A Conversation Analysis of the Iranian Youths' Written Chats of English

Hossein Shokouhi [*]
Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran
&
Neda Hamidi
MA in TEFL, Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran

Abstract
The ever-increasing application of computer and internet mandates a longer domain for computer-mediated-communication (CMC). Internet chat as a principal feature of CMC has attracted tremendous attention among the youths in recent years. Thus, this study has focused on the written chats of 100 Iranian university students majoring in different disciplines. We analyzed 400 chat samples (composed of 4000 moves) in terms of opening and continuing speech functions based on Eggins and Slade's (1997) model of casual conversation. We also examined humor and paralinguistic features based on taxonomies of Huffaker and Calvert (2005) and Nastri, Peña, and Hancock (2006). Among the various types of speech functions, nine opening speech functions, seven continuing speech functions and four humor and paralinguistic features were investigated. The analysis of the data shows that the salient opening speech function has been 'statement: opinion' which provides attitudinal and evaluative information. Additionally, the outstanding types of continuing speech functions are 'prolong: extend', 'prolong: enhance', and 'append: elaborate'. Therefore, it is in order for the participants to offer additional or contrasting information to the previous move or qualify it by giving details of time, place, condition, etc. Moreover, in case of interruption by the other chatter, the participants mostly tend to clarify, exemplify or reiterate the previous move. Furthermore, the participants produced irony, as a humorous element, in a great volume which is indicative of their tendency toward being indirect during conversation. The subjects also used many paralinguistic features such as misspellings and repeated punctuations in order to express their

[*] *E-mail address*: shokouhi_hossein@yahoo.com
Corresponding address: Faculty of Humanities & Persian Literature, Golestan Blvd., Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran

emotions and attract their partners' attention in the absence of verbal communication.

Keywords: Computer-mediated-communication (CMC); Conversation Analysis; Internet; Chat; Humor

Introduction

The widespread use of internet and media modes of various types including e-mail, chat, weblog, and bulletin board system (BBS) among which e-mail and chat are the most popular ones have changed the communication styles. Nowadays, many Iranian youths spend a good amount of time chatting with their friends inside the country and abroad. Chat is defined as informal textual interaction and informal voiced interaction, hence informality being the focal point (Reed and Ashmore, 2000, p. 1). Chat is a synchronous feature of computer-mediated conversation that has broken the constraints of the economy of spoken interaction. Our inability to listen to two or more people speaking at the same time for very long limits the number of possible turns available in any spoken conversation. In contrast, chat may be less restricted than spoken communication since more than one person may construct a message at the same time, and reading can be quicker than listening.

Since the advent of the internet and CMC, a new domain of research has been opened to the linguists. Some of the above-mentioned studies have emphasized Conversation Analysis (CA) of the web-based communications in order to study the interactional situation and compare it with face-to-face conversational settings. CA is based on the assumption that all the social actions are meaningful for those who produce them and they have a natural organization that CA intends to uncover (Psathas, 1995, p. 23). In other words, CA aims to 'discover the methods speakers use to produce a sense of social order' (Shokouhi and Kamyab, 2004, p. 87). It includes verbal and paralinguistic features of communication which play a significant role in webchat. Additionally, through a CA perspective language can be used to engage people in social actions. This implies a concern not only for the talk itself but also for the context in which it takes place. In the case of webchat, where the context is almost entirely new and unknown to the participants, a CA approach could be helpful in analyzing different ways in which interlocutors conduct social actions and create meaning through talk (Negretti, 1999, p. 77). However, many aspects of such a synchronous CMC have still remained untouched

by the researchers. Rarely have they investigated different speech functions, moods, paralinguistic features, etc. which occur in web-based chats.

Having employed a model of functional-semantic interpretation of dialogue introduced by Eggins and Slade (1997), the present study delves into the speech function network and examines different patterns of opening and continuing speech functions in web-based casual conversations of Iranian youths. In addition, the study investigates application of humor and paralinguistic features in the English chats of Iranian learners and compares it with application of these two factors in chats of English speakers. The research investigates various kinds of humor according to the taxonomy of Nastri et al. (2006) and different kinds of paralinguistic features on the basis of the taxonomy by Huffaker and Calvert (2005).

Review of Literature

Synchronous text-based chat tools provide an alternative to asynchronous discussion forums and e-mail. Synchronous communication provides place-independent opportunities for conversation although it is not time-independent since participants must be logged in at the same time. Consequently, text-based chat conversations can be more incoherent than those in asynchronous forums; there is no overt threading, and exchanges are often interleaved (Pena-Shaef, Martin and Gray, 2001; Cox, Carr, and Hall, 2004). Chat tools are often used to engage in less formal, more interactive conversations and thus have been viewed as more appropriate for the social aspects of distance courses, whereas asynchronous tools have been considered more useful for serious discussions (Im and Lee, 2004).

By examining the discourse characteristics of interaction within a virtual community, Simpson (2005) focused on the tendency in multi-party synchronous CMC discourse for certain notable patterns of interaction and specifically conversational floor. He obtained the data from the text-based chat forum of an online community of learners and teachers of English. The entire set of data which formed the basis of his study comprised 150 logs of chat sessions. The logs were saved and archived by the participants.

Simpson distinguished three floor types: speaking-and-supporter floor which is a single conversational floor, one participant can be regarded as the floor holder and others as supporting through the use of back-channel devices and other short

interjections; collaborative floor which is constructed by a number of participants; and multiple conversational floor which occurs when two or more floors exist in parallel. Additionally, Simpson asserted that many factors might influence the development of particular floor types. However, the most impressive factors were three contextual aspects of the discourse: participants and their roles within the group, verbal activity (topic and communicative action), and a selection of medium-related features (p. 350).

