Liquid language? On the personalization of discourse in the digital era

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Abstract
Interpersonal digital discourse (CMC and SMS), currently performed by wide circles of users, is characterized by deliberate misspelling and exhibits a strong influence of orality on the written text. This article examines the social legitimation of such non-standard oral discourse and its socio-discursive implications. I argue that this digital orality has strong links to postmodern and post-structural ideas. Oral-written text ostensibly reflects a melting of linguistic structures, resembling the changes that occurred in social structures in the late modern era. However, I demonstrate, using De Saussure’s basic structural perceptions in analyzing how this oral-written text is formed, that this deliberate misuse of language is quite structural and systematic in nature. What seems to be an anarchistic use of language or a rebellion against modernist rigid linguistic structures is highly performative in essence.

Keywords
liquid modernity, orality, orthography, performance, print, postmodernism, post-structuralism, speech communities, structuralism

LIZA. O-h, I couldn’t sleep here, missus. It’s too good for the likes of me. I should be afraid to touch anything. I aint a duchess yet, you know.

MRS PEARCE. You have got to make yourself as clean as the room: then you wont be afraid of it. And you must call me Mrs Pearce, not missus. [She throws open the door of the dressingroom, now modernized as a bathroom].

LIZA. Gawd! whats this? Is this where you wash clothes? Funny sort of copper I call it.

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MRS PEARCE. It is not a copper. This is where we wash ourselves, Eliza, and where I am going to wash you.

LIZA. You expect me to get into that and wet myself all over! Not me. I should catch my death. I know a woman did it every Saturday night; and she died of it.

MRS PEARCE. Mr Higgins has the gentlemen’s bathroom downstairs; and he has a bath every morning, in cold water.

LIZA. Ugh! He’s made of iron, that man.

(George Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion)

In this opening citation, we see Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl who has come to stay in the home of Professor Higgins, ‘negotiating’ with his housekeeper about taking a bath. One of the notable features about the text Shaw has written for Eliza to speak is its exaggerated oral elements. Expressions such as ‘Gawd!’ ‘Ugh!’ ‘O-h’ or ‘I aint’ are extremely notable in Eliza’s lines. Shaw emphasized the oral characteristics here because he is converting this spoken dialogue into written text. But these oral features also stand out because of the environment in which they are uttered: the home of Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, man of science, and scholar famous for his innovative methods. Professor Higgins means to correct Eliza’s pronunciation, which is far from standard, just as the dirt clinging to her from the street is meant to be washed off by the bath in question.

Pygmalion, which was written in 1912/13, aptly expresses the distinction between disciplined language (which operates according to ‘scientific’ rules and is characteristic of people with cultural capital) and extreme orality (which is associated with poverty and ignorance). But what if Eliza were participating in a chat conversation on the Web, or sending an instant message (IM) or texting her girlfriends? How then would we relate to her expressions of ‘Ugh!’, ‘Gawd!’, or any others of an exaggerated oral nature?

It is safe to assume that we would have accepted Eliza’s ‘comic book speech’ quite naturally and seen it as proof of her integration into the trendy, youthful digital culture, specifically that of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and short message service (SMS). These interpersonal means of communication have led to the development of linguistic and discursive patterns with written and spoken characteristics (Crystal, 2006; Green, 2007; Gunkel, 2009; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008). Terms like ‘netlish,’ ‘netspeak,’ ‘weblish,’ ‘Internet language,’ and ‘cyberspeak’ attest to the perception of the hybrid nature of digital discourse, which is composed simultaneously of elements of writing and speech (Crystal, 2006). The oral features of these digital texts include abbreviations, elisions of punctuation, replacement of letters with numbers that have a similar sound, imitation of sounds, and so on (Crystal, 2006; Danet, 2001).

Oral influences are not unique, of course, to the digital culture. Texts have always been related to the world of sound. Spoken and written language are supposed to correlate, at least to a certain extent (Ong, 1982: 8; Sebba, 2007: 28). However, the degree to which orality influences the text has varied across different cultural and historical environments. High levels of oral characteristics exhibited in a text seem to reflect the transformation of the written text into the acoustic sphere. This can be seen, for example, in the residual-manuscript of the Middle Ages, when reading was a physical activity that
emphasized the organ of speech – the mouth: manuscripts were read aloud even in private (Chaytor, 1950).

