English in online discussions forums: novel trends in language use

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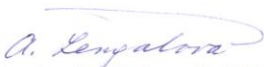Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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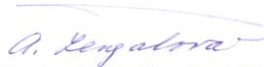Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **4. května 2012**

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ABSTRAKT

Anglický jazyk v online diskuzních fórech: nové trendy v použití jazyka

Moderní komunikační technologie rapidně nabírají na popularitě a jedny z nich jsou online diskuzní fóra. Pro ty je charakteristických několik jazykových jevů, jako jsou například zkratky, emotikony, opomínání velkých písmen, interpunkce a apostrofů. Tyto jazykové znaky jsou popsány v teoretické části a poté analyzovány v praktické části. Cílem této práce je dokázat, že věk účastníků je nutné brát v úvahu při posuzování a vyhodnocování změn v anglickém jazyce, které se objevují v online diskuzních fórech. Závěr je: věk účastníků hraje významnou roli a je nutné jej brát v úvahu při posuzování a vyhodnocování změn v anglickém jazyce, které se objevují v online diskuzních fórech.

Klíčová slova: online diskuzní fóra, jazyk různých generací, lingvistika, zkratky, emotikony

ABSTRACT

English in online discussions forums: novel trends in language use

Modern communication technologies are rapidly gaining in popularity and online discussion forums are one of them. There are several linguistic features typical for online discussion forums. For example: abbreviations, emoticons or omission of capital letters, punctuation or apostrophes. These linguistic features are described in the theoretical part and then analysed in the practical part. The aim of this thesis is to prove that age of the participants in online discussion forums must be taken into account when evaluating changes in the English language appearing in online discussion forums. The conclusion is: the age of participants plays a significant role and is relevant when evaluating the changes in the English language appearing in online discussion forums.

Keywords: online discussion forums, language of different generations, linguistics, abbreviations, emoticons

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"'I am' is reportedly the shortest sentence in the English language. Could it be that 'I do' is the longest sentence?" — George Carlin (1937–2008), American comedian

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Since the first time I used the Internet and later explored many of its possibilities I have become a huge fan. When choosing a thesis topic I decided to combine my interest in the Internet and everything around it with the English language in my bachelor thesis.

After the invention and the spread of writing and printing, nothing has caused so many changes in the language and the way we communicate with each other, like the arrival of the Internet. Almost every day people face these changes, willingly or not, directly or indirectly. Whether it is a job related e-mail or IM (Instant Message) from our friends or family members, participating in chats or discussion forums, playing on-line games or simply by surfing the Internet, the Internet is interconnected with all that we do.

In the past few years a lot has been said about the negative impacts of the Internet, especially Instant Messaging (IM), on the English language. Linguists, such as Jean Aitchison, Baron Naomi or David Crystal, focus on the impact of the Internet and modern communication technologies on the English language. They are mainly interested in the use of abbreviations, emoticons, overuse of capital letters and punctuation marks or their complete omission in chats, e-mails and other modern communication technologies.

The thesis deals with the online discussion forums, at field that I believe has been slightly overlooked by linguists in comparison to the language of IM or e-mails. The thesis is divided into two parts, theoretical and practical. The theoretical part provides general information about communication on the Internet and focuses on online discussion forums and their predecessors. Grammatical features of online discussion forums, such as abbreviations, punctuation marks, etc, are described. The last part describes a phenomenon called "memes" which is closely related to online discussion forums and which is analysed as part of my corpus in the practical part.

For research in the practical part I visited numerous online discussion forums to find suitable material with a sufficient amount of data for analysis. Three different discussions, based on age of their members, are analysed: teenagers and young people (16 - 26), adults (26-36), and senior people (50+). The research focuses on the following: average length of post (message), number of used abbreviations and emoticons, omission of capital letters, punctuation marks and apostrophes. Every part is analysed in all three discussions and the results are compared. The second part of the practical half focuses on the language of users' nicknames in online discussion forums and the language of memes. The aim of this

thesis is to prove that age of the participants is relevant when considering changes in the English language appearing in the online discussion forums.

I.   THEORY

1 LANGUAGE AND THE INTERNET

Language is a dynamic system. It evolves, changes, and also ceased to exist. Language is used by people and people change; therefore, the language has to change with them to fulfil their needs (Aitchison 2001, 2). The major inventions that had the greatest impact on the language are writing, printing, wireless communication and lately the Internet. The language on the Internet, especially in online discussion forums, is analysed in this thesis.