The researcher concluded that conversation in synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) is quite different in many ways from spoken conversation. In addition, many established approaches to spoken discourse analysis did not necessarily have concordance with those of an SCMC. He claimed that a particular SCMC environment required a measure of electronic communicative competence. The elements of electronic communicative competence include: 1) knowledge of the linguistic system, 2) knowledge of the discourse patterns involved, 3) knowledge of the technology, and 4) knowledge of the sociocultural rules of a particular virtual community (p. 356).

Nastri et al. (2006) examined performance of some speech acts through the production of 483 online messages sent by 44 participants. The messages were analyzed for the use of non-standard orthography and humor. They adopted Searle's taxonomy as the basic categorization for the speech acts found in instant messages. Searle, in his taxonomy, categorizes speech acts according to their illocutionary purpose, their fit to the world, their expressed psychological state, and their propositional content (Searle, 1979, p. 46).

Examining 483 online messages, they found that the messages were constructed primarily with assertives, followed by expressives and commissives, but rarely with directives, confirming that chat messages tend to reflect both informational and entertainment goals (Nastri et al., 2006, p. 15). Non-standard orthography and humor were also common although experienced participants used fewer non-standard forms than less experienced participants (p. 16).

A feature of many groups, collaborative or co-operative activities is that participants' contribution is assessed by their peers as well as their teacher. A cooperative learning activity, especially when the participants are at a distance, requires consideration, care, and understanding of each other (Clark, 1996, p. 222).

In this sense, Laurinen and Marttunen (2007) examined the quality of argumentation and collaboration in students' chat debates. Twenty-four students participated in twelve dyadic debates dealing with nuclear power or genetically modified organisms. Their argumentative interactions were analyzed by categorizing their speech turns into seven functional categories: (1) exploration and deepening of argumentative relations, deepening of the content of arguments; (2) argumentation, arguments directly related to the subject matter; (3) opinion, opinions with respect to the topic of the debate; (4) task management, management of the progression of the argumentative task; (5) interaction management, interaction that manages the interaction itself (e.g., coordination between speakers); (6) social relations, interaction managing the students' social relations (e.g., greetings) and (7) outside activity, any interaction not relating to the topic of the debate or to the given task. The argumentative task-related parts of the students' discussions were further analyzed into collaborative and non-collaborative speech acts (p. 233).

Most of the speech turns in the debates (67.2%) concerning nuclear power (NP) were argumentative compared to only 47.8% others concerning genetically manipulated organisms (GMO). The first category in which the students explored and deepened their arguments was the most frequent in NP debates (31.6%) compared to GMO debates (20.8%); therefore, the production of GMO seemed to be a more difficult topic than discussing NP. The larger proportion of outside activities during the GMO debates was also one indicator of the difficulty (24.3% vs. 15.6%). Most of the speech acts (96.8% in NP and 95.2% in GMO) were collaborative in nature. More than one-fifth of the speech acts were questions, requests for clarifications, or provocative claims. Thus, about half of the produced speech acts included the students' responses to these initiatives. Responses, in turn, were often rewarded; consequently, the category of short positive feedback was the third most common speech act category (Laurinen and Marttunen, 2007, pp. 237-238).

Having analyzed the chat debates by classifying the successive speech turns according to the level of argumentativeness, the researchers found that the majority (67.2%) of the speech turns in the NP debates included exploration of arguments, and opinions (p. 239). GMO was a more difficult topic as the proportion of argumentative speech turns was lower (47.8%), and the proportion of the outside activities was larger than outside activities in the NP debates. When the

collaborative speech turns of the chat debates were analyzed, Laurinen and Marttunen noticed that the argumentative parts of the debates were also collaborative in spite of the fact that the students were asked to provide opposing arguments. Therefore, collaborative communication appeared to be implicitly embedded in argumentative tasks even when students were asked to take opposing views (ibid.).

On the basis of what we observed so far, within the field of computer mediated communication, a good amount of research has dealt with issues of synchronous web-based interactions. However, no particular attention has been paid to it in the realm of second or foreign language acquisition. Our intention in this article is to bring this to attention by analyzing chats of a group of Iranian English chatters in terms of their speech functions.

Methodology

Participants

One hundred students, 62 males and 38 females, majoring in different fields of study at Shahid Chamran university of Ahvaz, individually participated in this research on a voluntary basis. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 35. The gender variable, however, was not considered in this study.

All the participants could use English at least at an intermediate level. They were capable of using meaningful messages and working with computer and internet and they had prior experience in chatting in English. Since we needed to pull out 400 samples containing at least 4000 clauses for our methodological purpose, each participant was asked to provide at least four chat extracts.

Data collection

During a period of eight months, the participants had been sending copies of their written chats in English to us. They were completely free to choose their addressee or the site through which they chatted. They either e-mailed their chat copies to us or directly handed their chat files or the printouts. The participants had chatted in English with their Iranian peers, and they were also free to select their chat topics, and the time and place of their web-based conversations. However, no chat conference was required. Through the data, the following research questions were to be answered:

1. What are the patterns of opening and continuing speech functions employed by the participants?
2. How do the participants use humor in their English chats to impress their Iranian peers?
3. What paralinguistic features do they use in their written chats?

Data analysis

A number of statistical methods were used to answer the research questions above. Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare the forms of speech functions in the participants' chats. The reason for the selection of this test was that it could help us compare the speech functions two by two. Additionally, the proportions of humor and paralinguistic features were calculated for each chat in order to count the percentage of the messages that contained these features. Also, Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare the categories of humor (jokes, verbal wit, irony, and facetious remarks) and paralinguistic features (emoticons, repeated punctuation, intentional misspellings, and abbreviations) and their interdependency on one another. It is to note that Kruskal-Wallis test is useful for comparing non-parametric variables and it is a counterpart of one-way ANOVA. Finally, the results were compared with those of the native speakers of English obtained by Negretti (1999), Nastri et al. (2006), Derks, Bos and Grumbkow (2007) and Chang (2007). In order to present a picture of how our data in the result section is classified, the information in Tables 1 and 2 below, which is based on Eggins and Slade's (1997) classification, is put forth to clarify the process. Further, as for our results to yield a more reliable outcome, two university professors of English who had lived in English speaking countries for a long while and were also familiar with the phenomenon under investigation were asked to rate the findings after a careful review.