Another textual era that saw a high level of oral influence on the written text is the secondary orality of radio and television (Ong, 1982). Here, texts were written to catch the ears of the audience and to be transformed into the vocal sphere. This ‘talking’ atmosphere of the electronic mass media contributed to the creation of a para-social relationship and a ‘simulacrum of conversation’ – wherein mass media create an illusion of intimate dialogue (Horton and Whol, 1956). This ‘mediated quasi-interaction’ blurred the monological nature of mass media, creating a kind of friendship with the media personas (Thompson, 1995: 90). As Scannell argues, mass media ‘speak to us as persons not as members of a crowd or mass.’ He refers to this mediated conversational turn to the anonymous masses in personal terms as a ‘for-anyone-as-someone structure’ – as each member of the crowd becomes a personal interlocutor (Scannell, 2000: 10). In the case of digital orality, however, texts are usually not meant to be read aloud. CMC and SMS texts are manifested silently, in the spirit of the modern print tradition.

Several functional reasons can explain the adaptation of oral features into interpersonal digital communication. The following seem to be central:

1. **Coping with technical constraints.** In a synchronous forum, such as a chat room, the reaction time is crucial – any delay in response can be disruptive (Walther, 2007: 2541). On such a communication platform, shortening the reaction time is much more important than grammatical correctness or spelling and punctuation (Danet, 2001: 16–17). The cell phone’s miniature keyboard and screen (which allow the display of a limited number of characters), as well as the almost synchronous nature of texting, also demand an ‘economical’ writing style, reducing the number of keystrokes and speeding typing through the use of various forms of shorthand (Green, 2007: 126). Another technical constraint is that the standard Latin operating system lacks script support for writing in non-Latin languages. Writers in these languages who are using a Latin alphabet, as a result, resort to symbols other than the English alphabet, based on their graphical resemblance to letters in the user’s language (Palfreyman and Al-Khalili, 2003).

2. **Creativity as part of the ‘Hyperpersonal Affordances.’** Early scholarly references to CMC described it as inferior to face-to-face (FtF) communication (Ramirez et al., 2007: 493; Walther, 1996: 7–8) as it filters out crucial social contextual information and nonverbal cues (physical appearance, body language, voice tone). Later approaches, however, described the lack of nonverbal cues not as a disadvantage but as a technical feature that actually helped users develop more positive and desirable relationships (Kim, 2002). According to this line of thought, energy that is usually devoted to physical self-presentation can be redirected to the linguistic and typographic sphere (Walther, 2007), resulting in freer and more creative expression. The oral written text is one example of such creativity.

3. **The impact of the medium on the message.** 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 (Soffer, 2010). In a similar way, the primary function of cell phones – for talking – affects the style of writing employed:
‘[I]n SMS conversations short messages alternated rather like verbal dialogue.’
(Rettie, 2009: 434)

But these functional explanations do not address the social legitimacy of this form of oral written communication. In other words, we must ask how it is that in the century since George Bernard Shaw wrote *Pygmalion*, discursive qualities which had been considered non-standard and hallmarks of low social status and a lack of cultural capital have become acceptable in the new media. This discursive oral atmosphere also raises questions about changes in language and its arbitrary nature – matters that are closely related to the postmodern and post-structural trends of our time.

As I will argue here, on the surface it seems that language structures are undermined within this oral-written language of interpersonal digital communication. One way to interpret this seeming linguistic anarchism is to see it as an intended deviation or some kind of rebellion of individual users against the rigid modern print era, which restricted the creativity of individual users. As Barthes (2007) argues, the modern education system imposed strict writing rules on students. These limited acceptable writing styles to several models only, imposing social and linguistic conventions rather than encouraging students to develop aesthetic creativity. Print media, with the high costs of publishing and the implementation of various cultural gatekeepers, also contributed in imposing conventional linguistic rules. Yet, a closer examination of digital discourse reveals that this discursive rebellion is highly performative. In fact, the digital-oral characteristics reveal only several discursive clusters, and in this sense they echo structuralist thinking.

In order to analyze the evolution of digital orality and its social and cultural implications, I will first briefly examine the modern social perspective of language and its ‘scientization.’ A second step will be to examine the postmodern and post-structural criticism of these perceptions. As we will see, digital orality seems to be strongly connected to postmodern and post-structural ideas. Yet, these seemingly post-structural discursive characteristics are applied in a rather structuralist way.

**The scientization of language: The modern print era**

Since the Renaissance, the discussion of language has been tied to the Scientific Revolution and its epistemology. Language was perceived as transparent and precise, partly as a result of the authority given to the discovery of ‘reality’ and ‘facts,’ which were seen as able to speak for themselves (Bulhof, 1992: 164). The scientification of different fields of knowledge influenced the change in the perception of the language in these fields (Ezrahi, 1974: 218). For the first chemists, such as Lavoisier, the move from alchemy to chemistry was linked to the removal of subjective or arbitrary utterances from language and to the adoption of a common scientific language. This reflected the new limitations placed on subjective interpretation and the establishment of a concept of scientific verification that could be understood by all rational people (Ezrahi, 1974: 218). Such thinkers as Hobbes and Leibniz sought to transform language into the ‘wise men’s counters,’ (Hobbes, 1668/1994:19) warning of the dangers of double meanings and lack of precision. Thus, Leibniz thought that every single element or ‘first idea’ should have
one signifier to represent this idea alone (Knowlson, 1975: 108). Complicated ideas should be composed of combinations of such simple signifiers. Leibniz believed that the adoption of this kind of language would lead to a certainty of conclusion, as in the field of mathematics (Knowlson, 1975: 109).

