Dimensions of speech and writing in World of Warcraft chat transcripts

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Abstract

The aim of this essay was to examine chat communication in the World of Warcraft on-line interactive game in order to place the chat on the formal/informal continuum using speech and writing as extremes, as well as to examine the linguistic context of the chat situation within a broadly Hallidayan perspective and tenor of the participants. A corpus of 3675 words was gathered from the game on the realm or game server of Bloodfeather. The data was analysed by counting the frequency of a few selected linguistic features and compared with examples of speech and writing. The research showed that the chat in World of Warcraft was highly informal and would on the continuum be placed as more informal than the speech extract used for comparison. The results also indicated that context plays a small role in shaping the chat conversation and that tenor have close to no significance at all.

Keywords: computer mediated communication, chat language, formal/informal language
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1. Introduction

Ever since the first spoken conversations and written texts were produced, language has been evolving. As societies grew larger, new ways to use language evolved from new needs, such as trading. As a result of the explosion of the IT-era in the late 20th century and the technologies that followed there are now numerous ways to communicate over long distances instantaneously. People can be involved in a conversation hundreds of miles apart, using text to communicate rather than their voices. The resulting text is therefore neither a written document nor a sample of spoken language, but rather a combination.

The aim of this essay is to examine more closely the text resulting from this new type of communication, namely chat produced in the online game World of Warcraft. The essay will attempt to place the chat in WoW on a formal/informal continuum using the work of Biber (1998) on speech and writing. Recent work by Crystal (2006) on language and the internet has shed light on computer mediated communication from a linguistic point of view. A widespread fear that the Internet is spelling doom for linguistic variety and the use of language as we know it is often uttered in newspapers and other media. Furthermore, the fact remains that the Internet has had a massive impact on the use of language, and especially affected are young people. The Internet shapes our daily lives and the communicative possibilities accompanied by the Internet have led to an era of constant accessibility. No matter where people are or what they are doing, they can always be contacted through some means of instant communication.

Biber (1988) defined the variations of speech and writing through statistics on the frequency of linguistic features common in speech or writing. Biber used a set of dimensions such as formal/informal, planned/unplanned, interactive/non-interactive and literary/colloquial to prove that there are no absolutes, and that some spoken language can be closely related to writing when some dimensions are looked at, but not at all when viewing other dimensions. He was also able to show that some linguistic features are more common in some genres of shared linguistic features, whilst being nearly unrepresented in other genres.

By applying the methodology of Biber to computer mediated communication, in this case chat-conversations from the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMO-rpg) World of Warcraft (henceforth WoW), the essay will attempt to place chat on the
formal/informal continuum. WoW chat is naturally tied to in-game situations, but these situations can vary greatly. The context in which the chat takes place will therefore shape the conversation. Other factors that can shape a conversation are power relations between people and this essay will analyze WoW chat in order to determine in what manner power relations between two or more people in the communicative act effect the conversation.

The present essay therefore has three main research questions. Firstly, the essay examines the question, assuming that speech and writing are the absolutes in a formal/informal continuum, as the where WoW chat fits in in terms of a formal/informal continuum. Secondly, context can greatly alter the way language is used, and how this holds true in WoW chat will be examined. Finally power relations, or tenor, between participants of a conversation can have great effect on the mood selections; therefore tenor in WoW conversations will be examined.

Research question one: Where does WoW chat place on a formal/informal continuum?
Research question two: In what way does the context of a conversation alter the use of language?
Research question three: How do power relations affect conversations in WoW?

1.1 Background
The recent work of Crystal (2006) on language and the Internet provides a solid theoretical reference for this essay as it sheds light on how the internet has affected the language. Crystal focuses on the differences between spoken and written language and tries to identify where computer mediated communication stands in comparison and what it is. This alongside of Biber’s (1988) study on variations across speech and writing, although carried out before the internet came into the picture provides good grounds to build the analysis of this essay on.

This study belongs to the Hallidayan realm of systemic functional linguistics which has a focus on meaning and context (Halliday 1994). The essay will work with a functional approach to grammar. Biber’s work as well belongs to the realm of functional grammar with the study on collected speech and writing data. What this means in reality is that the essay will use real and actual texts transcripts, rather than the artificial, invented sentences from the Chomskyan, generative paradigm in linguistics.
1.2 Speech and writing
Biber's work (1988) showed large variations of language across speech and writing. In his research he did not only show large variations between speech and writing but also between different genres of speech or writing. By counting the frequency of linguistic features Biber was able to show many variations between genres, even between different genres of fiction. The features were divided into factors that were compared to different dimensions previously mentioned. The factors were essentially linguistic features that that co-occurred with a high frequency. For example, the use of first person pronouns and questions co-occurred with high frequency, and could thus make up factor A (Biber 1988:79).