Table 1
Opening speech functions

Opening speech function	**Discourse purpose**	**Example**
Attending	Attention seeking	How r u?
Offer	Give goods and services	Would u like some more?
Command	Demand goods and services	Please give me a time
statement: fact	Give factual information	went shopping/ U know i'm originally from iran/ I was really busy last week
statement: opinion	Give attitudinal/evaluative information	This conversation needs yashar.
Question: open: fact	Demand factual information	what were u doing during these days /How about u?
Question: closed: fact	Demand Confirmation/agreement with factual information	so u were really busy as u said / Is there any Affairs in that party/
Question: open: Opinion	demand opinion information	Which party Did u go?
Question: closed: opinion	Demand agreement with opinion information	Did u find me anything helpful?/ Did u mean Flight Design System/ Can u tell me about that

Table 2
Continuing speech functions

continuing speech function	**Discourse purpose**	**Example**
Continue: monitor	check that audience is still engaged	You know? Right?
Prolong: elaborate	clarify, exemplify or restate	He gets banned from everywhere because of his antisocial behavior
Prolong: extend	Offer additional or contrasting information	Except that she sacked these guys, except roman
Prolong: enhance	Qualify previous move by giving details of time, place, cause, condition etc	We're too messy 4 him
Append: elaborate	Clarify, exemplify or restate previous move after intervention by another speaker	A: I hope this is a new one 4 the recorder B: [laughs] C: A garbage discussion
Append: extend	Offer additional or contrasting information to previous move after intervention by another speaker	A: Everybody has to be so but I mean B: or coopera...tion
Append: enhance	Qualify previous move after intervention by another speaker	A: He plays the guitar. B: Does he? A: In a small band

Results

Speech functions

According to the functional-semantic interpretation model by Eggins and Slade (1997), opening speech functions are divided into nine categories: 'attending', 'offer', 'command', 'statement: fact', 'statement: opinion', 'open question: fact',

'open question: opinion', 'closed question: fact', and 'closed question: opinion'. Table 3 below shows the distribution of these categories used in our participants' chats.

Table 3
Distribution of opening speech functions

Opening Speech Function	Total	Percentage
Statement: fact	436	16.8
Statement: opinion	436	16.8
Attending	400	15.5
Command	364	14.1
Question: closed: fact	364	14.1
Question: open: fact	290	11.2
Question: open: opinion	254	9.8
Question: closed: opinion	36	1.39
Offer	19	0.2
Total number of opening speech functions	**2599**	**100%**

As shown in the table above, 'statement: opinion' and 'statement: fact' were the opening speech functions which were used most and identical in terms of occurrence. The third kind of opening speech function which was used most by the participants was 'attending' which includes all the ways the interlocutor tries to attract his/her partner's attention. Such a speech function is usually seen in the form of greeting (e.g., hiiii/ hellllllo/ how r u?/ anyone there!!?). In the fourth place stand 'command' and 'question: closed: fact'. As shown in Table 3 above, each of the two categories includes 14.1 percent of all opening speech functions. 'Question: open: fact' and 'question: open: opinion' include 11.2 and 9.8 percent of all opening speech functions respectively. Finally, 'question: closed: opinion' and 'offer' were applied the least in the chats.

In order to see if there is any significant difference in terms of the dozen different opening speech functions, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was conducted. As it is clear from Table 4 below, there is a significant difference between the following two opening speech functions: 'question: open: fact' and 'statement: opinion' ($p<0.05$). The participants had used 'statement: opinion' more

than 'question: open: fact'. This can approve of the fact that the participants opted to state their opinions more than ask other speakers about facts. However, as further statistics in the same table reveal, no significant difference was detected for the following pairs: 'question: open: opinion' vs. 'statement: opinion', 'question: closed: fact' vs. 'statement: opinion', 'question: open: opinion' vs. 'question: open: fact', and 'question: open: opinion' vs. 'question: closed: fact' ($p>0.05$).

Table 4
Pairwise Wilcoxon test comparisons among opening speech functions

	Question: Open: opinion – statement: opinion	Question: closed: fact – statement: opinion	Question: open: fact – statement: opinion	Question: Closed: fact - Question: Open: fact	Question: Open: opinion - Question: open: fact	Question: Open: opinion - Question: closed: fact
Z	-1.199(a)	-.479(a)	-3.138(a)	-2.764(b)	-1.552(b)	-.913(a)
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.230	.632	.002	.006	.121	.361

a) Based on negative ranks, b) Based on positive ranks

Based on the same model of Eggins and Slade (1997), continuing speech functions were divided into seven categories: 'continue: monitor', 'prolong: elaborate', 'prolong: extend', 'prolong: enhance', 'append: elaborate', 'append: extend', and 'append: enhance'. The table below shows the distribution of these categories used in the participants' chats (see Appendix A).