The scientific perception imagined language as well disciplined (Bulhof, 1992: 3). In fact, some saw language during the scientific revolution, perhaps inspired by religious beliefs, as representing the world in a direct way (rather than as an arbitrary symbolic system). Hence, language was viewed not only as a means of acquiring knowledge, but as knowledge itself (Knowlson, 1975: 8). This essentialist view dictated an approach that emphasized the precise choice of words. The print media also played a key role in these processes: the modern belief was that text constituted a permanent visual testimony, in Ong’s words ‘a datum separate from any utterer or hearer or reader’ (1992: 308). The cost and difficulty of putting ideas into print helped to preserve language and the level of the printed material. Printed books had to meet the approval of various gatekeepers, who took it upon themselves to maintain, among other things, linguistic standards. The print mediators, who provided the technology, were also agents of culture and had a hand in shaping it.

The diffusion of the scientific approach was reflected widely in social and political realms. It was also seen in the scientization of linguistic studies. In the early twentieth century, the work of Ferdinand De Saussure laid the foundations of modern linguistics. In the spirit of the scientific approach, De Saussure sought to describe language in terms of a formal system, focusing on its synchronous features rather than its diachronic ones, as previous scholars had done. His approach rejected the notion that language represents reality at a primal level; yet at the same time, he postulated that every sign was mutually dependent on other signs and derived its meaning in reference to them. This view, which negated the notion that language portrayed the real world in an unmediated manner, offered a sufficient linguistic basis to perceive the modern world as certain and permanent. De Saussure’s theory posited that the sign is a ‘combination of a concept and a sound’ (De Saussure, 1966: 67; see Figure 1), which are connected by an arbitrary nature. Yet, once such an arbitrary connection is made, signs are supposed to be permanent and stable:

The signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other … We say to language: ‘Choose!’ but we add: ‘It must be this sign and no other.’ (De Saussure, 1966: 71)

Figure 1. De Saussure’s theoretical paradigm.  
(Based on the representation in Laughrey, 2007: 57).
Yet, the idea of language as a uniform system was not an unchallenged axiom, even before postmodern and post-structural perceptions gained momentum. Ludwig Wittgenstein was among the challengers of this perception towards language (Grayling, 1988: 72). He rejected the notions that language was uniform and that it carried one meaning common to all. Instead, Wittgenstein referred to language as a fragmented fluid human activity. He described the various uses of language as a ‘language game’ governed by its own heterogeneous linguistic rules and conventions determining the meanings of words (Canfield, 1981: 23). To illustrate his idea, Wittgenstein used the metaphor of tools in a tool-box: ‘[T]here is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects’ (Wittgenstein, 1953: PI 11). Each language game can be isolated from the other games, although they might overlap in different ways (Canfield, 1981: 23).

**Postmodern and post-structural perceptions of language**

Criticism of the structural perception stood at the center of post-structuralist and post-modernist ideas. Critics rejected the idea that language is a stable system, emphasizing instead its multiplicity of possible meanings. For post-structuralists, language is not a stable system in which the meaning of words is shaped in a binary, totalized fashion (Caplan, 1989: 265). Instead, they emphasize the openness and multiplicity of meanings (Foucault, 1976). The rejection of the concept of a stable language system is linked to the representation crisis: to the question of the relationship between the ‘representational’ and the ‘real,’ and even to the question of the existence of reality beyond language and discourse (Kirk, 1994: 226).

The crisis in the belief that reality can be captured in an adequate and ‘objective’ way is well reflected in Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) argument that in the current world the difference between the real and its simulacra has disappeared along with the ‘charm of abstraction.’ The ‘real’ can no longer be mirrored, since the mirror image is as real as what it depicts. In this state of ‘hyperreality,’ there is no reality to rely upon. Signs break free of their ideas and ‘live’ an independent existence (Azoulay, 2007: 157). In a similar spirit, Derrida (1976) doubted the possibility of a direct relationship between signifier and signified, seeing such a ‘direct relationship’ to be part of the grand narrative of the Enlightenment. According to Derrida ‘[t]he written signifier is always technical and representative. It has no constitutive meaning. This derivation is the very origin of the notion of “signifier.” The notion of the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified’ (p. 11). The emphasis on the distinction between these two elements – signifier and signified – stresses the ‘independent existence’ of the realm of the signifier and raises questions about the rules that govern this realm and the techniques that help it to face its objectivity and natural character.