These dimensions placed speech and writing and different genres on continuums. Different types of speech would be placed differently on these continuums based on the context of the speech. A conversation between two participants can be unplanned and informal, unplanned and formal, planned and formal and so on. A speech given at a court hearing is a clear example of an act of speech that is planned and most likely formal. In the same way a witness being questioned can be an example of an act of speech that is unplanned and formal. What Biber was able to prove in his study was that there are no absolute differences between spoken and written language and that certain features are present in both, and are determined by genre and contexts rather than by whether the language is spoken or written.

1.3 Differences across speech and writing
Crystal (2006) notes several differences between spoken and written language, the first of which is that speech is time-bound, dynamic and transient. It is an interaction between participants who are usually present and the speaker addresses the message to one or several known people. Writing on the other hand is space-bound, static and permanent. A writer addresses people who are distant and most likely to be unknown to the writer.

Speech has no time lag between production and reception. This makes it hard to produce complex linguistic constructions and the spontaneous nature of speech makes for looser constructions and an unplanned nature. Writing on the other hand always has a time lag between production and reception. This allows a writer more time to construct more complex linguistic structures and the writer is able to analyse the text. This results in sentences and paragraphs that are easy to identify (Chrystal 2006).
Due to the face-to-face nature of speech, the participants are able to use facial expressions and other non-linguistic cues to get their meaning across to the recipient. Speech is often heavily context-based with words or expressions which refer directly to the present situation. Writing on the other hand has a lack of visual contact and is void of the possibility of immediate feedback. This means that a writer tends to avoid the use of words or expressions that are context-based or refer to the specific situation as they can be unclear (Chrystal 2006).

Speech is known to contain linguistic features that writing does not, such as contracted forms like it's and doesn't as well as the use of slang and obscenity. Likewise writing has features rarely present in speech such as subordination and the long sometimes multi page sentences found in for instance legal documents. Subordination in this sense is the use of dependent clauses such as this is the boy that was late for school. Certain names or compounds are very rarely spoken and exist only in writing (Chrystal 2006).

Speech is suited for everyday situations, social interaction and casual unplanned discourse. Speech is often used to express personal opinions and attitudes and is well suited for describing personal relationships. Writing on the other hand is frequently used for recording facts and communicating ideas. Written texts are easy to keep and reproduce and can be read at a speed that is suited for the recipient who is able to determine the speed and flow of information (Chrystal 2006).

When speaking the speaker has an opportunity to rethink, reformulate and restart an utterance while the recipient is listening. Once spoken however, an error can never be withdrawn and interruptions are audible to the reader. There is no chance to correct an utterance after it has been produced. In writing a writer has the ability to delete any errors before producing it, or after it has been produced in a later draft. This will never be known to a reader, nor will any interruptions during the writing of the text (Chrystal 2006).

There are however as mentioned differences within both speech and writing as well. Speech can for instance hold some of the factors typical for writing. A public speech given by for example a politician is an example where the speaker is unaware of whom the recipients will be and have had time to prepare the speech, making sure that there are no faults. It may also be difficult to get much direct feedback from the speech. An interview is another example of a
prepared act of speech, from one of the participants in any case. However, for the sake of this study, the general differences between speech and writing will be looked at.

1.4 Field, tenor and mode
Systemic functional linguistics seeks to describe the interplay between the context of situation and linguistic features of this context using the register variables of Field tenor and mode. Tenor describes the social role relationship between people who are interacting within a certain field (Halliday 1994). The role a person has in a situation greatly affects the use of language. These role relations can be for example teacher/student or doctor/patient. Such roles give a person different power in a situation. A patient for example is unlikely to question a doctor’s judgement. The choice of language can then vary from situations depending on a few factors. Informal or formal use of language is a linguistic consequence of tenor. Informal language, which consists of attitudinal lexis, colloquial lexis, abbreviated forms, slang and swearing to name a few common features, is mostly used in relations with equal power, frequent contact and high affective involvement. Formal language on the other hand consists of a formal and neutral lexis, full form and absence of slang. Politeness is common as well as the use of titles rather than names. Formal language is therefore used in situations of hierarchical and unequal power, infrequent contact and low affective involvement (Eggins 1994).

Most clauses, both in writing and in the form of utterances have a selected mood selection that can be either indicative or imperative. Indicative mood can also be either declarative, in other words a sentence, or interrogative. Different choice of mood can position the speaker/writer in different roles towards the listener/reader. The speaker/reader can either give or ask for information, or tell a listener/reader to do something (Hewings & Hewings 2005).

1.5 Computer mediated communication
There are different types of computer-mediated communication. Computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) can according to Simpson (2002) be defined as either synchronous CMC or asynchronous CMC. The difference between the two is that synchronous CMC is taking place in real time using for instance chat. Asynchronous CMC is communication where the participants are not online at the same time using e-mail or similar software.
Communication with the use of a computer and the Internet is restrained by a number of limiting factors. This is due to the fact that the hardware that is used which limits the linguistic productivity with a set of characters, and the size and configuration of the screen determines the linguistic capacity of the recipient. In order to use a medium for communication it is important to know the strengths and weaknesses of the said medium (Crystal 2006).

