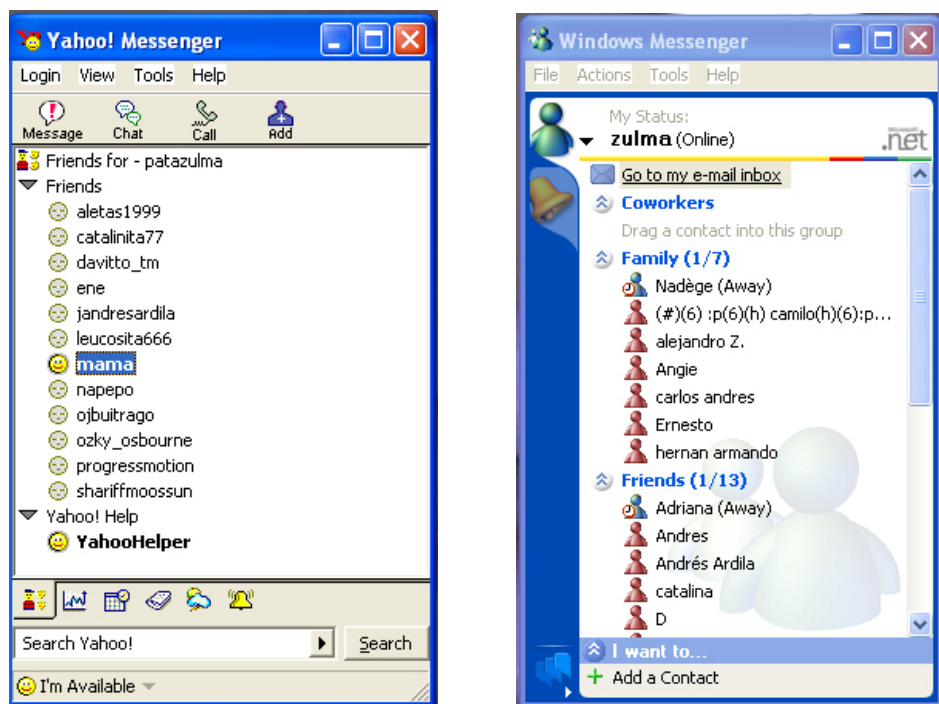


fig.1

We are now 'talking' through computers, the keyboard, the little window on our computers screen containing our conversations, and the text that we type to conduct them, conforms the medium, place and context of this new mode of human intercommunication.

So we write instead of talking, we read instead of listening. We don't see the faces of the people we are 'talking' to; we don't hear their voices, they can be in another country or sitting in the computer next to us, and yet we are conversing, we laugh, cry, discuss, and tell jokes, CMC is an essential part of our social life, and we can't keep our fingers away from the keyboard.

Are we just writing down what we would orally say in spoken communication? How do we compensate the lack of visual cues that make so much of the meaning in face-to-face conversations? Should this be categorized as written or oral? What is written and oral anyway?

2 Speech and Writing, historic antecedents

With the implementation of an alphabetic writing system (using different signs for consonant and vowel sounds) by the Greeks around 750 BC, Literacy adopted a predominant role in societies as the conservator of knowledge, totally changing the conception and use of oral communication. "Without writing, this knowledge had to be preserved in memory, with the aid of oral mnemonics. With the advent of writing, the task of knowledge preservation was taken over by written documents, freeing the human memory from the burden, while presenting a cultural repository much more reliable than oral memory". (Jahandarie, 1999:13).

The implementation of an alphabetic writing system had very important consequences on the development of literate societies, as Goody (1987:54) points out, the recording of speech, permits the "transmission of cultural information across generations", the historical and, no longer, mythical reconstruction of the past, and, thanks to the accumulation of information, the "increased possibility of incremental knowledge". From this moment, and up to present times, writing has been associated with a status of superiority among different cultures and within the hierarchies of a society itself, it is true that it had a democratising effect, taking the power of knowledge to a broader population, especially after the advent of the printing press in the 15th century. But it's also true that in the so known as literate cultures "It encouraged a radical differentiation within culture, a differentiation between the 'high' culture of the consumers of books and the 'low' culture of those confined to the oral register." (Goody 1982:212). This is a consequence of the uses and situations that we relate oral and written

communication with. We learn to talk in a familiar environment, is a natural process. To be able to read and write one has to go to school, to be educated, to learn more rules. We see the written as something to be believed, is more permanent, more official, (law, signatures, contracts). The oral on the other hand, is normally more transitory, less planned, we use it in our everyday life without paying too much attention to any rules, if we had to plan and revise everything we say, conversation would be impossible. These distinctions in use and conception, how they have being studied, and what they can tell us about the implications of text based conversations is what we will analyse next.