Table 5
Distribution of continuing speech functions

Continuing speech functions	**Total Number**	**Percent**
Prolong: enhance	400	27.5
Append: elaborate	327	22.5
Append: extend	290	19.9
Prolong: extend	254	17.4
Prolong: elaborate	145	9.9
Monitor	36	2.4
Append: enhance	4	0.23
Total number of continuing speech functions	**1456**	**100**

As seen, 'prolong: enhance' and 'prolong: elaborate' are the continuing speech functions used most by the participants (27.5% and 22.55%, respectively). As mentioned in the methodology, by 'prolong: enhance' an interlocutor qualifies his previous move by providing more detail statements, and by 'prolong: elaborate', the interlocutor qualifies previous move after intervention by another speaker. The third kind of continuing speech function which was used most by the participants was 'append: extend' by which an interlocutor offers additional or contrasting information to previous move after intervention by another speaker. In the fourth place stood 'prolong: extend' with 17.4%. 'Prolong: elaborate', 'monitor', and "append: enhance', were the categories which were used the least with only 9.9, 2.4, and 23 percent of all continuing speech functions, respectively.

The participants also tended to keep the floor by adding more details or information to the previous move. Moreover, they tended to restate or clarify the previous move after being interrupted by another interlocutor. However, the results revealed that the participants barely qualified a previous move or offered additional or contrasting information to it after intervention by another speaker.

In order to examine whether or not there are significant differences in terms of different continuing speech functions, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was performed (see Table 6) to allow us to compare three kinds of continuing speech functions which were of higher frequencies and mean scores. These three types were compared two-by-two.

Table 6
Pairwise Wilcoxon test comparisons among continuing speech functions

	Prolong: enhance – Prolong: Extend	Append: elaborate – Prolong: extend	Append: elaborate - Prolong: enhance
Z	-.912(a)	-6.343(a)	-7.625(a)
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.362	.000	.000

a) Based on negative ranks

As demonstrated in the table, the difference between 'append: elaborate' and 'prolong: extend', and the difference between 'append: elaborate' and 'prolong: enhance' is significant ($P<0.05$), the conclusion being that the participants tended

to qualify the previous move more than offer additional or contrastive information to it. However, the results also show that the subjects' trial to clarify, exemplify or restate previous move after being intervened by another speaker was more than qualify the previous move by giving details.

In order to see further into the comparison between opening and continuing speech functions, we thought, due to the non-parametric nature of the variables within this range here, a Pearson correlation would be in order (see Table 7 below).

Table 7
Pearson Correlation between opening and continuing speech functions

		Continuing speech functions			
Opening speech functions		Prolong: elaborate	Prolong: extend	Prolong: enhance	Append: elaborate
Statement: fact	Pearson Correlation	-.041	.055	.017	.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.416	.276	.730	.349
	N	400	400	400	400
Statement: opinion	Pearson Correlation	-.043	.099(*)	-.043	-.048
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.386	.047	.391	.341
	N	400	400	400	400
Question: open: fact	Pearson Correlation	.061	.016	-.070	.030
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.223	.746	.160	.553
	N	400	400	400	400
Question: closed: fact	Pearson Correlation	-.017	-.021	-.021	.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.736	.682	.677	.880
	N	400	400	400	400
Question: open: opinion	Pearson Correlation	-.028	-.032	.089	.132(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.572	.529	.076	.008
	N	400	400	400	400
Question:closed:opinion	Pearson Correlation	-.162(**)	.026	-.050	-.048
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.601	.314	.337
	N	400	400	400	400

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level[1] (2-tailed). 1 The test is done with error of 0.05
2 The test is done with error of 0.01. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level[2] (2-tailed).

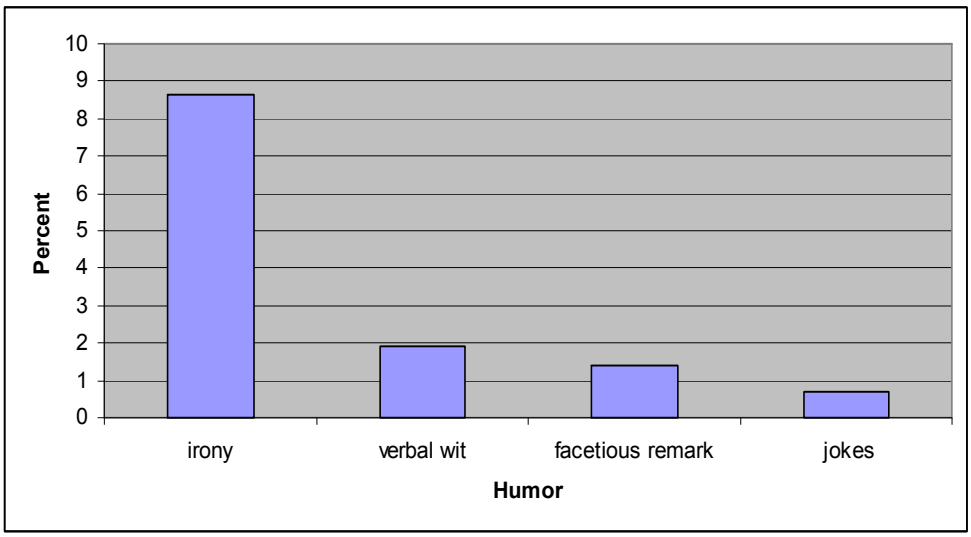
As the table demonstrates, only three pairs of opening and continuing speech functions have significant correlation with each other: (1) 'statement: opinion' vs. 'prolong: extend', (2) 'open question: opinion' vs. 'append: elaborate', and (3) 'closed question: opinion' vs. 'append: elaborate'. Consequently, except for these three pairs, there was no correlation between these two main categories of speech function.

Humor

Among 400 chats that we gathered, 12.7 percent contained humor. We divided humor into four main types: jokes, verbal wit, irony, and facetious remarks (Nastri et al., 2006). Jokes are the funny short stories or statements which one tells regarding one's self, some other person or people, and interesting and funny events. Wit is a kind of humor, similar to irony, which is funny because of its sudden sharpness and quick perception. Irony is the leading feature of humor; when a person uses irony, one says the opposite of what s/he means while the addressee believes the opposite of what was said. Facetious remarks are utterances used to tease somebody in a friendly manner. They are usually employed to create a joyful atmosphere. Although in majority of the cases the identification of each type was not so problematic, for a more solid reliability, based on the above definitions of the four major types of humor depicted here, we asked the same two raters to identify the type of humor to minimize the probable fault in distinguishing each type.