Restrictions aside, computer mediated communication has been hard to classify as either speech or writing. It has been called both written speech and that internet language is a way to write “the way people talk” (Crystal 2006:27). Studies that have been made on asynchronous CMC show that writing in an electronic discourse often reads as though it were spoken. It could then be said that CMC and electronic discourse constitute some sort of blend between written and spoken language. One thing that makes CMC or Netspeak as Crystal (2006) calls it, interesting is that it has characteristics from both writing and speech.

1.6 Chat
This essay will examine in particular the concept known as chat. It is necessary therefore to define what we mean by chat in the CMC context. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s dictionary chat is: “to talk to someone in a friendly informal way; to take part in a discussion with someone on the internet”. For the purpose of this essay neither can be said to be more grammatically well-formed than the other. Chat over the internet, in particular in MMOs such as WoW, can take many different forms from rather formal conversations and discussions to highly informal social interaction.

Synchronous CMC allows participants that are online at the same time to communicate by reading text either as it is being typed or immediately after (Maricic 1999). In a study on synchronous CMC, or chat as it will be referred to, Sauro and Smith (2010) examine the L2 production during chat. During spoken conversations it is the norm that each speaker has a turn. This means that only one person is able to produce language at one given time. During chat however, overlapping turns enable multiple participants to form an utterance and contribute it at roughly the same time. The overlapping turns make it easier to contribute to a discussion as well as providing more time for the participant to produce the utterance.
Participants also have the possibility to review the conversation and retrace previous contributions during a conversation without having to ask a speaker to repeat an utterance. This is due to the fact that the chat remains on the computer screen (Sauro & Smith 2010). This enables participants of a chat to have multiple ongoing topics at one given time. Chat also supports long pauses between utterances even though it unfolds in real time. These pauses are partly due to the time it takes to type in the utterance and the fact that in most chat clients the participants are not able to follow the utterance as it unfolds, in contrast to speech (Sauro & Smith 2010). Sauro and Smith argue that the lag times between utterances give participants of a chat more time to both produce their utterances as well as giving them more time to reflect on incoming chat. This enables a participant to monitor and edit and utterance before it is provided. A short chat transcript from WoW may look as follows:

Fantur: well according to leetfags u rolled the best possible race for pve rogue
Snuttan: if u want I can park my warrior here
Fantur: I quest my arse off on a day 2 day bases
Snuttan: for an occasional daily
Fantur: nah stay till the cleared content to shop the mount
Fantur: then they can go choke on theyre own sausages
Snuttan: that and all the heirlooms
Fantur: idd (indeed)
Snuttan: who knows I might make more toons
Fantur: might rock my dk up a bit for enchanting mats
Fantur: hopefully it brings us over to lvl 4
Fantur: seems the candy is 80-85 questing over anything else (appendix A:1).

1.7 The World of Warcraft

Blizzard Entertainment is the company responsible for the game that brought the gaming industry to the large masses. No other computer game in history has received this much publicity, both positive and negative. World of Warcraft is more than a game, it is a phenomenon. Children and adults both play WoW on a daily basis and the game now exceeds 12 million subscribers, and since the release in the fall of 2004 the total game time that players has spent online is now over 6 million years. In December of 2007 the first expansion The Burning Crusade was released, and the expansions Wrath of the Lich King and Cataclysm were released in November 13th 2008 and December 7th 2010 (Wikipedia 2011).
The game consists of two major components; questing and instancing. Questing is the means which a player uses in order to evolve a character through the game and reach a higher level. A higher level improves a player’s strength and unlocks new abilities. Quests are available from level one to the endgame at level 85. Questing is for many players the main attraction and what they will spend the majority of their time doing. Quests can be done solo or in a group, consisting of a maximum of five players.

The other part of the gameplay experience is instancing, or raiding as it is also known. Instances are available at an early stage of the game; from level 15 lower difficulty instances are open to the player. These instances provide harder enemies than normal and better loot and rewards for five player groups. The lower difficulty instances are used to complement questing when levelling up. By the endgame however, instances become much more difficult but equally rewarding in return. Instances for 10 or 25 players known as raids open up providing a high level of challenge. In return players are rewarded with loot and gear for their characters. After reaching the highest level of 85, players who want to improve their character further are forced to do so by completing these raids.

1.8 Chat in World of Warcraft

There is one aspect of the game WoW that is of certain interest to this essay, namely the way that chat is produced in the game. From the moment the player logs in to the game server known as a realm, the player is able to chat through a number of different chat channels. These channels have different functions, from the party chat that is used for a group of up to five people, to the guild chat that is specific for each in-game guild, with the number of members ranging from ten to hundreds. The individual natures of the channels invite the player to use somewhat different language depending on in which channel the chat is produced. The resulting text is still very similar in all chat channels of the game and can be said to be written speech or that the player simply writes as one would talk.