3 Oral and Written language, and their differences.

Despite the importance of the written text for the development of the western cultures, linguists in the last century, in their studies of the language and the way we construct meaning with it, have relegated writing to a secondary role, they "have given their virtually exclusive attention to oral language and have tended to treat the written as a purely derivative phenomenon" (Goody 1987:261). For Saussure and many of his predecessors, who saw written and oral ways of communication as systems of signs dependant of a common deep structure of 'language', the written text was seen as a subordinate of the speech, as a mere representation of the verbal communication, something like the static holder of speech discourse.

When trying to define what 'written' and 'spoken' really mean, and to help us distinguish between the two, the first idea that comes to our mind is to relate them with the senses that are involved in our perception of them, so we could say that "spoken language is the words we hear with our ears, and written language would be the words we read with our eyes"(Jahandarie 1999:131). Things are never that simple, and the sensory modality is one but not the only way to establish a distinction.

To analyse the use of written text in synchronous communication, how spoken like or written like it is, and to see how it modifies the way we interact and socialize with others, we will study the characteristics of conventional written and oral communication, that I have encountered to be a common denominator in the studies of language and conversation.

3.1 Permanence.

Permanence is one of the ideas that wouldn't normally be related to oral communication, "The spoken word is transient; it disappears as soon as it is uttered. If you miss a spoken word, there is no possibility of backtracking and salvaging it" (Jahandarie, 1999:134). We could obviously record an oral conversation, but that is not something we normally do, and in case we did it, we would never stop in the middle of an oral conversation to listen to the other person utterances again and again, the same as we can't ask our interlocutor to repeat what s/he just said time and time again, or what s/he said at any point of the conversation.

"Writing on the other hand, makes it possible to store linguistic material in an exact form over long periods, in principle to infinity" (Goody, 1987:234). With a text based conversation, you have the possibility not only of keeping the entire conversation for future reading, but also, at any time during the conversation you can have a register of every single word that you or your interlocutors 'said'. Halliday (1987) called writing a "product" and speech a "process", Text based conversation makes the whole process into a product, it enables us to go back to any point of the conversation and read it again, to skim through it, to replay to any line of the conversation at any time (which affects the linearity of the conversation, as we will see in the turn taking numeral), to copy and paste and literally quote the person to whom we are chatting, or to take his/her words to another messenger window, for another person to read them.

This brings out another important feature of text conversations; they make it possible, probably for the first time in human communication, to have several simultaneous conversations. We don't need to leave it to our memory to keep track of what is being said, as is the case with speech, which requires "a temporary memory in which inherently ambiguous portions of speech signal can be stored until the information necessary to disambiguate them has been received" (Nickerson, 1981:263), to know where in the conversation we are, to remember what was the last thing that was said, all we need to do is to read it again. Oral conversations limit us to the capacities of our memory "The oral mind is conditioned by the fact that it has no records to consult" (Ong, 1999:74)

3.2 Context

According to Pople (1988:31) "Written text is 'context free'" and in speech the context" is created as a response to the situation and context of the speakers", as more than one person is always involved in the production of the text in written conversations some sort of context is obviously created, but the mechanisms we use to create it are different from those encountered in oral conversations.

Jahandarie (1999:136) enunciates three dimensions of context, "Context may either refer to the linguistic (endophoric), or the extra-linguistic (exophoric) setting, the later consisting of the situational and the psychological settings."

The linguistic context is whatever text or speech immediately before and after a particular word or phrase, and helps us understand its meaning. We encounter it in both oral and written.

