Standards of type: Punctuation as a sociolinguistic variable in CMD

Research on computer-mediated discourse (CMD) has grown in the past several years, with linguists slowly gaining interest in the internet as a conversational space (e.g. Herring 1996). The majority of this work is descriptive and often treats online language as monolithic, though a modicum of recent work on CMD takes a variationist perspective (Paolillo 2001; Squires 2005; Raclaw Forthcoming). Because speakers online have access to a different set of social and linguistic resources than those afforded by spoken interaction, the traditional methods of variationist research cannot be readily ported to language use in CMD. One particular challenge to researchers has been adapting the concepts of *standard* and *non-standard* usage to linguistic variables used online, especially those that are unique to written discourse. This paper discusses one such set of variables, punctuation marks, with a focus on their use in standard and non-standard speech styles.

The data come from English-language conversations held through chatrooms and instant messages, both prototypically synchronous text-based forms of CMD, and from online interviews with speakers from the corpora. We examine two forms of punctuation, the apostrophe and the ellipsis, and discuss how these variables are socially salient to speakers and communities: their use can mark core member status within a community of practice, index social variables such as gender, and garner covert or overt prestige. We relate this salience to notions of standard and non-standard usage as they are described by previous variationist research (e.g. Labov 2001) and as they surface in language ideologies about online talk. For both punctuation variables, standard usage appears to derive from the prescribed rules of formal written English. The standard use of an apostrophe depends on its inclusion in as required by these rules, such as in a contraction, while its exclusion is seen as non-standard. The standard use of ellipses, however, conforms to traditional *functions* of ellipses in formal writing, while its non-standard uses are those that are more innovative, such as 'substituting' for other pieces of punctuation or lexical constituents. These distinctions are illustrated with examples below.

[Apostrophe: Quantitative Distinction]

standard (inclusion)	*non-standard (exclusion)*
how's it going?	i dont think ill be going though

[Ellipsis: Qualitative Distinction]

standard (traditional)	*non-standard (innovative)*
And then … silence.	lets get ice cream … pickles … soda :)

In light of the above analysis, we propose a model for considering the uses of punctuation variables in CMD as being realized either quantitatively, through their *inclusion* or *exclusion*, or qualitatively, through their *traditional* or *innovative* use relative to prescribed written language. We then briefly discuss the more complicated application of this model to variables such as question marks or periods, whose standards of use may be determined both quantitatively and qualitatively. Following these examples, we discuss how variation is also influenced by conversational format, such that different mediums of CMD can make certain punctuation patterns more or less likely. Finally, we overview how this kind of research highlights the necessary interdisciplinarity of variation work, as conversation increasingly occurs through different media.

References

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