1.1 The Internet

The Internet, spread widely in 1990s, has been the latest invention. It combines almost all possible types of communications. A video chat is a substitution to face-to-face communication, e-mails are a new form of letters, online discussion forums can be seen as a new form of debate. However, the Internet also brought downsides. The first negative aspects of modern communication arose, such as a lack of face-to-face communication and the obsessive problems or even addiction to the Internet. Personal information can sometimes be freely accessible by other people. The vast amount of information, especially relevant data, is becoming more and more difficult. We are experiencing a sort of an "information overflow" and the increasing amount of relevant information available is becoming a problem, because it is getting more and more difficult to filter and sift through them. According to Crystal, the long-term linguistic changes caused by the Internet and whether they are positive or negative is too soon to evaluate (as cited in Lomas, 2011).

The use of language varies based on where and by whom it is used. Language in tabloids differs from language in scientific or legal journals, sport commentaries need to be distinguished from Presidential speeches, linguistic features in formal letters are dissimilar to the features in informal ones, different rules apply in a conversation with friends in a pub than in the conversation with a politician or a policeman. The same applies to the language on the Internet (Crystal 2006, 6-8).

The Internet opened the door for people from all around the world to share their knowledge and participate in various discussions on all kinds of topics. People with different social backgrounds, different educations, ages, genders, interests, people with specific slangs or jargons, etc. For linguists, psychologist or anyone else interested in language or human behaviour, the Internet is a source of unimaginable amounts of data to analyse. This thesis focuses on the language in online discussion forums and aims to prove that age of the participants is relevant when considering changes in the English language.

2   COMMUNICATION ON THE INTERNET

The Internet provides its users with a wide range of different tools for communication. Types of electronic communication can be divided into two groups; synchronous and asynchronous. **Synchronous** takes place in a real time, it is a direct communication. To participate in this type of communication, all users have to be present at the same time. Individual users can join and leave anytime they feel like, the ongoing conversation will not be terminated, unless all users leave (chats, instant messaging, multiplayer online games). **Asynchronous** form of communication does not require all the participants to be present at the same time, messages (posts) are stored on the site and can be viewed any time later (online discussion forums, e-mails, text and voice messages, web sites, social networks, blogs) (Baron 2008, 14).

The second aspect is related to the number of people participating in a specific conversation and it is called the **audience scope**. The communication can be from one person to another, such as Instant Messaging (IM), a conversation between two people. The other type is from one person to many, such as chats, online discussion forums, blogs, YouTube, Twitter, social networks, and so on. The message, article, etc., posted by a single person can be read, seen or heard by countless online users. For example one tweet (message on Twitter) from a famous actor or musician can be seen by hundreds of thousands of people (Baron 2008, 14).

2.1   Online discussion forums

Online discussion forums are going to be the focus of my research in the practical part. By analysing linguistic behaviour in them I will try to prove my hypothesis that age of the participants is relevant when considering changes in the English language. Several parts of online discussion forums require a certain amount of technical skills with computers and the Internet to successfully operate them. Older people, especially seniors, often represent the group with the lowest computer skills compared with young people. I believe their inexperience with computers and the Internet may be partially the reason for their different language behaviour in online discussion forums.

Online discussion forums are one of the types of communication on the Internet. Communication on forums is asynchronous and the audience scope is one-to-many: every post on forums is sent by an individual and viewed by many other users.

Online discussion forums can metaphorically be described as a virtual state: a state with its own population hierarchy, rules and policies with severe consequences if broken, a relatively simple democratic electoral system, and sometimes with specific slang or a special language rules for a given forum. In some ways it is similar to conferences or debates (Crystal 2006, 5-6).

How online discussion forums work, what they all share in common, and their rules and policies are described in this chapter.

2.1.1 Structure

The vast majority of forums follow very similar patterns in a structure of categorizing posts and members. Structure of forums can be compared to the way files are organized in a computer. The computer represents the forum, the hard-disc is an equivalent to the categories, every hard-disc (category) contains folders (sub-forums). Folders can contain additional folders, like sub-forums can have additional sub-forums. The files stand for the topics (threads) and finally, the content of the files is a substitution for posts. This concept might be at first slightly confusing for people not familiar with computers (Crystal 2006, 135).

The users' organization can be separate in two categories; non-registered are classified as visitors and hosts, and registered as **users**. Registered users then can go through more positions on forums' hierarchy.