2. Material and Method

In order to analyse WoW chat and place it on a formal/informal continuum, it is necessary to gather as much text as possible in order to make the analysis accurate. Therefore the majority of the work in this essay will be quantitative in nature, and the basis will be a substantial
statistical analysis. Two of the research questions however require a more qualitative approach in order to be answered. It is possible to answer the second and third research questions outlined above by using a more restricted number of chat interactions. The conversations that were more closely analysed in order to answer these research questions were taken from situations that suited the questions, as not all conversations play out in the same way. Depending on the situation in WoW one chat interaction may look rather different from another and comparisons between different conversations will be made in order to establish a viable theory. Comparisons with the chat compared to written texts and spoken language will also be made.

2.1 Chat data
The conversations and chat were gathered from the MMO-rpg World of Warcraft and from in-game situations using a copy and paste method. The chat extracts were gathered from the realm of Bloodfeather, which is an English Player versus Player realm, meaning that players may be targeted in combat by other players at any given time. The chat was gathered from March to May, 2011. The text was not altered in any way before the analysis. The corpus of words gathered from conversations in WoW chat consisted of 3675 words. The chat was gathered using many different chat channels in WoW and close to 100 people were involved in producing the chat. Chat where the investigator took part was not used in order to ensure an objective standpoint and ensuring that the chat produced was not deliberately altered to suite the investigation. Closely related players were however encouraged to start up conversations, but choice of when and in what context were up to the players ensuring that the chat produced was not controlled by the investigator.

Regarding anonymity of the players that take part in the conversations they are all protected by the nick names that are used in game. This is the name of the character or “avatar” that the players use and the real identity behind an avatar is impossible to determine without the help of Blizzard Entertainment. Blizzard’s policy is never to give out information regarding a player in order to protect their customers. The only case where information can be given out that would not violate the terms of agreement is when helping an on-going criminal investigation. In any case where a chat example is mentioned or a name appears, the players were notified that the chat would be used and in what way. All players that were asked gave their consent.
2.2 Comparison texts
In order to make a comparison between WoW chat and spoken and written language, text and spoken data would need to be examined in the same way using the same features as for the chat data. Therefore a text consisting of 1024 words was chosen. This text was taken from Wikipedia and is about WoW. Two sections of the text were chosen and analysed using the same method as with the chat data.

Along with the comparison text on World of Warcraft an interview was chosen in order to compare the chat data to a spoken conversation. The interview was posted on Youtube and was performed by “Chuck the movieguy” with Jack Black on the topic of his then recently released movie Tropic Thunder. The same process of analysis was used on the spoken conversation as with the chat data and the comparison text.

2.3 Problems and limitations
The process of gathering the chat data was very time consuming, mostly due to the fact that the investigator had to be online during hours when there are the most amount of players online, thus giving more chat. The use of the copy paste method meant that it was not necessary to manually type in all the chat data to a text document. However this method meant that much of the chat data gathered was in the form of image files that had to be inserted into a document. This meant that all the data had to be analysed by simple counting occurrences of words and features manually. This, needless to say, was a monumental task even though the corpus was rather small.

3675 words are, in regards to a corpus, a rather small amount. Therefore it is not possible to make any general conclusions of the result, the chat data also comes from only one of the game’s many realms. In order to make accurate generalizations multiple realms with a larger corpus would have been necessary. It would also have been useful to have a larger number of comparison texts and spoken conversations in order to make the comparisons even more accurate.

2.4 Analysis of linguistic features
The chat that was gathered was analysed using a simplified version of Biber’s statistical analysis. A set number of linguistic features that are specific to speech or writing were chosen. The features can be used to determine the level of formality of a text, and by counting
the frequency of them in WoW produced chat compared to a speech or a written document, chat can be placed on a formal/informal continuum. The features to be counted are the use of passive sentences, subordination and coordination. Cases of subject or verb ellipsis were counted as well as a type/token ratio. Sentences or utterance length was also examined. These features were counted in the chat data as well as in the comparison text and the interview. The numbers were then compared in order to place WoW chat on a formal/informal continuum.

All the features mentioned helped analyse the data in order to answer the first research question. In order to answer the second research question the context of a few selected situations were examined. The third research question was answered by viewing the tenor of the participants of the selected conversations and the use of modality, namely modal auxiliaries in said conversations.

3. Results

3.1 Sentence and utterance length

Chart 1: Sentence and utterance length

The 3675 words of the corpus were taken from 562 different utterances. This relatively large number of utterances compared to the amount of words leads to the conclusion that the utterances were rather short. The average length of an utterance was only 6.5 words and 467 out of 562 utterances consisted of less than 10 words, which is 83% of the utterances. This in turn means that 95 utterances consisted of 10 words or more. The median value of an utterance was 7 words.

The comparison text used for the essay consisted of 1024 words divided into 44 sentences. In contrast to the chat data, the comparison text is divided into correctly constructed grammatical
sentences, and thus it is sentences and not utterances that are analysed. The average length of a sentence was 23 words, which is substantially longer than the utterances from the chat data. The median value of a sentence was 20 words.