Situational context makes reference to the way in which time and space affect the communication, and is considered one of the main differentiations between speech and writing "What most clearly separates reading from listening is *situational context*—the time and place of making the statement" (Jahandarie, 1999:136). Speaker and listener sharing the same spatio-temporal context is a typical situation, for most of the reading-writing situations it is not. Because of this, written communication is considered to be lacking the interaction with audiences that speaking has. Chafe (1982:45) speaks of "involvement with the audience as typical for a speaker, and detachment from the audience as typical for a writer". Online writers and readers don't share the same physical space, but they share the new virtual cyberspace; conversations are real-time, although, depending on where one is geographically located, local times for the participants on the conversations are frequently different. We share anyway a type of technologically shaped spatiotemporal context, and this gives text conversations the kind of richness and interaction typically associated with oral communication, like in a typical speaker - listener situation, writers and readers now "share a considerable amount of knowledge concerning the environment of the conversation", they can and do "monitor the effect of what they are saying on the listener" (reader) (Chafe, 1982:45).

Psychological context is also higher in text conversations than in any other mode of written communication, it "has to do with the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that the source shares with the receiver" (Jahandarie, 1999: 137) as

immediate feedback exists in text conversations, we constantly make assumptions about what the other person knows and feels, assumptions that are corrected or reassured during the interaction.

The situational and psychological context seem to bring text conversations closer to orality, this new way of conversations “produces a sense of immediacy and informality missing in more traditional relationships between writer and reader” (Yaros, 1996: 275)

Now lets see some other classification of context that explains some of the special features of Computer Mediated Communication not present in written or oral uses of language.

3.3 Non-Verbal Communication and the creation of Context.

Non-verbal communication plays a very important role in our face-to-face conversations; a lot of the meaning is actually produced by elements outside the strict use and understanding of the language, according to Hartley (1993: 138)

“Different signals are involved including:

- Facial expression
- Gaze
- Gestures
- Posture
- Bodily contact
- Spatial behaviour
- Clothes and appearance
- Non-verbal-vocalization”

These signals are in fact totally absent from text-based conversations, and this lack of non-verbal cues, together with the technical characteristics of the transmission of the messages have conduced to the creation of special features and conventions for text conversations.

3.3.1 Visual talk

We can't see the faces and gestures of our interlocutors, but we can see their words, the possibilities of a computer keyboard determine the possibilities of our visual expression. Things like eccentric spelling and multiple punctuation to imitate intonation in speech, are frequent in text conversations, in what we type we try to be playful and to visually represent the sound of the words, an onomatopoeic comic like conversation. Conventions like capital letters interpreted

as shouting are of common knowledge, we have the text in front of us and we love to manipulate it "To some extent, then, this new medium releases people to write in an expressive manner which was suppressed in the past by the schools when training children in the basic practices of essayist literacy."

<http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/thesis/methodology.htm>

Another interesting feature is the "the 'verbalian' category which involves making things which will normally be non verbal into verbal forms" (Todd and Walker, 2000: Ch.7) Others can't see if we are crying or smiling, we need to write this information for others to know, we need to build with words the emotional context. For statements that involve actions, is a convention to use the third person, and these utterances are normally written in brackets e.g. (zulma hugs you).

These are new ways to use the written language, not always in the most grammatically correct usage, which is normally associated with the written text, but certainly more expressive and visually creative, as Laross affirms (Pg.287) "deviations from formal grammar usually signify efforts to visualize talk."

3.3.2 Emoticons

(see a complete list of emoticons in chart 1)

Originally created from combinations of punctuation marks and alphanumerical characters from the computer keyboard, emoticons started their role in CMC as sideways representations of faces, the most common being:

- :) = Funny, happy, smiling.
- : (= Unhappy, sad, frowning.

However, their typographic origin must not be understood as any kind of relation with the conventional written language. As Ron Jacobson says "emoticons have more in common with hieroglyphics than with the alphabetic, phonetic writing on which western literacy is based, and emoticons' visual representation of the speaker or listener's frame of mind brings nonverbal aspects of oral communication to written text. As a hybrid code, the emoticon is a perfect fit for a hybrid medium." The non alphabetic-phonetic character of the emoticons is now reassured by the replacement of the most commonly used icons for real graphics in the two most popular messenger programs (yahoo messenger and MSN) but new

emoticons are being added all the time, not always to help in the construction of messages, but as a demonstration of ingenious and humour "Some emoticons exist mainly as jokes, passed along from one person to the next as examples of wit" (Yaross, 1996: 288)