Among the types mentioned, 8.65 percent of all participants' chats included irony, 1.9 percent verbal wit, 1.4 percent of which being facetious remark, and 0.72 percent were ordinary jokes. These results reveal that the participants had chosen irony as the main element of their humorous language. Other categories of humor (verbal wit, facetious remark and jokes) only included 4.02 percent of all humors. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of different kinds of humor that participants had produced.

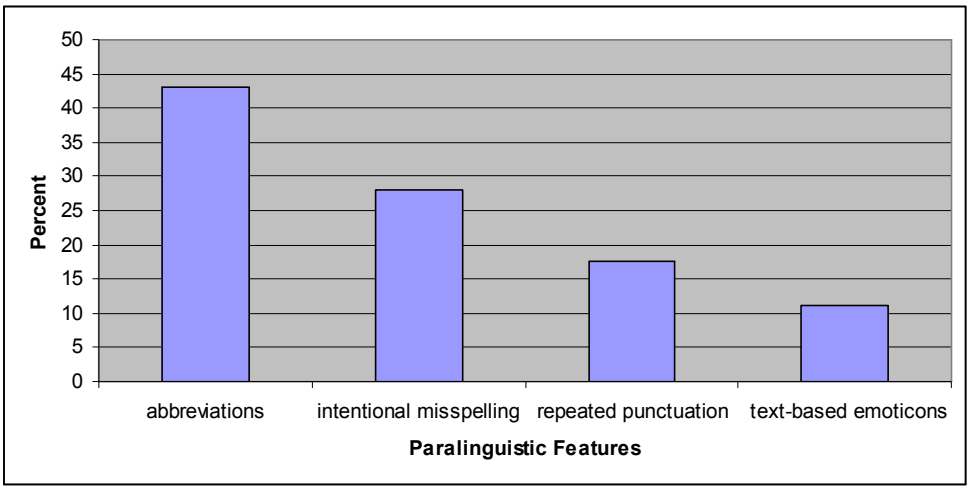
Figure 1
Distribution of different humor types



Paralinguistic features

Paralinguistic features are divided into four categories according to Huffaker and Calvert (2005, p. 15). The first is 'repeated punctuation' which was used sixty-four percent of all chats. The second is 'intentional misspelling' which was included in 81 percent of all chats. The third is the 'abbreviations' which were seen in almost all chats. Some chats were full of abbreviations such as 'IBB' which stands for 'I'll be back', 'NP' which represents 'no problem', 'OIC' which demonstrates 'oh! I see', and 'LOL' which shows 'laughing out loud'. The last category was 'emoticons' which were in turn divided into two types: text-based emoticons and graphical emoticons. Examining graphical emoticons turned out to be impossible to do because these small animation pictures require some special software which was unreachable to us.

Figure 2
Distribution of different kinds of paralinguistic features



Discussion

Descriptive statistics from this study indicates that among the nine categories of opening speech function, the participants overall used 'statement: opinion' and 'statement: fact' much more than the other types. This can suggest the subjects' tendency towards concentration on self as well as the world surrounding them as they were eager to tell about various facts: facts of their own lives, lives of the people they know, politics, environment, etc.

As was expected, 'attending' was also used highly in the chats. Seventy percent of the chats started with 'attending' (e.g., "hi, how r u?", "how's everything?"). In the next place, the participants had used 'command' and 'closed question: fact' (14.1%). This means that after 'statement: opinion' and 'statement: fact' as the main categories of opening speech function, the participants tended to ask for some information, demand services and things (e.g., "would u plz do me a favor?", "download this file", "don't forget to call Ramin tom morning"). They also tended to ask for confirmation or agreement with factual information by asking closed questions about facts; however, the participants had used 'open question: opinion' much less than 'closed question: fact' and 'statement: opinion'. This suggests that the Iranian learners of English highly tended to express their own opinions rather

than asking about others' opinions; moreover, they preferred asking *closed questions* to *open ones*. This way they could get the answer of their questions faster and easier. However, the data from native speakers have revealed some different results. Nasti et al. (2006:11) found that 'statement: fact' was the salient speech function produced by the English speakers while 'statement: opinion' was rarely applied by them. The native speakers of English used 'statement: fact' to form a specific idea, proposition, or belief in the addressee. Using this speech function, they committed themselves to being true, while being eager to hear about facts, so they put a great value on expressing facts. This result confirms that the chats produced by English native speakers are chiefly fact-oriented.

As mentioned above, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, a test for comparing two sets of non-parametric data, was conducted to measure the significance of different in terms of different opening speech functions produced. Consequently, five kinds of opening speech functions used more frequently by the participants and whose mean scores were closer to each other were compared two-by-two. The only significant difference among these sets was between 'question: open: fact' and 'statement: opinion' ($P<0.05$). This reveals that our participants had more desire to express their own opinions rather than to demand factual information. Consequently, the subjects' tendency to express their opinions was the salient characteristic of their chats regarding opening speech functions.

One such 'opening speech' function, 'statement: opinion', serves to provide attitudinal and evaluative information (Eggins and Slade, 1997:185). Having examined the data, we observed that the participants had produced this speech function based on emotional reactions to situations (e.g., 'I'm not happy now'/ 'Feeling hot today'/ 'you're a liaaaaaaaaaaaar') (see example 1 below; turns 3, 4, and 7, for which the display of feelings and emotions by the participants not only informs the interlocutor of their personal opinions (e.g., their favorite classes, people, and activities) but also gives a glimpse of their emotional state (e.g., aroused, happy, sad, angry, and stressed). Consequently, the observations suggest that the participants construct personalized web-based messages with informational and expressive purposes in mind in order to regulate conversations, maintain social connections, and express their identity.

