Language Practices on Internet Game Fora

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Abstract: Online discussion fora form important venues for promoting language change across the boundaries of time, space, and formal organization. The aim in this paper is to discuss the processes by which participants of online communities develop a sense of common identity. The analysis involves several popular game discussion fora, from quite formal World of Warcraft to unrestrained Tibia. The reported analysis is based on language practices which are found during participation in online game fora. One can note that processes which could be considered as central to community formation are often different manner than the ones found in the literature regarding traditional discussion fora. Examples of such practices along with activities included in a particular category are provided based on selected examples. However, the results which emerge from the analysis indicate that the relationships tend to be constantly realigned under the influence of changing virtual circumstances, such as changing player roles in a group. In addition, language rules are typically not explicit and it appears that they are established and maintained as players imitate and react to each other's roles. Moreover, there is very little evidence of formal establishing a code of conduct or netiquette for our group, as it is completely thought to be implied. However, the practices which are found to be central are the ones in the category of developing a consistent linguistic style, as they show a great diversity. It is indicated how this category seems to serve certain roles, such as forming a distinct code and with examples of forms of abbreviations and acronyms. It is shown that more traditional roles are played by the very fact of the formation of a distinct code.

1. Introduction

Online fora (also referred to as virtual communities or discussion groups) offer their members an opportunity to exchange information through in-group discussion involving a common topic or theme. Such fora have a structure in which individuals write and respond to a topic in discussion or provide commentary that is organized by a subject matter or thread. In-depth conversation and a high diversity of participation are achieved because contributors can be located anywhere in the world, pursue discussions for months or even years, and need only to share an interest in a particular topic under discussion.

The development of common identity on the Internet does not only involve the formation of a set of shared linguistic behaviors and the existence of a common

code. It is also connected with the maintenance of collective identity, which is a label associated with a set of shared attributes meaningful to the group and helps to create and preserve a system of meaning that binds people together (Collier & Thomas, 1988). In this paper, the analysis illustrates how participants produce a set of discursive practices that define and enact their sense of common identity as they participate in discussion on Internet fora.

Thus, the aim in this paper is to report the results of a study into linguistic and social processes by which participants in online communities develop a sense of group identity. A comparison needs to be made between criteria reported in the literature and used to identify group membership and the observations derived from internet discussion fora, as the fora demonstrate the language change in the circumstances of need of language economy and following from a need to form a distinct way of speaking.

Language is not universal or standard in its usages or meaning; rather, language is created and enacted by speakers as they generate discussion around ideas or objects of common interest. In such conditions it is crucial participants involved in these fora develop a sense of group identity, which includes collective reference to the group, creating a sense of belonging, and an agreement on how things are to be organized, which are a core to building virtual communities. Yet, accounts on how this can be difficult to achieve in virtual contexts are available in the literature (e.g. Smith, 1999), which is traditionally attributed to the lack of traditional social cues, shared artifacts and *unifying symbols* to communicate a sense of common identity (Preece, 2000). Since the above statement is contrary to the belief of this author, the aim is to find information to support this. Such an understanding should be of interest to linguists especially as research yields insights into how the ways of speaking specific to the Internet are transferred to everyday language.

2. Research Setting and Procedure

Online game language fora are powerful tools of communication involving large groups of individuals from different circles and speaking different languages, who are able to maintain a sufficient level of communication in English for the purposes of exchange of knowledge in a game environment. This is due to the fact that in the circumstances where time is lacking, the prevalent tendency in the communication will be to use the most economical forms which need to follow the rules set for a code understandable for the participants.

The procedure followed in this paper involved the following stages:
- finding several popular and active game fora,
- collecting sufficient amounts of data using the ethnographic approach,

- identifying how group identity is linguistically defined on online discussion fora and on analyzed game fora,
- determining which processes on game fora are similar compared to fora concerned with information exchange,
- formulating conclusions.