~(_8^(|) Homer Simpson

In text messengers words and images play the opposite role as the one described by Barthes(1964) when he uses the term anchorage to describe the function of words in relation to the polysemous condition of visual images, words, he affirms, help fix the floating chain of signifieds. In the case of CMC the situation is the opposite, we use images to clarify our attitude over the written message, "emoticons contribute to the meaning of a message, they intensify the verbal text rather than be a substitute for words or phrases." (Ron Jacobson Stephanie Gibson 1996) The limitations that IRC have compared to physical conversations, the lack of non verbal cues in computer mediated communication (e.g. Facial expression, Gaze, Gestures, Posture, Bodily contact, Spatial behaviour) leaves the reader in a more difficult position before the multiple possible interpretations of the tone of the message, emoticons help to add this contextual information to the conversation, it reassures the reader to interpret the message as the writer intended, in many cases it is related to the degree of seriousness of the comment, in this extent, emoticons work as signifiers of attitude.

3.4 Sequential conversation and turn taking

Certain characteristics have been established in spoken conversations, the fact that is a sequential activity is one of the most important factors that make possible a conversation. "Virtually every conversational action occurs in a sequence of other conversational actions. An utterance's position within such a sequence has a very powerful influence on how it will be interpreted." (Nofsinger, 1991:43) However, in text-based conversations, we seem to lose the sequential order in which conversations are supposed to be build on, this, and organized turn taking, another vital aspect of oral conversations, is definitely something we rarely will see in online conversations.

You don't have to wait for a turn in order to talk, you can do it anytime, no overlapping is going to occur, even if the two people write and send their messages

at the same time, they will still be understood, no gestures or attempts to take the turn in the conversation can stop you from saying what you want, from writing what you want; written conversation is sometimes like a monologue instead of a dialogue, it is not simply that you are transcribing your otherwise oral utterances to written form, a text conversation couldn't be more distanced from a theatrical dialogue conversation, the fact that we are using written text to "talk" affect not only the form but also the content and dynamics of the conversation, not only you have the possibility to talk to several people about different subjects at the same time (it can get very confusing). But also, thanks to the lack of overlapping, and interruptions, you frequently end up carrying multiple conversations with one person, like a metaconversation, talking about different subjects in a very short period of time and still understanding what the conversation is about, in other conventional forms of conversation, you normally have to wait until the other person finishes talking in order to say something, unless off course you interrupt the other person and don't let him/her finish the sentence. Because is possible for both ends of the chat to be writing at the same time, multiple topics of the conversation can co-exist in very few lines.

This can be very confusing for the non experienced user, I remember the first time I had a text conversation with my dad, even though he knows how to use computers, and is confident typing on a keyboard, after few minutes he simply couldn't keep the track of the chat anymore, and the only way we could finish the conversation was using a rather odd (at least for me) method of indicating when one had finished with an idea, indicated by a key word, and with the compromise not to write anything until the other person had answered back.

The other aspect that affects the linearity of text conversations is related with the permanence of the text, "access can be random when we want it to be, because the entire text is simultaneously available. We can scan the text skipping over lines or paragraphs or larger chunks, and seek out the information we need" (Smith:6)

3.5 Speed and acronyms

Reading is faster than listening and talking faster than writing. "Typing takes place at about one-third of the speed of speaking" (chafe, 1982).

If we want to keep the rhythm of the conversation we need to type extremely fast, or we need to write short words, written text is normally seen as more elaborated, and grammatically correct "Written texts have been found to include longer words and extensive vocabulary than speech" (Jahandarie:144). In instant messengers, although we have the opportunity to revise what we write before we send it, if we are involved in an interesting conversation, we just can't waste time doing spelling check, misspellings are frequent and we need to make a great use of linguistic context to confirm the meanings. Fragmentation, hesitation and fussiness, typical to the oral communication (Chafe) are present in text conversations, the use of fillers and expressions to monitor the information flow like "you know", "well", are present in the text, contradicting all the previous definitions of the written communication.

Another way to keep the conversation moving fast is the use of Acronyms, widely spread in text-based conversations. They are "are shorthand -- abbreviations -- to help you communicate quickly and effectively while online". (<http://www.marshall.edu/isp/ct107/emoticons.html>)

This is an use of the language that can only be present in written forms of communication, it would be impossible to conduct a conversation using this type of abbreviations, they communicate as far as they are visual, we don't need all the words or phrases, conventions are established in the new medium, and we adapt to them and contribute to them, and while satisfying the human need of conversation and social interrelations, we also modify the structures of the systems of signs that conform human language.