(1)

1 Sahar: u mean u don't like window shopping?.....**question: closed: opinion**

2 Sahar: Then let's go to cinema??.....**question: closed: opinion**
3 Arya: u no, im feeling hot today, cant think of goin out.....**statement: opinion**
4 Sahar: u just dont like to join me. That's obvious.....**statement: opinion**
5 Sahar: No more excuse plz!!! .....**command**
6 Arya: Oh! cool down baby.....come on ..
7 Sahar: you're a liaaaaaaaaaaaar.....**statement: opinion**

Descriptive statistics from this study also indicate that, among the seven categories of continuing speech function, the subjects, on the whole, used 'prolong: extend', 'prolong: enhance', and 'append: elaborate' much more than the other categories. This implies that the participants found it a necessity to offer additional or contrasting information to the previous move (the move just produced by themselves or the other interlocutor) or qualify it by giving details of time, place, condition, etc. Moreover, when interrupted by the other chatter, the participants highly tended to clarify, exemplify or restate the previous move.

Once again, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to compare the three main categories of continuing speech functions in the participants' chats. The results revealed that 'append: elaborate' was highly different from 'prolong: extend' and 'prolong: enhance' (P=0). This makes clear that the Iranian youths in these contexts show great reaction when being interrupted by another interlocutor. This result is also confirmed by a great number of 'append: elaborate' (22.5%) and 'append: extend' (17.4%) produced by the participants in comparison with the number of some other 'continuing speech' functions: 'prolong: elaborate' (9.9%), 'monitor' (2.4%), and 'append: enhance' (0.23%) (see Table 5 above). Among the ones whose function is to compensate for the previous move after intervention by another speaker 'Append: elaborate' was the 'continuing speech' function applied most ('append: extend' and 'append: enhance'). However, in most cases, the subjects tried to resume their speech after being interrupted by using one of the three kinds of 'append' (elaborate/extend/enhance). Data observations revealed that the majority of these compensations (59%) occurred when the interlocutor was interrupted in the middle of his/her utterances (see example 2 below; turns 3 and 5). In case of interruption, which is not so much desirable, speakers immediately took action to recompense for the intervention caused by another chatter; this way they attempted not to lose the floor and keep track of the talk.

(2)
1 Soroush: yeah they seem.....many..but they r coloured
2 Elham modheji: lol
3 Soroush**: I want to be 70 bfore u leave**
4 Elham modheji: impossible, I don't have much time playing
5 Soroush: ***cuz I wont leave anymore....i'm going back to the start*** **(append:extend)**
6 Elham modheji: mmmmmm.. ur really strange

As far as humor was concerned, its salient characteristic was irony which that was used 8.65 percent of all chats. Irony is a form of sarcasm which is common in many genres. It is a "linguistic humor that arises out of the pragmatics of the situational context rather than through telling funny stories or parodic voices" (Lee, 2006:58). The other category of humor, verbal wit, included 1.9 percent of the humor (e.g., 'You are the apex of crazy danger', 'hahaha...She is cooking the 1 step to death'). The participants had used irony much more than verbal wit or other types of humor because this way they could express their intent more indirectly. They had also used the same technique to express their demands in a less direct way. Moreover, in order to examine whether or not these four categories of humor are independent from each other, Kruskal-Wallis test was used, which revealed that the four categories were not independent (P=0).

The results obtained from humor in this investigation (12.7%) nearly correspond to the results reported by Nastri et al. (2006, p.13) on native speakers of English (16.0%). Additionally, since irony was the salient feature of the humor applied by the Iranians, it can be concluded that the amount of humor seen in the chats is another technique for the participants to express themselves indirectly. This might, again, refer to the cultural norms of the participants who like to avoid frankness due to face saving effects unlike the native ones who preferred directness.

The most common category of paralinguistic features was abbreviation which was used in 93 percent of the participants' chats. They used different kinds of abbreviation for the ease of their web-based communication. This way they spent less time typing long words or phrases. Sometimes, they had even tried to make short words into more brief forms. Intentional misspelling, repeated punctuation, and emoticons are used to express the chatters' instant feelings and emotions. Since

chat interlocutors are deprived of facial expressions, and different voice tones and modes, they need to use such paralinguistic features in order to transfer their immediate mood to their partner. In addition, many participants used intentional misspellings and repeated punctuation in order to emphasize some facts and ideas so that they could attract the other interlocutor's attention to what they were about to discuss. This technique came out practical since it resulted in immediate reactions by the other interactant.

Emoticons, comprising 48% of all paralinguistic features, were the other device for showing emotions in participants' chats although they were used much less than intentional misspellings (81%) and repeated punctuation (64%). When talking about emoticons in this study, it is meant text-based emoticons, since photographic emoticons were not the focus of this study due to the reasons mentioned in the results section. The participants had preferred the other paralinguistic features to emoticons. They found other devices more effective to express their emotions and to attract their partners' attention. The reason might be that other paralinguistic devices seem more expressive of the interactant's feelings; besides, they put more emphasis on the parts of the interaction which the interlocutor intends to highlight (e.g, 'I **HAAAAAATE** him. He's such a sticktight'). This example reflects and emphasizes the great amount of hatred that the interactant has to someone else. However, the subjects used two kinds of emoticons much more than the others: **:-)** and **:-(**. The first one was used to show happiness and satisfaction, while the second sadness and dissatisfaction. The other common emoticons were: **:-o** used as an exclamation sign, **;-)** for showing naughtiness, and **:-*** used as a kiss.