The above ideas were part of an overall perception of the arbitrary nature of the postmodern era in social settings in general, including politics. The collapse of the meta-narrative in society led to the placement of the individual and a relatively limited group at the center (Ezrahi, 1990). While the printed text fostered, and was associated with,
trends related to the Scientific Revolution, digital technologies, with their flexibility and fluidity, are tied to postmodernist approaches. They have undermined the role of the traditional gatekeepers (in journalism we can see this process with the emergence of the blog); facilitated copying, editing, and reversals of meaning; and called into question the perception of the author that typified the modern capitalist era (in favor of knowledge-sharing through Wikipedia, for example; see: Soffer and Eshet-Alkalai, 2009).

Digital orality – an era of linguistic anarchism?

At least on the surface, digital orality is related directly to the post-structural perception of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, expressing and fostering the erosion of the rigid and constant structuralist relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifier becomes a product of an individual choice. Thus, users can shorten the signifier, replacing or adding to its phonetic sounds with a single letter or digits. Words can also be replaced with imitations of sounds or initials (Crystal, 2006: 91–92; Danet, 2001: 18; Green, 2007: 126).

If we analyze this phenomenon of digital orality in De Saussure’s terms, we find that the phonetic signifier, which according to the structuralist approach has no meaning without the idea it represents, has become the signified itself. The abbreviations or other playful linguistic oral-digital features of the signifier function as new signifiers of the original phonetic form (original signifier). This can be seen as a breaking free of the signifier from its signified – that is, the independent existence of the signifier. This is possible only when we have acknowledged that there is no direct ability to represent reality as it is, as well as no binary linguistic structure.

During the Scientific Revolution, the effects of science trickled down from social institutions and the scientific elite to the public and political spheres: in the case of current oral-digital linguistic trends, the direction of the change is shifting. Individuals are becoming agents of change and are upsetting standard linguistic axioms. Language becomes a playing field, and participation in the game is a component of the user’s virtual identity. Users ‘toy around with language’ and coin new expressions (Kesseler and Bergs, 2003: 82; Oksman and Turtiainen, 2004: 326). Oral characteristics are part of the speech play and humor that identifies internet communication (Danet, 2001: 10). Users adopt a variety of artful typographic features, such as self-made emoticons; or, with newer software, they can now use sophisticated graphical emoticons from a catalogue. While these emoticons reflect the adjustment of users to inherent medium characteristics, standing in for nonverbal cues to help emotionally frame the verbal communication (Derks et al., 2008; Lo, 2008; Walther and D’Addario, 2001), they also contribute to the informal and personal flavor of this interpersonal communication.

While acknowledging the grassroots characteristics of this phenomenon, we should remember that it fits well into the contemporary scholarly Zeitgeist: that is, of linguistic and discursive (or deconstructive) study methods and research themes. On the face of it, digital language play would appear to be consistent with what Zygmunt Bauman has described metaphorically as the liquidity of modern social structures. Bauman distinguishes between the modern and the late or post-modern era. He describes modern social structures as ‘solid,’ meaning that they maintain their characteristics over time. However,
in late modernity these structures, including those related to human communications, are becoming more ‘liquid’:

The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions – the pattern of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other. (Bauman, 2000: 6)

The fluidity associated with late modernity is related to a notion of ‘lightness’ due to the lack of solid structures that allows a rapid transformation according to the changing environment. The result of this is the absence of patterns and rules for people to follow (Shenhav, 2007: 6). In this liquid modernity, then, individuals create their own version of modernity, which they can shape and customize to their needs.

A similar liquidation process can be seen in the discursive digital sphere. The solid structure of language as described by De Saussure seems to be melting, paving the way to a dynamic, personal, and customized language. As in other social processes (for example, political), the ‘melting,’ or liquefying, of language structures is related to personal choices that create a private, individual version of modernity – and in our case, of language. In a similar spirit to the melting of social structures in late modernity, digital liquid language helps to create a ‘lighter’ form of language, one that is faster and easier to use and allows for more creativity. In this atmosphere, the transformation from solid to liquid, of written text to something written yet with oral qualities, would seem to restore language to its original characteristics. To a great degree, we imagine language as liquid: we speak of fluent language, a torrent of words, flowing conversation. All of these are liquid images, in particular with reference to spoken language. In this way, the language is very different from the image of printed works of the modern era, whose solid existence is guaranteed to endure.