Administrators (admins) are at the top. They define and manage rules, they can promote or demote users to moderators, create or delete categories, threads or posts, etc. Administrators must be technically familiar with online discussion forums, computers and the Internet to be successful. Based on a reputation, users can be promoted to **moderators**. Moderators have their own ranks, e.g. the lowest ranks can moderate only one thread while the highest have no limitations. Their role is to keep threads clean from spam and inappropriate posts. If necessary whole threads can be locked and no additional post is possible to add. They move threads to different categories, answer users' questions, etc. To become a moderator a user has to show, among other qualities, adequate language skills (Crystal 2006, 138-139).

2.1.2 Common features

Almost all forums have approximately similar features for registered users. Profile page, where personal information like contact, hobby, address, etc. can be filled in. Other forum

members can be added to friend or ignore lists. Members can vote in polls and subscribe to favourite threads so they will not miss any new post. Use of attachments, like pictures or videos in posts is enabled, as well as links to other websites. The most significant features of forums are an avatar, a nickname, and a signature. Additional features can be; search function, visual customisation of forum, private messages, etc. Many of these features require a certain amount of technical skills (Fusetalk n.d.).

An **avatar** is a picture that represents the user's alter ego, it is usually shown on the left side of every post made by the user. A **nickname** (nick) is a substitution for the actual name of a person. Nicknames are unique on forums, there cannot be the same nickname used twice. A **signature** (sig) is at the bottom of every post, containing mostly quotations by famous people, interesting post by other member, or another picture (Crystal 2006, 137-139).

Uploading (send from the user's computer to the computer of the specific forum) a picture might be a simple task for a teenager but a few hours struggle for a senior. Young people can also utilize their knowledge of computers in the creation of linguistically interesting nicknames. To what degree is a creation of nicknames influenced by technical skills is linguistically analysed in the practical part.

2.1.3 Rules and Policies

Every forum has its own set of rules and guidelines. Administrators and moderators are responsible for the rules being followed and have multiple tools to achieve it. The regular users can also help maintain the order by reporting any rule violation to moderators. The most common rules are; do not post inappropriate, offensive, or illegal content. The rules can be greatly extended, there are forums that do not allow its users to post pictures or links to other web sites (MMO-Champion n.d.a).

When users break any of the rules given by the forums they participate in, the following steps are usually taken. First, a private message is sent to the user with a warning and specification of what rules were broken. After the second time the user breaks the rules, a two-day ban (access to the forum is prohibited) is given. The next step is a permanent ban (perma ban). The ban applies to the IP address (an address of a computer on the Internet), therefore, a new registration for the user will not be allowed. This is again very similar to conferences or debates, where members can be expelled (MMO-Champion n.d.b).

All forums are very similar in structure, features they provide for their users, and they all have almost identical rules and policies. Online discussion forums might not be user-friendly for older and senior people. I believe this might be reflected in their language use in online discussion forums. They might not know how to format a text, how to add pictures (memes), how to provide a link to other websites, how to create linguistically interesting nicknames or how to use emoticons.

3   PREDECESSOR OF ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

As briefly mentioned before, many of the new types of electronic communication have some predecessors. E-mail is considered the new form of the posted/paper letter, video chats can be seen as daily face-to-face conversations, and the closest type of communication, similar to online discussion forums, would be a conference or debate. They both share certain similarities, but at the same time they are very different. The changes brought by the Internet range from very positive to very negative (Crystal 2006, 99-100).

3.1   Similarities

Online discussion forums share the following similarities with their predecessors. The **audience scope** is the same. It is always a communication between more than two people. The message from a single person is intended to reach a broad audience. Every participant can read and/or hear the message, even though it might not be completely relevant to all of them.

The discussion is always about a **specific topic**. The course of a debate at a business conference will be about business related matters and the thread named *sixty-nine Chevy* will be with a high probability about the models of Chevrolets made in 1969. Rarely users go off-topic and if they do it repeatedly, they might be banned from the forum or expelled in the case of the conference. The topic is always known, whether it is a name of the conference or the name of the thread, all participants have an idea what in the particular conference/debate or thread will be discussed. Taking the discussion off-topic is not acceptable either in conferences or in online discussions.