The interview that was analysed consisted of 450 words divided up into 35 utterances. One utterance could consist of incomplete grammatical structures or several grammatically correct sentences. The average length of the utterances was 13 words placing it somewhere in the middle of the chat data and the comparison text. However two utterances stood for 154 words and were thus uncharacteristically long consisting of 88 and 64 words respectively. When a median value was examined the length was 8 words per utterance.

3.2 Type/token ratio

Chart 2: Number of utterances/sentences with a type/token ratio less than 1.0

Counting the type/token ratio of the utterances from the WoW chat revealed that very few utterances had a difference between the amount of tokens and the amount of types. For example “now if you two dont start behaving i wont get you icecream” (appendix a:10) is a raw unchanged example from the guild chat, and has 12 tokens and 11 types as the word you appears twice. If an utterance or sentence has equal amounts of types and tokens, the ratio will equal to 1. From the 562 utterances only 40 had a difference in type and token which is 7.1% of the utterances. The vast majority of the utterances with a difference in type and token consisted of ten or more words. In fact only 5 of the 40 utterances with a ratio of less than 1 had less than 10 words. 522 utterances had a type/token ratio of 1.

The type/token ratio from the comparison text revealed that 82% of the sentences had a different amount of types and tokens, compared to 7.1% of the utterances in the chat data. 36 out of the 44 sentences had a difference in type/token, in other words 8 out of 44 sentences
had a ratio of 1. All the sentences that had a ratio of 1 were shorter than the average sentence length.

When comparing type/token ratios not only to a single utterance or sentence, but rather a full conversation or paragraph, different results were found compared to when single sentences or utterances were compared. A conversation from the chat data that consisted of 91 words and a paragraph that was 84 words long were chosen, and the two selected cases were roughly equal in length. The conversation had as mentioned 91 tokens and the amount of types were 73, giving the conversation a 0.80 type/token ration. The paragraph with 84 tokens had 72 types giving it a ratio of 0.85. As mentioned, if the amount of types and tokens are the same the value will equal 1. This in turn means that the paragraph from the comparison text contained more words that only appeared once than the conversation from the chat data. Similar results were found when comparing two longer segments where a paragraph of 116 words had a ratio of 0.77 and a chat conversation of 107 words had a ratio of 0.7.

Half the utterances, 19 to be specific, had a type/token ratio of 1. The utterances that had a ratio of 1 were all shorter than 10 words. All utterances that consisted of more than 10 words had a difference in the amounts of types and tokens. When the first part of the topic was counted, all the utterance of the part were on the same topic, there were 115 tokens, or words, and there were 83 types making the type/token ratio 0.72.

3.3 Subject and verb ellipsis

Chart 3: frequency of linguistic features

In the 562 utterances of WoW chat gathered, 36 utterances contained cases of subject ellipsis which equals 6%. Subject ellipsis is when the subject of a clause is left out for example: “tbh dont think Quoze has actually ever done well in arena” (appendix a:7). In the example consisting of 14 words, tbh stands for to be honest and is three tokens and three types, the
subject "I" is left out. If corrected the utterance would read: "To be honest I don't think Quoze has actually ever done well in arena".

Along with subject ellipsis there were also cases of verb ellipsis. In total 34 of the 562 utterances contained verb ellipsis. The majority of the verbs missing were auxiliary verbs for instance: tell me sommat... where you get the recipes for that? (Appendix a:4). In the example the verb do is missing as it of course should read where do you. Interestingly there were 12 cases of utterances where both the subject and the verb were missing, which is a substantial amount of the cases in total. An example of this is: still doing rift? which should be are you still doing rift where the subject you was missing along with the verb are.

In the comparison text no case of subject ellipsis was found. Neither were there any cases of verb ellipsis, and accordingly no combinations of subject and verb ellipsis. This is most likely due to the fact that the text is published. The text has most likely been proofread and any cases of faulty grammar corrected. The interview used as an example of spoken data contained one case of subject ellipsis but no case of verb ellipsis. The case of subject ellipsis was "[I] hate to say it" where the subject I was missing.

3.4 Coordination and subordination

In all of the 562 utterances in the chat sample cases of subordination and subordinate clauses were rare compared to cases of ellipsis. Only three cases of subordination were found in the WoW chat data. These cases were all linked to cases where players were retelling a past event such as: "we lost one case well only way we would have wone is if shaman resto dps was as good as say disc dps"(appendix a:8).

Coordination was slightly more frequent in the chat data with 9 cases. However out of the 562 utterances it can be said to be rather rare as well. One example of coordination is "did 2s last night and gave up case we had 3 games draw case of the timer running out"(appendix a:8). The word case in the quote is actually because which is a word commonly used to coordinate a sentence. However coordination was not all that common throughout the analysed chat.

Coordination and subordination in the comparison text was rather more frequent than in the chat data. 7 cases of subordination was found, which means that 16% of the sentences had subordination compared to 3 cases from the total of 562 utterances in the chat data which
equals 0.5%. Coordination was located in 6 cases which equals 14% of the sentences. In the chat data the number of cases of coordination located was 9 in the 562 utterances which is 1.6%.