Yet, this idea of the privatization of language undermines the basic feature of language, which is to allow mutual understanding as intuitively as possible. As Wittgenstein argued, a private language – ‘sounds which no one else understands but which I “appear to understand”’ (Wittgenstein, 1953: 94e) – cannot exist, as language is public in its essence (Grayling, 1988: 85). The collapse of linguistic structures should therefore be considered with suspicion. As we will see, when we analyze the features of oral digital text in a systematic way, using De Saussure’s ideas as an analytical tool, we find that they are not devoid of structure. The schemas below demonstrate that many of the digital-oral features of online writing can be seen as developments of the structuralist perceptions of De Saussure. It is important to note that I am not arguing that all cases of digital orality fall into these categories. Moreover, the three categories presented here are not mutually exclusive: they are often combined, and such combination plays an important role in this oral-digital language. However, these categories cover many of these oral manifestations found both in relevant scholarly studies and on the Web, and they indicate some of the main relationships between the original ‘conventional’ signifiers and the new oral-written signifiers that represent them.
Type one: Lexical substitution

Lexical substitution is a common textual feature of orality in CMC and SMS text. It is rooted in graffiti culture and in other deviant spelling techniques of marginal groups (Sebba, 2007: 14). In this type of digital oral writing, the phonetic sound that characterizes a letter (or combination of letters) or digit replaces the word (or part of a word), for example: \( b = \text{‘be’}, \ c = \text{‘see’}, \ d = \text{‘ate’}, \ 4 = \text{‘for’}. \) The phonetic sound of a letter plus a digit can replace syllables: \( b4 = \text{‘before’}, \ f2f = \text{‘face to face’}, \ gr8 = \text{‘great’}, \ o4u = \text{‘only for you’} \) (Crystal, 2006: 91–92; Green, 2007: 126). Some lesser known examples of lexical substitution are 2i8 = ‘too late,’ 2m or 2moro = ‘tomorrow,’ cr8 = ‘create,’ anim8 = ‘animate.’ Some of the new signifiers are made up of digits and letters, such as \( f2f \) and \( o4u \), reflecting a combination of lexical substitution and the third type I will discuss below, wherein initial letters represent the words of the original signifier. In lexical substitution, the number of letters (or digits) in the new signifier is less than in the original. They therefore function as a condensed version of the original signifiers, while to a certain extent preserving the phonetic sound that allows recognition of the original signifier.

Analyzing this type of oral digital representation in the framework of De Saussure’s structuralist perception of language, we see that this phonetic digital-oral representation of words seems to function as a new signifier that signifies the original signifier. Yet, this new signifier is by no means arbitrary. It has a strong phonetic-iconic feature that allows improvisation while lessening the fear that the meaning will not be understood. These abbreviations are related, therefore, to the original relationship between the signifier and signified. This makes this type of linguistic derivation easy to use and to expand to include more words and expressions, which anyone who knows the language in its standard form should be able to identify.

In Figure 2, the original signifier (‘thanks’), which represents the idea that relates to the expression of gratitude, has been replaced by a new signifier that is phonetically similar to the original signifier. Writing ‘10x’ instead of ‘thanks’ cuts into half

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Figure 2. Lexical substitution.
(Note: The upper boxes represent the general scheme and the lower ones represent an example.)
the number of letters typed. This eases the typing process and shortens the response time (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008: 7). This matter of time is crucial especially 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, this requires an extended period of time to occur because CMC is a single channel relying on text only, while FtF is a multiple one (Ramirez et al., 2008: 534). It should be also noted that – as in other cases of phonetic spelling, which deviate from conventional spelling – this digital-oral writing functions as a symbol for social otherness, and represents the notion of intended deviation from the modern conventional writing (Sebba, 2007: 3).

It is interesting to note that while this type of lexical substitution is of a phonetic-iconic nature, we also see graphically iconic representation in CMC and SMS writing. Palfreyman and Al-Khalili (2003), in their study on the use of Arabic written in the Latin alphabet in CMC, show that numbers are used as graphic icons for Arabic letters that English letters do not phonetically resemble. This use of numbers was driven by the desire to maintain the distinct original Arabic sounds while writing in the Latin alphabet (Palfreyman and Al-Khalili, 2003). However, this graphical iconic representation relates to specific letters only, whereas the phonetic-iconic model relates to the whole signifier, making it much more effective for dealing with time constraints.

**Type two: Onomatopoetic signs**

While lexical substitution is based upon the relationship between the original and the new signifiers, the second type of digital orality, based on onomatopoetic signs, circumvents the original signifier. Onomatopoetic signs imitate the voices that relate the signified idea. Rooted in comic-book style, this type is characterized by the use of multiple punctuation and eccentric spelling – often with capital letters. All these features also relate to the esthetic playful aspect of these oral-written texts (Jaffe, 2000: 509). The original signifier is lost here, and therefore the meaning may be harder to grasp; but the exceptional and ritual use of capital letters (Barthes, 2007: 97) indicates the exceptional characteristics of the new oral signifier.