The perspective in this study will be ethnographic in the sense that at least two requirements have to be met: language form is analyzed in combination with its function and both elements of quantitative research are combined to offer support for any qualitative statements that are made about the nature of the phenomena (Saville-Troike,[1982] 2003). Thus, any conclusions have to be combined with a statement about the role and extent of a phenomenon and this implies the need to abstract and analyze representative forms of speaking and its structures.

The research reported here is based on analysis of the author's two-year study of participation in communication involving players of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (mmorpg), i.e. ones while involve simultaneous activity of large numbers of players and requires them to communicate through in-game chat and discussion aimed at problem solving via fora. The analysis reported here is based on four popular game fora, including *Tibia, World of Warcraft (WoW), League of Legends (LoL)* and *Raiderz*. They are similar in terms of their international context but vary with regard to several factors. The games are similar in terms of their background, i.e. they involve combat and completing tasks and missions in cooperation with other players and require players' involvement due to the need to complete time-consuming scenarios. As a result of the necessity of constant cooperation, a lot of discussion is produced. However, communication on these fora varies in terms of the degree of unrestrained discussion, often reflected in the lack of moderation of user contribution. Tibia and Raiderz allows totally unrestrained discussion and involves no moderation of user contribution while the discussion on WoW and LoL is more conventional and often moderated. The former contributes to freer discussions including the use of more curse words, understandability to a more limited circle of active participants and more direct discussions but also familiarity and warm tone between participants, while the latter has the advantage of being more topic focused, following more unwritten rules and using more formal vocabulary.

3. Approaches in the Literature

A study of the literature revealed how participants enacted a sense of group identity through the discursive practices while participating in a forum. For example, Anne-Laure Fayard & Gerardine DeSanctis (2010) list practices that were identified as being enacted in two knowledge management fora. The practices identified on the analyzed fora devoted to knowledge management include (1) self-referring; (2)

building a shared history; (3) expressing legitimacy and authority; (4) managing relationships and (5) developing a consistent linguistic style. Each of these practices has a number of activities, which correspond to the use of specific forms. Table 1 describes the practices and the activities they entail.

Table 1 Collective identity practices and activities in the analyzed fora (based on Fayard and DeSanctis, 2010)

Practice	Activities in the practice
Self-referring	Use of collective language ('we', 'us', 'our group'); reference to the group ('this group'); reference to the knowledge management community ('as the enthusiasts'); reference to the geography
Building a shared history	Linking; forwarding; quoting; weaving
Managing relationships	Giving feedback to acknowledge prior contributions; soliciting input on ideas just presented to the group, thanking, helping
Expressing legitimacy	Introducing oneself; referring to one's experience and expertise; welcoming new members, greeting and closings
Enacting a consistent linguistic style	Formal and informal tone; conversational flow; paralinguistic features (parentheses, emoticons).

A similar account can be found in another paper by Jorge Pena & Jeffrey Hancock (2006) – which refers to communication on the Internet that takes place in a game environment (called the recreational and playful context). The structure also involves practices and activities included in particular activities. This classification involves 3 categories that take into account the purported goal during communication: (1) expressing social information and emotions – with its 6 activities– (a) *solidarity or friendliness,* (b) expressions of *tension, relief, jokes, laughs, or dramatization* (c) expressing *agreement and understanding,* (d) *disagreement and passive rejection*, (e) *tension*, and (f) *antagonism. However,* the majority of activities in this study involve (2) task oriented communication comprised of questions and answers aimed at completing a procedure. The activities in this category include, on the one hand, *(a) asking for an opinion, (b) asking for a sugges*tion, (c) asking for task information or orientation, and on the other, (d) giving an opinion, (e) giving a suggestion or command and (f) giving task information or orientation in response to instrumental inquiries about a task or procedure at hand.   The last category (3) provides examples of linguistic

conventions used in the context, including use of distinct terminology, emoticons, scripted emotes, and abbreviations.