These results were in harmony with the results of the study conducted by Huffaker and Calvert (2005). They examined issues of online identity and language use among 47 native teenagers who had created their own weblogs. They investigated emoticons as a device for expressing emotions, and divided emoticons into five types: 1) happy, 2) sad, 3) angry, 4) flirty, and 5) tired. The descriptive analysis revealed that more than half of the total population of bloggers had used emoticons in their blogs (63%). Emoticons used in the blogs were overwhelmingly the happy type (53%). Sad emoticons (30%) were also very popular. However, the other emoticons were rarely used by the participants (p. 13).

Conclusion

The fact that among the nine categories of opening speech function shown above, the overall use of 'statement: opinion' and 'statement: fact' was much more than the other categories can suggest the participants´ willingness to construct personalized web-based messages with informational and expressive purposes to regulate conversation, maintain social connections, and express their identity.

As for the humor, it was shown that the native participants somewhat exaggerated their speech in order to be playful during their chats with their colleagues while the Iranian ones primarily used humorous elements in order to create more intimacy.

Another fact worth of consideration is the irritation caused to the Iranian youths when being interrupted, which is confirmed by a great number of 'append: elaborate' and 'append: extend' they produced, which themselves were used, among other functions, to compensate for the previous move after intervention by another speaker. The learners have to be taught to raise their level of tolerance of other cultural norms and do not get easily offended if they are interrupted by others as the same thing can happen to them when others´ turns of chats come up. Here it is possible to take Smith, Cadiz and Burkhalter's (2001) advice to use threaded chat instead of standard one. The key privilege of threaded chat over the traditional one is that turns are organized into turn and response structures called threads that can grow to any size (p. 7). Thus, proper use of threaded chat eliminates the possibility of ruptured sequences of turns: turns are linked directly to the turn they are intended to respond to.

While teaching such chat elements to the Iranian second language speakers of English, it is suggested that teachers start with the speech functions found frequently in the participants' chats such as 'statement: opinion' or 'question: closed: fact' since it is expected that learners have the tendency to learn these functions more easily and accordingly, in a shorter time. Then, they can shift to those which are less frequent in their conversations but more frequent in the conversations of native speakers. Teachers should also be wary of the pragmatic and cultural norms of the native context as some tricky aspects like frankness and non-ironic ones are the preferred values by the native speakers. Since teaching humor is by nature a hard task, pedagogical consciousness raising exercises can

play a grave role in making foreign language learners aware of different types and functions of humor.

Received 20 August 2009
Accepted 25 December 2009

References

Chang, Y. (2007). The potential of synchronous text-based computer-mediated-communication for second language acquisition, *Issues in Information Systems*, 8, 355-361.

Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cox, G., Carr, T., & Hall, M. (2004). Evaluating the use of synchronous communication in two blended courses, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 20, 183-193.

Derks, D., Bos, A. E. R., & Grumbkow, J. (2007). Emoticons and social interaction on the Internet: the importance of social context, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, 842-849.

Eggins, E., & Slade, D. (1997). *Analysing Casual Conversation*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

Huffaker, D. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2005). Gender, identity, and language use in teenage blogs, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10, 1-26.

Im, Y., & Lee, O. (2004). Pedagogical implications of online discussion for preservice teacher training, *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 36, 155-170.

Laurinen, L. I., & Marttunen, M. J. (2007). Written arguments and collaborative speech acts in practicing the argumentative power of language through chat debates, *Computers and Composition*, 24, 230-246.

Lee, D. (2006). Humor in spoken academic discourse, *NUCB Journal of Language Culture and Communication*, 8, 49-68.

Nastri, J., Peña, J., & Hancock, J. (2006). The construction of away messages: a speech act analysis, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11, 1-22.

Negretti, R. (1999). Web-based activities and SLA: a conversation analysis research approach, *Language Learning and Technology*, 3, 75-87.

Pena-Shaef, J., Martin, W., & Gray, G. (2001). An epistemological framework for analyzing student interactions in computer-mediated communication environments, *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 12, 41-68.

Psathas, G. (1995). *Conversation Analysis: the study of talk-in-interaction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Reed, D., & Ashmore, M. (2000). The naturally-occurring chat machine, *Journal of Media and Culture*, 3, 1-5.

Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shokouhi, H., & Kamyab, G. (2004). *Analyzing Discourse: multivariant perspectives*. Ahvaz: Shahid Chamran University Press.

Simpson, J. (2005). Conversational floors in synchronous text-based CMC discourse, *Discourse Studies*, 7, 337-361.

Smith, B., Cadiz, J., & Burkhalter, B. (2001). Conversation trees and threaded chats.
Retrieved from*: http://byronandgen.net/research/chatandconversation.htm*

Appendix A

The chat extracts below are analyzed in terms of opening and continuing speech functions. Different kinds of continuing speech functions are shown in bold.