In Figure 3, we can see an example of this type of written oral text (again, using the context of De Saussure’s theory as a point of reference). The use of the ‘ZZZZ’ here represents the onomatopoetic voice of the inhalation and exhalation noises while sleeping. The use of this onomatopoetic sign also symbolizes the adaptation of this signifier to the net culture, so that it represents dissatisfaction over the slow tempo of the chatting or playing partner. The use of ZZZZ is charged with meaning that relates to the digital culture. In this sense, writing out the original signifier (‘snoring’) would not have the same meaning. Other examples of this type are ‘Haaaa’ that represents the sound of laughing or ‘Grrrr’ representing anger (the onomatopoeic representation of an animal growling).
Type three: Initial letters

In this third, and very common type, of digital orality, a new signifier is added to the original one. This is similar to the process in lexical substitution; however, as can be seen in Figure 4, this new signifier is not based on a phonetic-iconic relationship with the original signifier, but is formed by joining the initial letters of each of the words that make up the original signifier. Thus, the component of the oral echo of the signifier or of the signified – which plays an important role in the previous two types mentioned here – is much less prominent. In the use of initial letters (and to a lesser degree also in the use of onomatopoetic signs), the users require prior knowledge because the relationship between the original and the new signifier is not based on a direct, iconic relationship.
Nonetheless, this type is founded on a relatively simple method of linguistic derivation. The decoding is often made easier in this case (as in the second type) through the use of capital letters. In addition, this type of derivation is generally well known in the English language (words such as ‘laser,’ ‘radar,’ and ‘snafu’ were created in a similar way), which eases both the coding and decoding of these digital expressions by the users. The meaning of initials in this type of digital orality is dynamic: it can be changed over time and is context or group related (e.g., YMMV, or ‘your mileage may vary,’ is popular in some contexts but almost unused in others). In some cases, the initials have departed from the original words they represent, although their meaning is well known (e.g., RSVP, which stands for the French phrase, ‘répondez s’il vous plaît,’ or NB, which originated from the Italian, ‘nota bene’).

Some of the initials used in the oral-written digital sphere (e.g., LOL – ‘laughing out loud’) are well known outside of this arena. Other examples of this type of derivation are TTYL = ‘talk to your later,’ ASAP = ‘as soon as possible,’ FYI = ‘for your information,’ WTF = ‘what the fuck,’ BRB = ‘be right back,’ BBS = ‘be back soon.’ Many less-known initials are used among smaller circles, such as TIA= ‘thanks in advance,’ TIME = ‘tears in my eyes,’ TAM = ‘thanks a million.’

Rethinking the relevant reference point for comparison

Media in general, and new media in particular, are never used in isolation but always in comparison with other more familiar media. As Gershon argues, media ideologies – the way people perceive and use specific channels, along with the codes and semiotic systems revealed and shaped by this use – are always enmeshed in ‘a web of media ideologies’ (Gershon, 2010: 287). In other words, new communication channels and their social meanings are in a continuous and progressive dialogue with old channels. In the case of the new media, because the traditional dichotomy between mass and personal media have been blurred, this relationship is much more complicated (Lüders, 2008: 684). It also should be noted that the ‘newness’ of a medium and the experiences involved in its use affect the personal and social perception of it (Gershon, 2010: 289). These circumstances might influence the social evaluation of the oral-written text, discussed above. Thus, because writing in the digital media resembles the graphical shape of print products, print could be seen as the default media for comparison. However, if people are using these printed oral texts to ‘chat’ or to text through a cell phone – a medium whose main application is oral speech – a more accurate reference point for comparison might be unwritten, oral conversation. A comparison of oral-written language with print, combined with the social emphasis on the unique character of the new media, might create a bias when evaluating the changes reflected by the oral-written language.

The perception that the signifier is a fixed and stable one, as well as the condemnation of the written-oral text as deviating from the universal stable model, are prime examples of the perceptual bias towards the printed media. Fixed standard spelling, which De Saussure’s model assumes, was imposed by print culture. At least in the case of the English language, even after the introduction of print and the development of a normative, inflexible spelling regime, there was a period when private texts were
relatively autonomous from this fixed spelling. As the print culture strengthened and became hegemonic, this autonomy gradually disappeared (Sebba, 2003: 153). If we adopt a long-term historical perspective, then, the CMC and SMS phenomenon of phonetic expression of the signifier, rather than using universal, fixed dictionary spelling, is not so exceptional. This fits well with the notion of a ‘textual pendulum,’ put forward by Soffer and Eshet-Alkalai, (2009), wherein pre-print textual phenomena that disappeared during the rigid print culture era are reviving in the new media and postmodern environments, which are much more tolerant of a variety of writing cultures.