Table 2 Collective identity practices and examples of activities (based on Jorge Pena & Jeffrey Hancock (2006)

Practice	Activities
Expressing social information and emotions	Positive : (a) solidarity or friendliness, (b) expressions of tension, relief, jokes, laughs, or dramatization (c) expressing agreement and understanding Negative: (d) disagreement and passive rejection, (e) tension, and (f) antagonism
Task oriented communication	(a) asking for an opinion, (b) asking for a suggestion, (c) asking for task information or orientation, (d) giving an opinion, (e) giving a suggestion or command (f) giving task information or orientation
Following group's linguistic traditions	use of consistent style, use of emoticons, emoticons, scripted emotes, and abbreviations

On the basis of these two classifications, one can conclude that the activities included in the category of self-referring in Fayard & DeSancti are similar to the category of expressing social information and emotions in Pena and Hancock's classification. Similarly, the activities included in the category of building a shared history in the first classification are involved in the task oriented procedure described in the latter as they both involve exchange of information aimed at completing tasks. However, the category of task oriented communication seems to be very extensive and the activities in 4 categories in the first classification could be included in it. Additionally, the category of enacting a consistent linguistic style in the former is synonymous to the one defined as following linguistic tradition in the latter classification. Hence, a decision was made to adapt the classification produced by Fayard and DeSanctis (2010) for the purposes of this study. The reason is associated with the need for a more detailed list of categories of activities in the former classification. Therefore, the classification applied in the further part of this research will include four categories: (1) self-referring; (2) building a shared history; (3) managing relationships; (4) developing a consistent linguistic style. The first two follow from the classification referred to above while the third one (managing relationships) combines two practices listed in Table 1 (i.e. expressing legitimacy and managing relationships) with presentations of ideas as well as exchanging information and feedback. These two categories therefore overlap

considerably and could be considered as one. The four categories will be analyzed in turn in the later part of this study and examples of each category will be provided.

4. Category One. Self-referring

It is very important for members of any community to feel that they are a part of a group and this involves all types of activities through which members express their reliance and solidarity with other participants. We might be prompted to think that online discussion fora regarding gameplay are unlikely to refer to common identity. However, what I found on the analyzed fora principally concerns:

- forming forum identity by repeated references to the group, such as 'we', 'us', 'this clan',
- addressing the group as a whole through reference to group experience,
- developing group identity by announcements and invitations to join others,
- inviting people to teams/guilds and other group activities,
- referencing to local context,
- greetings and signatures: general greetings to the group and personal addressing, use of closing regards.

Examples of several such activities are found in Table 3. As we can see in the table, reference to common identity can also be found in surface language features that convey the establishing of relations with others, references to a common, larger identity by announcements to groups, and also greetings for the group members and giving regards. This is in direct contrast to what is believed to be at the core of the forming of virtual communities – greater likelihood of hostility due to anonymous discussion. This is also confirmed by categories in the classification proposed by Pena and Hancock (2006), as such activities of behavior play two roles: they offer an opportunity for participants to fit into the categories of seeking solidarity and agreement understanding while simultaneously playing the role of a task oriented communication: asking, giving and offering.

Table 3 Activities and examples in the self-referring category on analyzed game fora

Category	Activity	Example messages from LoL & Tibia
Self – referring	Use of collective language	We'll let you know well before it ends. :) We all know it's broken and we all realize that nearly every aspect of it is broken. We have a decently active raid call at night. Please come check our thread out

Self – referring	Announce-ments and invitations to other groups	Hey, New Facebook group for people living in Australia who play Tibia, join and say Hi. Group Link: http://www.facebook.com/groups/729681810386573/ [Do not look at external websites. Your account could be hacked.] or search "Tibia Australia" Thanks
Self – referring	Reference to the group experience	O .O)/ welcome back... anyone that tells you this game is nao p2e u can just smite 'em in the ass or flip burgers like a baws (/ >///<)/ ~~ [‖): I'd also love a system so that when nobody has agro on boss you can spawn right after the last boss you killed. When party wipes and we have to spend 5 minutes walking back to veilnus, that's no fun