(1)

eminem_rapbaz_lll: Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyy	**attending**
eminem_rapbaz_lll: say sth command	
shiiiiiiiirin: do u like him question:closed:opinion	
eminem_rapbaz_lll: sure	
eminem_rapbaz_lll: like my mom	**prolong: extend**
shiiiiiiiirin: wow	
eminem_rapbaz_lll: his my love	**append: extend**
shiiiiiiiirin: really? Question:closed:opinion	
shiiiiiiiirin: he's so weet	**append: extend**
eminem_rapbaz_lll: his my life	**append: enhance**
eminem_rapbaz_lll: what's up in Isfahan?	**Question: open: fact**
shiiiiiiiirin: what do u mean?	**Question: open: opinion**
shiiiiiiiirin: nothing special	
eminem_rapbaz_lll: what's news	
shiiiiiiiirin: the election	

(2)

batman_shz2007: Hello Sweetheat	**attending**

batman_shz2007: how are You My Lady? **attending**

golbanooo23: hi honey

batman_shz2007: read my offs command

golbanooo23: okkkkkkk :-)

golbanooo23: done statement:fact

golbanooo23: so how u doin' on ur weekend ? **question: open: fact**

batman_shz2007: well, actually I feel ok

batman_shz2007: well fed

batman_shz2007: and with chill good humor

golbanooo23: ay ay ay

batman_shz2007: and now humor getting warmer and warmer **statement: opinion**

golbanooo23: hmmm , lets see when its getting hot **prolong: enhance**

batman_shz2007: I think it's gonna be soon **statement: opinion**

batman_shz2007: so How are You My Dear ? attending

golbanooo23: hmmm , im fine , and i come here to get better **prolong: extend**

golbanooo23: so what r we going to talk about , or r we going to talk? **question: open: opinion**

Appendix B

The chat extracts below are analyzed in terms of humor produced by the participants. The humorous parts are emphasized in bold.

(1)

T: lol
D**: i'm clean as a bird**
D: **still eagle form**
T: **hmmm , and u have all those feathers around ya :D ?**
D: **yeah they seem ... many .. but they are coloured .. i think it's all left from.. fairys**
T: lol
D: i want u to be 70 before u leave
T: lol , thats impossible , i dont have much time playing
D: cuz i won't leave anymore .. i';m going back to the start .. here ... so i will play all
the time

(2)

sohailmitr: u can improve ur english by talking to me..
poya: No problem, tell me about your education but be honest OK?
sohailmitr: ok
sohailmitr: wait plz
poya: Your educations?
poya: **!!! you are thinking about your education??? Ok, think deeplyyyyyy**
poya: i'm waiting for the answer
sohailmitr: pl wait
poya: what are you doing? I have to go.
poya: I'm going!!!
sohailmitr: hi...sorry to b away

(3)

GOL gol: I was really busy last week
GOL gol: sorry
thecapricornstar: ok
GOL gol: How are u?
thecapricornstar: fine thanx
thecapricornstar: did u find me anything helpful?\

thecapricornstar: 4 the project
: ***GOL*** gol: Sorry
GOL gol: I was really busy
GOL gol: Please give me a time
thecapricornstar: ok
thecapricornstar: thanx
thecapricornstar: **what were u doing during these days???**
GOL gol: **Just Sleeping**
thecapricornstar: **so u were really busy as u said ;-/**
GOL gol: **yes Very busy. Lol**

(4)
M: I went to a market with my parents
M: and then it was almost dinner time
M: so I've cooked something
T: hmmm , as i remember , u did it once again while we were chatting , and u explained a few about that
M: yeah
M: **but today I made a dynamite sauce**
T: **hmmm ?!**
M: **only I ate it without any trouble**
T: **oooh**
M: **but my parents told me it's wayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy too hot**
T: **u r a damn bastard , i bet i will never try anything made by ya**
M: I didn't suspect it will be so hot

(5)
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): **She's scared getting in the car with me sometimes I think, lol**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **Hahahaha**
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): **Sahar was disappointed in me though when she saw me with her**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: yeah she said that
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): **Raana was freaken hot bro**
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): too bad **she smokes like a chimeney**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **hahahahahaha**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **hahahahahaha**

GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **and swears every two seconds**
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): really, well she was always quite around me
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **just wait till she talks**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **just wait till she talks**
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): **hahaha :D**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: sry bro
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: have to run be back in a bit
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): np, I'll ttyl bro
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): take care

Appendix C
The chat extracts below are analyzed in terms of paralinguistic features which are highlighted in bold.

(1)
M: **hmmm** maybe I should read
T: **tyt**
M: **brb**
M: come on, I have never thought about myself as an very handsome man
T: **u** know why?
T: **Bcuz u r** silly
T: **u r** Awsom man
M: about politics....
M: **hmmm**
M: thats really fuck if this kind of Manifesto or whatever shoudl it be called will pass the vote **:-)**
M: thtas a goddamn fuck shit ass damn .... cant find proper words
T: yep , if it happen , economy get fuck
M: I know probably
T: and there will be a war for sure
T: **lol**

(2)
shilly_shally: Hello? I know you're there. I can see you!
rosenoire707: **lol**
shilly_shally: my pleasure **u** laughed
shilly_shally may i know **ur asl plzzzz**

rosenoire707: 1st **u plzzzzzzzzz**
shilly_shally: i am male 22 **Teh**
shilly_shally: now its **ur** turn
rosenoire707: 22**f ;)**

(3)
M: but today I made a dynamite sauce
T: **hmmm !?!**
M: only I ate it without any trouble
T: **oooooh!**
M: but my parents told me it's **wayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy** too hot
T: **u r** a damn bastard , i bet i will never try anything made by **ya**

(4)
eminem_rapbaz_lll: one's number is up means end of the work the somebody
eminem_rapbaz_lll: hot water means bad problem
azi_shiraz2003: **aha**
azi_shiraz2003: **thanx**
eminem_rapbaz_lll: get the ball rolling means start working
azi_shiraz2003: **I NO THIS ONEEEEEEEEEE**
eminem_rapbaz_lll: where is the beef
eminem_rapbaz_lll: can u say that?
azi_shiraz2003: **mmmmmmmm... :-o**

(5)
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): too bad she smokes like a chimeney
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **hahahahahaha**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **hahahahahaha**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: and swears every two seconds
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): really, well she was always quite around me
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO : just wait till she talks
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: just wait till she talks
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): **hahaha :D**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: **sry bro**
GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO ... GO SENS GO: have to run be back in a bit
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): **np**, I'll ttyl **bro**
Mehdi===> (6)(6)(6): take care