If we compare the oral-written text to print products, which are often edited and controlled by expert gatekeepers, the instability of oral-written language is prominent. It seems that this viewpoint stands, perhaps unconsciously, at the core of the public discourse on internet language. As Squires argues, popular discourse adopts a protectionist approach that assumes linguistic purity and correctness outside the ‘net’ – in the ‘real world’ (Squires, 2010: 458). Comparing oral-written language with that of a newspaper or a book will indeed reveal the lack of standardization of CMC and SMS language. Yet, if we adopt spoken (unwritten) language as a reference point for comparison, the idea of a stable and standardized language does not apply. As Labov argues, the perception of homogeneous speech communities is a myth. Moreover, the social context and circumstances determine the style a speaker uses: ‘there are no single-style speakers. Whenever we first encounter a speaker in a face-to-face situation, we must assume that we are observing only a limited part of his entire linguistic repertoire’ (Labov, 1972: 112). Following this convention, variation theorists emphasize linguistic instability and try to discover patterns among different speech communities by observing the actual use of language within specific socio-cultural settings (Poplack, 1993: 252). Emphasis is given to the use of subordinate dialects or non-standard linguistic forms among minorities and subculture-groups.

Of course, this comparison – between the oral-written text of CMC/SMS and spoken vernaculars – has its own problems. First, the former is a written, not a spoken, text. Second, unlike the case of speech communities, the oral-written digital language does not relate to a specific geographic location or community (Squires, 2010). Third, as Labov draws our attention to the nature of spoken vernaculars in speech communities, ‘the style which is most regular in its structure and in its relation to the evaluation of the language is the vernacular, in which the minimum attention is paid to speech’ (Labov, 1972: 112). The oral-written text does not really follow this assumption. The level of intention behind the ‘oralization’ of the written text – utilizing creativity for a seemingly authentic flavor – is high (Soffer, 2010). In other words, in many cases people make a great effort to be seen as taking shortcuts, or deviating from the structured linguistic source. Indeed, sometimes these ‘shortcuts’ are technically more complicated than writing the original signifier would be.

The difficulty of finding a suitable basis for comparison to CMC’s and SMS’s oral-written discourse is related to this channel’s unique affordances and restrictions – the possibilities that this form of ‘technologized interaction’ enables and encourages (or discourages) in everyday interpersonal communication (Hutchby, 2001: 31). The telephone, for example, enabled interpersonal communication between parties not co-present in the
same location, while preserving some of the cues of intimate face-to-face conversation, such as voice recognition. Communicating through CMC and SMS allows synchronic, or nearly synchronic, written interpersonal interaction.

Following Goffman’s (1959) metaphor distinguishing between the ‘front region’ – where the performance is taking place in the eyes of the audience – and the ‘back region’ – the area that is supposed to be hidden from the audience – it seems that CMC and SMS create a synchronous interpersonal channel of communication whose ‘front region’ is solely typographic. This channel excludes, to a much greater extent than other technologically mediated communication, the chatting partner from the ‘back region’ ‘noises.’ Unlike telephone conversation, for example, where one party’s environmental noise can (undesirably) reach the other chatting party (Thompson, 1995), the oral-written form of conversation separates the front and back regions much more distinctly. This typographic front region filters out ‘real world’ identities, and might allow, for example, the performance of false age or gender. Yet, performing by typographic means only is a challenging task. For most people, performing in written text is less intuitive than oral performance. The difficulty of textually performing is further stressed by time pressures: writers of, for example, chat or texting conversations are unable to edit or re-read the written text. This can mar the ‘front region’ performance, inviting ‘back region’ textual expressions – errors of grammar, misspellings, and ambiguity. Moreover, the textual expressions of the ‘back region’ do not fade out like spoken words: the oral-written text can be documented and saved, re-read, and even printed.

One of the ways of dealing with this typographic challenge is to adopt a language and media ideology that emphasizes the fluidity and instability of the language. In this sense, the channel’s unique characteristics can influence the creation of a language ideology – shared perceptions about language and its place within the social experience (Woolard, 1998: 4) – that is tolerant of some deviation from the rigid structural perception. The rise of such a language ideology, along with its typographic practice, is possible because of much wider social and cultural movements. This typographic culture is well-integrated in the postmodernist trends that provide ideological justification for undermining rigid modernist linguistic rules. Yet, as I will discuss in the next section, this linguistic anarchism is part of users’ performance rather than a real rebellion in the linguistic culture.