5. Category Two. Building a Shared History

In the virtual context, it is the sense of shared history that distinguishes groups from each other and offers a given group the sense of a specific identity. In order to create a sense of belonging in an online environment in cases when members of the forum are invisible, reference is often made to details of the local context in the archived messages. Participants develop a discursive practice to develop a shared history through a series of activities, such as linking – i.e. they refer explicitly to the content of a previous message in their reply; or use a paraphrase of text discussed in a series of earlier messages in their replies. Participants also use quoting, although it is a less frequent activity. The purpose of participant quoting and copying of portions of previous messages in the discussion is to bring some of the side thoughts back to the discussion, which by its very nature involves a variety of threads. This is often aimed at bringing the discussion back on track. The participants also use message forwarding and weaving – which involves summarizing the major points made during the discussion and making a synthesis of the topic up to date, which is not usually considered to be common on game fora. The fact of having a shared history is essential to the existence of a sense of group identity in online fora. It provides a collective library of quotes and opinions which members can apply in their further gameplay.

Selected examples of these activities are included in Table 4. As one can see, some of the most common examples of building a shared history are achieved by linking through frequent references to earlier messages. This includes in particular:

- forwarding to the group of email or other material that was sent to one individual,
- quoting or copying of earlier messages inside the posted messages,

- references to previous experience in the midst of discussions regarding performance,
- references to the local context and to particular regions and locations,
- quoting or summarizing what was said before.

Table 4 Activities and examples in the building a shared history category on analyzed game fora

Category	Activity	Example messages from WoW forum
Building a shared history	Forwarding information found on the forum	Look at the patchnotes: Shadow Shen's damage reduction from taunted enemies now only applies to their basic attacks (previously... putting their poser into somewhere that other classes won't get Just as I found it in another thread „so either assists".
Building a shared history	Weaving	Hi, I would like to refer to the thread in August the week before Deaths breaths and level 61 items. Death's Breaths are definitely very scarce for newly characters into Reaper of Souls, and they are much rarer than they were in the beta, when players had so many they were not even bothering to pick them up anymore n
Building a shared history	Quoting	I agree with answer by TheWhiz. "Overall, it feels like they put a lot more effort into the death animations of the D1 monsters". The Death Knights are a perfect example of this.

6. Category Three. Managing Relationships

It is interesting to note how people from different cultures are capable of and willing to show their involvement in a virtual community, a member of whom a player becomes as a result of joining a team, clan or guild in a game. It is interesting that in this manner a friendly and helpful culture is created, which in turn fosters commitment and a feeling of belonging. The idea of managing relationships involves a variety of activities. All types of activities that give members of an online community the sense of establishing and maintaining relationships are included in this category. Such relationship maintenance involves a number of activities: acknowledging participant contributions, giving feedback (i.e. saying how interesting and/or useful they found prior messages), and helping (replying and offering the requested information and thanking for it). Since the aim is to create a positive atmosphere and establish a sense of support, the goal of

formation of a real community is achieved. Some of the surprise in this respect is that positive emotions are being expressed by the members who feel they are a part of a community.

Other activities in this category involve: reference to other players' experience; reference to earlier contributions, such as replying to earlier contributions on the online forum, by statements that indicate how participation in the discussion is followed and appreciated. In other cases contributors refer to behaviors by referring others to a related topic and noting its relevance to the discussion. In such discussions it is noteworthy how common participants try to define themselves as legitimate members of a community. This can be achieved by giving precise information, advice and offering help. It is specific to role playing games since some types of activities are possible only with the participation of many players (from different classes, categories and background). Specifically, some of the common activities on the analyzed fora include:

- sharing information (references, names, places),
- asking for advice/giving advice,
- helping and thanking,
- summarizing knowledge to date.