In the interview there were six cases of coordination and two case of subordination in the 35 utterances. That makes coordination appear in 17% of the utterances which is close to the results from the comparison text. Subordination however only appeared twice in 35 cases which is 5.7% compared to the seven from a total of 44 in the comparison text which is 16%. The interview however did have more cases of both subordination and coordination than the chat data.

3.5 Passive sentences and modal auxiliaries
As for passive sentences, no case was found in any of the 562 utterances of the chat data, in the 35 utterances of the interview or the 44 sentences. Modal auxiliaries were another feature that was rather absent in the chat data. In the chat data the only modal auxiliaries found were the ones used to show ability such as can. A mere 7 instances of modal auxiliaries were found in the chat data.

4. Discussion

4.1 Sentence length and type/token ratio
The results revealed that there are several differences between the analysed data and the comparison text and speech. First of all it is the difference in the length of the utterances or sentences. When the average utterance length was examined, the chat data was considerably shorter than both the spoken conversation and the written text. The average value placed the spoken conversation right in the middle of the chat and written text. However as two of the utterances in the interview were of considerable length, 88 words is rather long, a median value revealed that the spoken conversation and the chat both had a value at around 7-9 words. The written text had a median of 19 words, which goes to show that when conversing; either through speaking or writing, the participants in the study tend to keep the utterance much shorter than a sentence in a written text.
The type/token ratio also put the spoken conversation and the chat in closer relation to each other than to the written text. When single utterances or sentences were viewed, the speech and chat both had a high amount of utterances with a type/token ratio of 1.0. There were a relatively small number of the sentences that had a type/token ratio of 1.0. The high type/token ratio would indicate that the language used was diverse and uses synonyms rather than the same words over and over. However when longer segments were analysed together it was revealed that the chat and speech had considerably lower type/token ratio than the written text. This was to be expected since when writing a text, the writer is able to take time to find synonyms. The high type/token ratio in the chat and speech utterances is better explained by the shortness of the utterances, rather than language diversity.

4.2 Differences between chat, speech and writing

The fact that the writer is able to take time and change the text when writing a document, something that Crystal (2006) pointed out, is made clear when viewing the subordination and coordination features. The comparison text scored considerably higher than especially the chat in this regard with 16% of the sentences containing subordination and 14% containing coordination. This can also be explained by the shortness of the utterances in the chat conversations. Instead of making grammatically complex structures players appear to split up information into shorter and less complicated grammatical constructions such as “i hate him” “he lone wolf”. Even though the second utterance is missing an article and a verb, something that the player corrected in a later utterance, the example shows a case where instead of using “because” and making it one utterance the player split the information up into two different utterances and removed the coordinator. Using a coordinator the utterance would have read “I hate him because he is a lone wolf”. This can be due to time saving measures, using fewer words to get the same message across or the fact that the player felt a need to add information after posting the first utterance. When writing a document the writer is able to fuse short sentences together and create more complex grammatical constructions.

It is interesting to note that the spoken conversation scored rather high in terms of coordination. This can be explained by the fact that it was an interview and the interviewer asked questions that needed longer replies. Several different sentences or even different answers were linked together using coordinators. The features of subordination and coordination do separate chat conversation from spoken conversation nonetheless as it is much less of an effort to combine sentences like this when speaking compared to when forced
to type rapidly on a keyboard. Sauro and Smith (2010) argue that due to the fact that the screen saves the information, it is possible to read previous utterances and retrace what has been said, and that this in turn would give a participant more time to formulate the entry. This does not always hold true in WoW chat however as the player can be involved in conversations in several different chat channels at once and is therefore pressed for time in order to keep up with all of them. However, the ability to take part in several different conversations at once is helped by the fact that chat conversations are not limited by each participant having its turn as would be the case in a spoken conversation (Sauro & Smith 2010).

There are other instances of time saving measures in WoW chat, such as the ellipsis of the subject or verb and in some cases both. This segment for example shows how two players use ellipsis in order to lower the amount of words, and in turn time, used to get the message across:

Yoruichi: [are you] still doing rift? Fantur: like a madcow 42/50 now Fantur: [I am] closing in on endgame babey Yoruichi: so its good then? Fantur: I think so ye, though [it is] hard to see so far Fantur: [I] think what iam loving is being broke n clueless in foreign land® Yoruichi: yeah who doesn't love that feeling Fantur: [I am] saving up for my epic mount WHAT up!(appendix A:3)

Cases where the participants left out a subject or verb are indicated by the brackets. The text is however fully understandable for the two participants without the subjects or verbs. Although it is not grammatically correct, ellipsis of the subject or verb in cases like this simply speeds up the conversation slightly by allowing the participant to use less time typing. That is one explanation to why ellipsis was so much more common in the chat conversations than in the spoken conversation.