Rules for both types of discussion are, to a certain degree, very similar. Participants are familiarised with the rules and policies before entering a discussion forum or conference. The most commonly broken rules are inappropriate behaviour, as well as strong and abusive language, which can not be tolerated. As mentioned before, frequently taking conversation off-topic is against the rules. The violation of these rules may result in temporary or permanent expulsion/ban from the discussion group, prohibiting the person from participating in the current and all future discussions (MMO-Champion n.d.b).

Another feature of face-to-face conversations that can be seen in online discussion forums is **Communication accommodation theory** (CAT). The CAT suggests that no matter what social background participants come from or what style they are used to

writing in, they might accommodate to each other by using similar words, abbreviations, slang, or jargon. With this approach the participants try to identify with the group or with the certain members of the group they find interesting. This is mostly reflected within one thread, or can occasionally penetrate into few more threads. It is important to note, that the change is not permanent and often diminishes after the thread/threads are no longer active. The CAT is not a universal law. Not every thread shows signs of accommodation and if it does then not everyone in the thread is a part of it (Giles, J. Coupland and N. Coupland 1991, 1-3).

There are more minor similarities. Participants can question each other, they can agree or disagree, quote each other, vote if necessary, choose whom they respond to, etc.

3.2   Differences

Online form of discussions bring several differences. The biggest difference is in form. Communication at debates and conferences is spoken while the online discussion takes a written form. Messages in online discussion forums are transmitted through letters and therefore spelling, grammar, text organization, font colour and size, use of abbreviations, etc. play an important role. In a spoken language the speaker has wide range of verbal and non-verbal tools at his disposal, body language such as gestures, intonations, pauses, speaker's visual appearance, and many more. A speaker can address questions, provide additional explanations and examples, or change the order of the presentation in real time. Audience attention is also crucial for speakers to deliver their message. Speech is immediate and the audience cannot go back to what was previously said unless it is recorded. The written form provides readers with the extra benefit of being able to take their time and read it as often as they need to and when they need to.

The online discussion is **asynchronous**. Members can participate at their leisure since their constant presence is not required. Messages (posts) are stored in the forum and can be read any time later. People from all around the world can participate and do not need to be personally presented, just like how it is with conferences and debates. This fact allows numerous people to join in discussions on almost every possible topic with other users from the opposite side of the globe. Asynchronous type of communication also allows users to take time for their response. They can do their own research and sort out their thoughts before writing a post or a response to some other user's questions. Threads in online discussion forums can last even for several years before they are abandoned while

conferences or debates usually last only several hours at best. The situation in conferences and debates is quite the opposite. Every individual speaker has limited time to prepare a comment as well as time to speak. This feature makes communication in online discussion forums more like a face-to-screen than a face-to-face conversation (Baron 2008, 14).

Asynchronous nature of online discussion forums allow users to freely **join and leave** when they feel like. Absence for a few hours or days is commonly expected. Because of this fact other participants in an ongoing thread will find it nearly impossible to see how much time every respondent spent writing their post. The situation in conferences and debates is the exact opposite. Some conferences and debates even forbid leaving the room before the appointed break, unless it is urgent. In online discussion forums users are not bound to be presented and can join and leave whenever they want to (Crystal 2006, 173).

Contributions to discussions have a **pragmatic effect**. In face-to-face conversation the effect is direct and immediate. The online discussion forums store all messages (posts) for months, some even for years, or individual members can make their own records. Situation in which one user quotes some other user's few month old post is not at all rare. Every user of online discussion forums is aware of this fact and behaves accordingly. Media are usually known for this approach to discredit politicians by reporting certain pieces from an old interview (Crystal 2006, 140).

In conferences and debates conversations are under the **turn-taking** rule or what some call "getting the floor". In a conversation with 3 or more people, the one who starts talking first may decide who will talk next. The current speaker might use sentences such as "Jane, what do you think about it?" If the first speaker does not choose someone specific to talk next, there will be a competition. It is possible for more people to start talking at the same time, which results in one of two scenarios. All speakers stop talking and they give up their turn or some of them start increasing their voice(s). The situation gets more complicated with more people in the conversation. This cannot happen in online discussion forums. There is no such thing as an interruption or giving someone the floor/turn. Every user can write a post without asking for the floor (Baron 2008, 48).

The Internet gives people **anonymity**. This also applies to online discussion forums where users create their own accounts with a nickname. Most of the times users are not required to fill out their real name, but if they are, there is almost no possibility for the website to clarify the given information. Anonymity allows users to behave in a way that they would not in real life. Users can create multiple accounts and pretend to be someone

else. Posting in one thread with two different accounts may alter the course of a discussion. Anonymity also hides or can mystify the age, gender, and education of individual members in online discussion forums. Most of the time the worst consequence for their actions is a permanent ban (Crystal 2006, 172).