Table 5 Activities and examples of managing relationships on analyzed game fora

Category	Activity	Example messages from WoW forum
Managing relation-ships	Asking and giving advice	Post by HastaLaVistaBob: dear medroid, how high should be the upload in mbs to be able to stream, my 1 mbs upload isnt enough as i have noticed in a testrun Reply by ObscurenessOo: this stream guide helps me to start a stream but its very complicated i started a testrun but the site bugged and my Pc crash every time hmm. Post by Ameran: Can anyone help me with my entry to an archway in (garena or something?) bcuz its blocked... how can i unblock it!?? really need to play LoL..... please help me! T_T Reply by Odeira: As i have found it and if anyone else needs to know it's the archway at the bottom of the ramp

| **Managing relation-ships** | Acknowledging past contributions | Post by Khahan: *Because if those people don't speak now the alpha patch notes become beta features and those become game features. Given the OP could do a better job at presenting his feedback to blizz, but there are perfectly legit reasons to say something now rather than later on.*
Reply by Stockings :Exactly. There are people who do know how to play their classes and know the mechanics of them inside and out |
| **Managing relation-ships** | Summarizing knowledge | As noted in this discussion, make them have a real reason to watch your stream, offer something unique and of course, try to interact with your viewers! I can tell you guys that streaming is one of the best experiences ever. Awesome stories I could give you from my streaming experience. Won't ever forget when I reached for the very first time 4,000 viewers; was literally chilling! haha
Cheers guys! And again, so happy that it helps |

7. Category Four. Performing a Consistent Linguistic Style

Members of an online community are able to develop a highly sophisticated and complex system of communication which has two characteristics: it indicates how economical online communication has become and serves the purpose of the need to establish a shared code of behavior. Traditionally, the changes associated with communication on the Internet were mostly identified with the graphical form and lexicon in accordance with the definition of netspeak by David Crystal (2001, p. 91), who notes that netspeak's distinct characteristics are found chiefly in graphology and the lexicon. According to Crystal (2001, p. 92) these are the levels in which it is relatively easy to introduce both innovation and deviation. The reader from outside the community who is not familiar with the code used is struck by the degree of specialization in the vocabulary and by new graphical forms. In this discussion I am not going to give an in-depth analysis of such graphical novelties (such as special use of punctuation, capital letters, simplified spelling and single letter acronyms). The focus in this paper is on a specific code limited to internet fora while many of the novelties mentioned below are likely to enter more extensively into everyday communication. This discussion will therefore focus on the accumulation of technicalities and how information takes the form of various acronyms and abbreviations.

With more reading in a forum, one could observe order and structure in communication. Members of online fora tend to learn and follow a code which is organized and strictly followed. Members who are not following the changes are

often referred to the manuals which contain glossaries of terms which are agreed (such as the one included in the manual for new players of *World of Warcraft* – http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/2394021476). In addition, numerous dictionaries are available on the net and they contain various numbers of terms (from 250 to over 4000). Some even provide the possibility of translation of slang into the standard language. An example of this is available on the website (http://www.wowslang.com/index.php) which provides examples of original text and a translation:

original text – *lfp 4 nl CATA apply asap*

translation: *Looking for people for Normal Catacombs mode; apply as soon as possible*

The original text indicates how the purpose of economical writing is achieved as a result of using numerous letter acronyms and abbreviations. However, more extensive analysis of forum discussions indicates that the creativity of users and diversity of forms is quite common. Thus, in order to ensure that understanding is achieved, it is crucial for new members to track the changes in the existing code while the level of required competence for following the developments in game is relatively high. Examples of common abbreviations and acronyms used on WoW and Tibia are found in the table below. It is interesting to note that some of these terms are also starting to exist in the common language, and how these ease and accelerate communication in terms of saving keystrokes. Such acronyms also enable expressions of vulgarity to be made without direct use of curse words (examples at the bottom of the table).