It seems according to this analysis that the chat conversation, although written, has many similarities to speech conversations. One of the major differences between speech and writing suggested by Crystal (2006) were that writing lacks the face to face situation and direct feedback that speech has. New ways to overcome this hurdle in the conversation are constantly evolving. Acts such as writing *lol* (laugh out loud) or simply the onomatopoeic *haha* as a way to indicate that the participant is laughing, or the use of emoticons such as the smiley (😊) are all ways to give direct feedback to other participants. The chat, just as speech, is suited for the casual day-to-day nature of many of the situations and interactions in
WoW. The lack of subordinate clauses and the use of contractions and slang all indicate a strong resemblance to speech.

4.3 Formality of the chat
The comparison text used in this analysis was as mentioned published at Wikipedia and can therefore be said to be rather formal. Although not at the level of a legal document or similar, the fact that it has been published on a website that has hundreds of thousands of users daily does force the text to adhere to certain rules of Standard English. The comparison text is a good example of a written document and a good comparison for the analysis of this essay. Many of the features mentioned by Crystal (2006) hold true for the text such as the fact that the writer has no idea who will read it. The time lag between production and reception also gives the writer time to correct any errors made in early drafts of the text.

The interview however can be said to be rather informal as it contains profanity and colloquial language. The conversation is also low on expressions for politeness and the use of modality. The interviewer and the target of the interview seem to be on equal power levels and there is no clear hierarchical standing between them. The conversation is also full of interruptions and stutters indicating that the answers given are unprepared in advance. The interview has many features that Eggins (1994) argues are characteristic for informal language.

If WoW chat were to be placed somewhere on a formal or informal continuum between speech and writing using the two examples in this analysis, it would place itself as even more informal than the spoken conversation. In the chat data there was a surprising lack of any modality in the form of modal auxiliary verbs, or politeness of any kind. Profanity was plentiful as well as colloquial language, slang and onomatopoeic words. The chat did as mentioned have much in common with the spoken conversation that was used for comparison, but as formality goes it was even more informal. Note that the chat is coming from just about all possible different situations from WoW.

Another indication that the chat in WoW is very informal is the frequency of the ellipsis of subjects and verbs. This indicates that the conversation is very personal and that the participants know each other. The example mentioned of the conversation between Yoruichi and Fantur that had plenty of ellipsis illustrates this well. To an outsider there are plenty of questions about what the players are talking about that would easily be answered by the use of
subjects. However as the chat data was gathered using multiple different chat channels in the game, it is highly unlikely that all players have a close contact and relationship. Both guilds that contributed to the chat have over 200 members, many of whom have never spoken to each other, even online. Yet the cases of ellipsis, especially subject ellipsis, were present in all of the data gathered and not specific to just one channel or situation. This indicates that the chat looks just about the same in most if not all situations in WoW.

4.4 Context and power relations

One of the aims of this essay was to examine in what way the context alter the communication and the way players express themselves in WoW chat. Considering the use of ellipsis and the consequences the usage has for outsiders to take part of the conversation, it is possible to claim that context plays a major role in shaping the language. Take the previously mentioned conversation between Yoruichi and Fantur for example. The utterance “still doing rift” starts the conversation off. Who is still doing rift? Fantur’s answers “like a madcow” and “closing in on endgame babey” does little to answer who was doing rift as well. In this particular case we know that Yoruichi is asking Fantur if he is still playing the game “Rift” another MMOOrpg, but reading the conversation they may just as well have been talking about a third person. This instance of removing a subject however was not the most common.

In 22 of the 36 cases of subject ellipsis, the subject that was removed was “I”. The conversation that has been mentioned as an example several times is between two players that have a long history of playing together. In guild chat situations however, or party chat situations for that matter, the most common subjects by far to be left out are “I”. In the guild chat it is more common than not that multiple players participate in a chat topic, and multiple topics are usually going on at the same time. The fact that the first person subject is missing as often as it is in these situations indicate that it is simply understood that when a player makes an utterance that is missing a subject such as “Guess it depends on how u play”(appendix A:7) the missing subject is first person, in this case “I”.

Context does play a role in shaping the language as players tend to use less ellipsis of the 2nd or 3rd person when in a situation where many participants are involved in order to make it easier to understand and follow the conversation. Simply put, as long as it does not interfere with the understanding or meaning, any subject or auxiliary verb can be neglected. The
ellipsis of main verbs was highly unusual, and in cases where it occurred such as “Worgen there?” (appendix A:6) there was little question as to what the missing verb was.

Subordination only occurred in situations where a player was describing a previous event or task, and coordination was used in the odd cases where a player took time to explain certain aspects of the game, opting to take time to write one long utterance in order to have all the information at the same place, as it makes it easier to follow.

Some of the time saving measures used by players in WoW chat also forces some general understandings in order to follow along in the chat. For example the fact that players more often than not not opt not to use the apostrophe in contractions or genitive can lead to some confusion. It can for instance be hard to tell plurals or genitives apart, as well as the case of “it is” and “its” that in WoW chat often are identical as the contraction has no apostrophe. These features of the WoW chat are present in any channel or situation, proving that the context only alters the communication in small ways, such as the use of ellipsis.