The performance of linguistic anarchism

The limitation of the frameworks of the main manifestations of oral-written texts – demonstrated by the three types above – seems to call into question the extent to which this seemingly private ‘liquid’ language in fact reflects anarchism and individual choice in the spirit of post-structuralist and postmodern ideas. The relatively meager set of orthographic rules that underlies these many examples actually attests to the triumph of the modern linguistic system. This does not, of course, refute the post-structuralist argument for the multiplicity of meaning nor its rejection of the binary stable characteristics of language. The modern linguistic approach triumphs in the sense that, as in other manifestations of non-standard orthographies, the deviant
spelling in online texts does not necessarily indicate the lack of consistency or of a systematic form of writing (Sebba, 2007: 46). Preserving such a systematic notion is a crucial component of the linguistic system.

We should certainly consider the possibility that rather than an actual linguistic rebellion what we have here is a cultural performance of rebellion. As Jeffrey Alexander argues,

Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation. This meaning may or may not be one to which they themselves subjectively adhere; it is the meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe. (Alexander, 2004: 529)

Digital oral-written language is used here as a discursive marker that differentiates between digital interpersonal writing and other discursive fields. As this digital discourse replaces FtF conversation, users want it to be seen as one that preserves their authentic, personal voice (Jaffe, 2000: 498). This is achieved through a performance of linguistic anarchism that does not preserve the conventional and uniform orthography and the writing aesthetic that is tolerated by the education system (Androutsopoulos, 2000). As Sebba argues, ‘Orthography – highly visible, and a part of the physical image of language – is an ideal site for ideological struggle and rebellion of various kinds’ (Sebba, 2003: 152). Users want to create language that has an undisciplined image on the one hand and that is rapid, brief, personal, and creative on the other.

Even if the linguistic orality typical of written-spoken digital discourse is merely performative – creating the impression of liquid language – it has a clear significant social impact. Imagination too carries meaning; perhaps the ultimate proof of this is how the scientific system served as a metaphor for the way the social and political systems, like the linguistic one, were supposed to operate. When we take into account the limitations that print places on individuals’ self-expression, this trend – as well as the flood of users generating writing of virtually every genre – can be seen as a type of personal reaction that expresses, albeit symbolically, a sense of dissatisfaction with rigid structures of ‘correct’ modern language and utterances.

**Conclusions**

The use of non-standard orthographies and deliberate misspelling is widely present in digital interpersonal communication means, such as CMC and SMS. These non-standard orthographies reflect, as do many cases of non-standard spelling, oral influences on the digital-written text. The social legitimizing of this non-standard language by wide circles of users and its socio-discursive implications are at the center of this article. I argued above that the oral-written language, which seemingly reflects strong personal influences, relates to and is well integrated in postmodern and post-structural ideas. These challenge the existence and survival of rigid, binary linguistic structures: the intentional deviation from standard writing forms can be seen as an erosion of the relationship between signifier and signified. Moreover, following the metaphor of Zygmunt Bauman, I argued that this oral-written text ostensibly reflects the melting processes of linguistic structures, resembling the changes that occurred to other social structures in the late modern era.
However, analysis of the characteristics of common oral-written digital text within the framework of the basic structural perceptions of De Saussure reveals that linguistic disruptions are expressed in a very systematic way. This is due to the fact that conversational partners need to be able to easily use language to understand one another. The first type, lexical substitution, occurs when a new signifier is added to the original one in a relationship based upon iconic-phonetic similarity, enabling a wide circle of users to understand it. The second type, onomatopoetic signs, adds a new signifier that bypasses the original signifier, making it redundant. The relationship between the new signifier and the original idea is based on onomatopoeic relationships, easing mutual understanding. The third type, initial letters, expresses a lower oral element than the other two. It is based on derivation of initials—a familiar method in English language usage—that facilitates the users’ ability to decode it. This systematic derivation implies that what is seemingly seen as an anarchic use of language in the digital arena is more performative than real.

As mentioned already, I do not argue here that the three types discussed in this article cover all the practices of oral-written language in CMC and SMS. An in-depth inductive work is needed, followed by a possible refining or expanding of the theoretical types described. In particular, we need to better distinguish between different communication channels (their technological affordances and their limitations) and different ‘genres’ of oral writing in CMC, as well as between CMC and SMS types of oral-written methods. For example, comparative analyses of chats, SMS, twitters, and blogs to locate differences in oral-written methods and to consider their origin are needed.

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**Notes**

1. These lesser known examples, as well as those in type three, are taken from the following internet slang online “dectineries”: http://www.noslang.com, http://www.internetslang.com, http://www.netlingo.com
2. See: http://www.urbandictionary.com

**References**


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