Table 6 Examples of abbreviations and acronyms common on the analyzed fora

Acronym/ Abbreviation	Meaning	Acronym/ Abbreviation	Meaning
idk	I don't know	**e2g**	Easy to game
n/c	no comment	**2.e**	Too easy
nvm	Never mind	**Msg**	Message
sup	What's up?	**Pmo**	Piss me off
gtg	Got to go	**Wth**	what the hell
n/c	No comment	**fl@d**	f..king lame and disaster

It is also interesting to get to know how a code is developed by the players. First of all, it serves the purpose of economical writing, since both words and common names used on the fora are constantly abbreviated and various forms of clipping are coined (e.g. *ppl* for *people*). However, many others form an alternative code which is designed and understood by the members of a discourse community, which by its very nature has its goals and requires a threshold level of competence to possess a degree of language expertise (reference). First of all, it has a large number of terms used to describe game mechanics (categories of players, activities and ways of expressing emotions). Secondly, the players develop an alternative code, whose aim is to promote intercommunication between members. In this respect, two phenomena start to play a role: use of alternative spelling and leetspeak. The first one departs from the existing forms so that the spelling resembles colloquial or phonetic form (such as traditional *ain't, wanna, dunno*). Some of the terms are taken from other genres (such as biology – e.g. *respawn* meaning come to life, and slang – e.g. in *riot* meaning *crowd*) while sometimes the role of novelty is played by the mixture of formal or informal style. The second, leetspeak is a relatively new phenomenon in the fora (though originating in the 1980s) and involves replacing letters in a word by similar (in sound or appearance) numbers or other letters that create an identical or similar sound, so that the meaning can be concealed as much as the writers intend to. Words in these categories together with their meanings and examples of forum entries are found in the table below.

Table 7 Examples of alternative codes on the analyzed fora

Term	Meaning	Example message
boss,	bosses are significantly superior enemies	The problem is i am pvp so i don't get that extra gold from mobs and bosses.
mob	any non-player character	
spawn	to come/return to life	maybe i can specify in which location each player will spawn
noob, newbie	a player overconfident about their experience, but willing to learn vs. a new player	If you've never played a MMORPG before, relax. Yeah, seriously, follow this newbie guide and soon you'll be telling noobs where to go.
aggro	make sth attack you	What if a tank can't provoke aggro?
buff	a temporary beneficial spell or effect placed on a player	"I wish riot would buff Talon slightly, to make him stronger. (not saying he sucks, but a buff would be nice)"

pwn3d	dominated, perfectly owned	put a lot of time into getting my PvP gear (mut rogue,~1140 resil) only to get pwn3d by someone decked out in their t9's? Is there something wrong here
roxx0rz	something rocks – it is impressive	PoWell – she roxx0rz with MR reduction problem is that there are no items for her
w00t	what?	Was the slap in the face for the 10m guilds part! You w00t? f!@d up with the 10 and 25 man locks merge and I think that it's time to fix it if you want the game

8. Conclusions

The analysis of communication on Internet game fora indicates that the formation of common identity occurs via a number of various phenomena. Some of them have been described in the literature; however, they have different frequency compared to other analyzed fora. From the discussion it appears that the existing classifications of categories and activities yield satisfactory results in respect to how members of online communities exchange knowledge and use and refer to the existing information to exchange information and form a sense of belonging in a community. However, among the analyzed categories, the tendency to manage relationships seems to be a very common one in the communication on analyzed fora. New tendencies involve developing a consistent linguistic style in the online communities. This category extends far beyond the activities which have been identified in the literature (e.g. simplified spelling, emoticons). Nowadays, a fast pace of development is apparent in informal English language. Such changes in particular involve the formation of a specific code which borrows from different genres and styles but still has several characteristics, including use of a large number of abbreviations and acronyms as well as other novelties such as leetspeak. Two reasons are basically responsible for these changes: the tendency to find the most economical ways of writing and the need to search for a way of expressing which differentiates a group from common language, such that the characteristics are similar to closed discourse communities. Such online communities apply a code and a high level of competence in this code is required for successful participation in the group's activities.

Online discussion fora indicate the potential for language change in English. Such changes can be indicative of how communication in English can be revolutionized. Text derived from fora is often completely incomprehensible in everyday communication. However, words borrowed from communication on the Internet are likely to be transferred to other genres in order to give them more economy, such as ones that are used in texting and slang. They offer the potential of

containing a greater degree of emotional meaning, while the purpose of economy is maintained.

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