Other evidence that players change the way they communicate very little depending on situation is the use of modality. As mentioned there was a surprising lack of modality, or more specifically the use of modal auxiliaries. The only modal auxiliaries that appeared in the 562 utterances analysed were can and would. These however were only used when describing the will or ability of the first person such as i would like to obs (appendix A:17) or I could go that way. This means that the mood of an utterance in WoW tends to be of the imperative. Players do not ask for help or information, but rather demand it like for example this sample: tell me sommat... where you get the recipes for that (appendix A:4). The example was taken from the guild chat of Dragonspawn on the realm of Bloodfeather.

However it seems to be of little importance where the chat was taken from, as the use of modal auxiliaries looked just about the same throughout all of the chat data. This indicates that the tenor of participants in a conversation in WoW has little importance, if any at all. A new member of a guild will speak to the guild master in the same way as to another member. A member of a raid group will address the raid leader in the same way as the raid leader would address the member. Power relations in WoW do in this sense not alter the communication, as there is no difference either in modality or formality between participants of different situations. This too shows us that WoW chat is very informal, and that
hierarchical structures have no effect on the conversation, at the very least not on the realm of Bloodfeather. One explanation for this could be that a player’s real identity is protected by the character avatar and the use of nick names. The player is not forced to keep up a positive face, as Maricic (1999) argued is vital for CMC. Face-saving acts are simply not necessary as a player is in many cases unlikely to come across some players more than once or twice.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine chat conversations from the MMO-rpg game World of Warcraft and place the chat on a formal/informal continuum. Context of the chat and power relations between participants was also examined. With the use of Biber’s (1988) methodology of factorial analysis and the counting of linguistic features, the differences between chat communication in WoW and spoken conversations and written documents were established. Features used were ellipsis of subject and verb, subordination and coordination. Type/token ratio was also examined as well as the use of passive sentences and modal auxiliaries.

It was established that the chat in WoW was closely related to the spoken conversation in many aspects. Many of the features of speech held true for the chat conversations as well. In cases where the method of communication limited the participants, ways to avoid the obstacles were invented, such as the use of emoticons and onomatopoeic words. On a formal/informal continuum with the speech and writing as the two extremes, the analysis indicated that WoW chat should be places as even more informal than the speech. The use of ellipsis and lack of modality were strong indicators of this, as well as the use of profanity regardless of situation.

The context of the conversations in WoW did little to alter how the language was used, other than to affect how ellipsis was used. Depending on the number of participants in a conversation, players would remove different subjects or verbs. The more participants that were active in the chat, the less likely was the use of ellipsis for 2nd and 3rd person subjects. It was also established that the tenor between players did little to change the choice of mood and use of modality. Players simply use the same language and address people in the same way, regardless of the field of the conversation. This may be due to the fact that players are protected by an avatar and it is in many situations not important to consider face-saving acts.
The conclusions made in this analysis are accurate in the sense that the chat data came from all different situations where a player interacts in WoW and the fact that the chat data shared the same features and the results were the same from all the different situations. However it is important to point out that while this holds true for the realm of Bloodfeather, the realm used to gather data, it may not hold true at all on other realms. Bloodfeather is a PvP realm, and while the conclusions made may hold true for many servers of the type, it cannot be said for every server in the game.

The study could have used a larger corpus, as 3500 words may be too small to make accurate conclusions. However a significantly larger corpus could be made, given that there is more time or that more people are involved in the process of gathering the data. Data from different realms may also have altered the results, and this should be kept in mind when reading the results. Furthermore, the comparison text and interview could have been complemented with more data. However due to the limitations of the essay, this was not possible. As the feature of passive sentences came up without any useful results, another feature, such as nominalization could have been used instead.

Future research on the topic could include a larger corpus from multiple realms both in Europe and North America. It would also be interesting to look at a larger list of linguistic features, such as pronoun use and nominalization. Both these features were intended for this research but were not manageable with the limitations of the essay. For the essay a simplified model of Biber’s methodology was used, and in future projects a model more similar to Biber’s could be used. It would also be interesting to have a larger comparison material in order to make more generalizable observations in the differences between speech, writing and chat conversations.

It would also be interesting to look at the results from the essay and how they affect students studying English as a L2 language. Future studies could compare students that play WoW and other MMO-rpgs and students who do not play the game and if there is any difference in their use of language as a result of playing. The effect that games have on students learning English cannot be overlooked. In the environment of a game a player is under a constant stream of information, and in online based games the player is also constantly in different kinds of
interactions with other players. The role of games such as WoW when learning a new language is something that would be interesting to investigate as a future language teacher.
6. References

Primary sources

Appendix A: chat data gathered from World of Warcraft March-May, 2011


Appendix C: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIgmaThKeKw

Secondary sources