4 Conclusion

Human communication is an ever-changing entity, we can't classify the written and the oral forms of communication as something fixed and clearly differentiated, but more like a continuum in the development of human communication. These are some of the characteristics with which theorists have tried to establish the differences between speech and writing: Permanence, Context, Involvement, Precision, Speed, Direct interaction, Time and space, Turn taking, and lexical features, we have seen how all this changes and loses validity when we use written text to chat.

This week I had a text conversation with my five years-old cousin who recently moved with her family to Canada, she is in the age in which children learn languages, she doesn't distinguish between Spanish and English anymore, and now, at that early age, she's also been introduced to this talking through computers way of communicating, for her the concept of written and spoken language will be totally different from the one I was thought as school, the new use demands new sets of rules and definitions.

People tend to think that the next step of computer mediated communication and IRC (internet relay chat) is going to be oral computer mediated face-to face communication and video conferencing, I don't agree with that, I think they are two different things, our generation learned to communicate through a computer keyboard using this unique hybrid verbal-written-graphic new language, a new code that has great limitations, but that we have managed to give shape into something interesting and some times addictive, because is new, and we are the users and creators, there are few rules and many things to be defined and invented.

Another possibility for the development of text conversations would be that the academy gets awareness of the great possibilities of CMC, and introduces it as part and method of education, in subjects where oral academic discussion will be accompanied by computer mediated discussion, giving everybody the opportunity to "talk", taking advantage of the liberating effect of the conversation behind screen, and still producing material easy to record, edit, and consult. (there are a few examples of this, like the experiment in a writing class using CMC at the University of Illinois (Gregory G. Colomb and Joice A. Simutis))

Chart 1 Online emoticons and Acronyms.

Taken from <http://www.marshall.edu/lsp/ct107/emoticons.html>

Emoticons:

The two most common:

Emoticon Meaning

:)	funny, happy, smiling
:(unhappy, sad, frowning

Here's a bunch more you'll also see:

Emoticon	Meaning
(:-&	Angry
(:&	Angry
:D	big smile, laugh
(:<)	Blabbermouth
:#	Censored
:*)	Clown
:*>	clown
;-)	crying
&:-)	curly hair
&:)	curly hair
{0-)	cyclops
:~	disgusted
:	disgusted
<:-)	dunce
:<)=	for those with beards, too
:~<	forlorn
:<	forlorn
:*p	French kiss
:>	funny, grinning
:~)	funny, happy, smiling
:~>	funny, happy, smiling, grinning
{Name}	Hug (single, for the person named)
{}	Hug (single)
{{{Name}}}	hugs (multiple for the person named)
{{}}{}}	hugs (multiple)
:*	Kiss
;~?	licking lips

:X Lips sealed
 >:) mischievous grin
 +<:-| monk/nun
 :<) mustache-wearer, smiling
 :/ not funny
 :/) not funny
 #-:-) person with matted hair
 7:) Ronald Reagan
 @-->-->---- rose (long-stemmed)
 @>--`--,,-- rose with thorns
 @-->-->---- x12 roses (one dozen, long-stemmed)
 B-> smiling with sunglasses on
 :-} smirk
 :} smirk
 :P sticking out tongue
 :-p sticking out tongue
 :p sticking out tongue
 :-8 talking out both sides of mouth (lying)
 :-J tongue in cheek
 :J tongue in cheek
 :-& tongue-tied
 :T trying to keep straight face
 :-C unbelieving (jaw dropped)
 =|:-) Uncle Sam
 :-(- unhappy, sad, frowning
 :-{ Vampire
 @:-) wavy hair
 @:) wavy hair
 8-) wearing glasses
 :W whispering or talking softly
 ;) Wink
 '-) Wink
 ') Wink
 :-o Yawn

Acronyms:

Acronym	Meaning
AFAIK	As far as I know
AFK	Away from keyboard
AISI	As I see It
AYST	Are you still there?
BAK	Back at keyboard
BBL	Be back later
BF	Boyfriend
BOC	But of course
BOS/BRS	Big orange/red switch
BOT	Back on topic
BRB	Be right back
BTW	By the way
CE	Creative editing
CMH	Cross my heart
CUL	Catch/see you later
CUL8R	See you later
CWYL	Chat with you later
D&C	Duck and cover
DBA	Doing business as
DUCWIC	Do you see what I see
DYHWIH	Do you hear what I hear
E2EG	Ear to ear grin
EOD	End of discussion
EOL	End of lecture
F2F	Face-to-face
FAQ	Frequently asked questions
FITB	Fill in the blank
FOAF	Friend of a friend
FTASB	Faster than a speeding bullet
FWIW	For what it's worth
FYA	For your action
FYI	For your information
GA	Go ahead
GD&R	Grinning, ducking, and running
GF	Girlfriend
GGN	Gotta go now

GIGO	Garbage in, garbage out
GIWIST	Gee I wish I'd said that
GMTA	Great minds think alike
GRUIT	Get real you impudent thing
HHOJ	Ha ha only joking
HHOK	Ha ha only kidding
HTH	Hope this helps
IAC	In any case
IANAC	I am not a crook
IANAL	I am not a lawyer
IBM	Inadequate, but marketable
ICUR	I see you are
IDBI	I don't believe it
IDC	I don't care
IDTS	I don't think so
ILIWTPCT	I love it when the plan comes together
ILY	I love you
IMBO	In my biased opinion
IMHO	In my humble opinion
IMI	I mean it
IMNSHO	In my not so humble opinion
IMO	In my opinion
IMVHO	In my very humble opinion
INPO	In no particular order
IOW	In other words
IRL	In real life
JAM	Just a minute
JIC	Just in case
JJ	Just joking
KISS	Keep it simple, stupid
KWIM	Know what I mean?
L8R	Later
LLTA	Lots and lots of thunderous applause
LOL	Laughing out loud
LTNS	Long time no see
MCIBTY (SN)	My computer is better than yours (so nyah)
MFG	More friendly garbage

MORF	Male or female
MOTOS	Member of the opposite sex
MOTSS	Member of the same sex
MYOB	Mind your own business
NBD	No big deal
NERD	National Establishment for Real Dorks
NIMBY	Not in my back yard
NRN	No reply necessary
NTL	Nevertheless
OATUS	On a totally unrelated subject
OIC	Oh, I see
OTC	Over the counter
OTOH	On the other hand
OTTOMH	Off the top of my head
OTW	On the whole
OWTTE	Or words to that effect
POV	Point of view
PPP	Petty pet peeve
PTMM	Please tell me more
PTUM	Please tell us more
ROFL	Rolling on floor laughing
ROTBA	Reality on the blink again
RSN	Real soon now
SBT	Strange but true
SO	Significant other
SOP	Standard operating procedure
TANJ	There ain't no justice
TANSTAAFL	There ain't no such thing as a free lunch
TCB	Taking care of business
TCS	Take care sweetheart
TGAL	Think globally, act locally
TGIF	Thank God it's Friday
TIA	Thanks in advance
TINALO	This is not a legal opinion
TINAR	This is not a recommendation
TINWIS	That is not what I said
TLA	Three letter acronym
TOJ	Tears of joy

TOY	Thinking of you
TPTB	The powers that be
TTBOMK	To the best of my knowledge
TTFN	Ta-ta for now
TTM	To the moderator
TTT	That's the truth
TTYL	Talk to you later
TTYRS	Talk to you real soon
TWIU	That's what I understand
TY	Thank you
UTC	Under the counter
UTT	Under the table
WHAK	With hugs and kisses
WMRS	Write me real soon
WRT	With regard/respect to
WYSIWYG	What you see is what you get
YAOTM	Yet another off topic message
YHGASP	You have got a serious problem
YWSYLS	You win some, you lose some

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the art of connecting real people in virtual places.

<http://www-lci.enst-bretagne.fr/colloque/glat/communications/fritsch.htm>

Signs, Space, and Time in HCI - Evidence for a Semiotic Relativity

<http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/thesis/methodology.htm>

Development of a protocol of a transcription methodology

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb/srb/computer.html>

SRB Insights: Computer-Mediated Communication

<http://atar.mscc.huji.ac.il/~msdanet/cmc1.htm>

Computer Mediated Communication, by Brenda Danet.

<http://www.muller-godschalk.com/emoticon.html>

Smileys and emoticons.

<http://www.marshall.edu/isp/ct107/emoticons.html>

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http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/traffic_patterns/article/0,,5931_582491,00.html

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Internet Users Taking to chat.