The average **length** of a post in online discussion forums is three to five lines. In conferences the length of a speech is greater. The long posts are often met with the following sample replies: TL;DR (tool long; did not read), wall of text (response to a text that is very long and does not use paragraphs), etc (Crystal 2006, 150).

Stylistically, the speech in academic conferences or in politician debates tends to be much more formal than in a conversation among kids after school or with a family at dinner. More attention is paid to a pronunciation. In conferences, words are pronounced slowly and more carefully to avoid potential misunderstandings. Vocabulary and syntax is affected, as well. Politically correct terms and phrases (such as "intellectually disabled" instead of "retarded") are used in formal conversations. Formal speech is also less likely to be filled with abbreviations and contractions ("want to" instead of "wanna"). Most of the time speakers do not even realise they slightly alter their language differently in formal situations and differently in casual conversations. The nature of language in online discussion forums tends to be mainly informal. There are some exceptions but they are rather rare (Aitchison 2001, 40).

From the linguistics point of view, online discussion forums are a place of tremendous amounts of written language. There are thousands of forums in the English language. The number of members is in the millions, while the overall amount of posts is counted in the billions and it is rising every single day (Big Boards n.d.).

The amount of written text from one forum can be compared to the average length of a typical novel. Great Novels have in an average slightly under 140,000 words, for example "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe has 166,662 words; "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Bronte has 107,945 words; or "Fahrenheit 451" by Ray Bradbury has only 46,118 words (WordPress 2008). The average length of a single post is 54 words (see chapter 6.1). According to statistics from (Big Boards n.d.), the number of posts in the most active forum (Gaia Online - Anime role-playing community) is 2,029,803,069. There are approximately 109,609,365,726 words posted in Gaia forum, which is approximately equal to 657,674 books of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and it is from only one forum. This is a rough

estimation based on a small sample of posts but it gives the impression of how many words are written in online discussion forums.

Almost everything that has been written on forums is publicly and freely accessible. This fact makes forums an interesting place for linguists, sociologists, psychologists or anyone else interested in language. Forums can serve as a valuable data source for various types of analysis.

Unlike books, magazines, or newspapers, online discussion forums do not go through any kind of editorial or publishing process, which leaves the writing unaffected (Crystal 2006, 15).

4 SPECIFIC LANGUAGE FEATURES USED IN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

This chapter provides theoretical information about language features typical in online discussion forums. These features are analysed in the practical part and are represented by abbreviations (shortened words), emoticons, and omission of capital letters, punctuation marks and apostrophes.

4.1 Abbreviations

There are many ways how words can be shortened in English. Shortening words in English is nothing new and did not come with the Internet. Abbreviations were very popular hundreds of years ago. There were more than 13,000 abbreviations in Middle Ages (Lundmark 2001, 47). The criticism of abbreviation use is nothing new, as well. In the early 18th century, Jonathan Swift wrote "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, & Ascertaining the English Tongue" where he says:

"...I mean the Poets, from the Time of the Restoration. These Gentlemen, although they could not be insensible how much our Language was already overstocked with Monosyllables; yet, to same Time and Pains, introduced that barbarous Custom of abbreviating Words, to fit them to the Measure of their Verses...." (Swift 1712)

The most typical way of shortening words in online discussion forums is abbreviation. Abbreviations can be divided into four categories; acronym, initialism, clipping, and blend (McArthur 1992, 3).

4.1.1 Acronym

An acronym is a type of abbreviation. It is composed of the first letters of the words that are being shortened. These letters then create a new word which is also pronounced as a word. For example: *NATO* (**N**orth **A**tlantic **T**reaty **O**rganization) pronounced as 'Nay-toe' (McArthur 1992, 3).

4.1.2 Initialism

Another type of abbreviation is initialism. Like an acronym's use of initial letters, initialism differs only in its separate pronunciation of those letters. For example *BBC* (**B**ritish **B**roadcasting **C**orporation) is pronounce as 'bee-bee-cee' (McArthur 1992, 3). And the examples from my research corpus:

*I **lol** at the people who think this will require a hard drive...* lol stands for Laugh Out Loud and it is pronounce 'el-ou-el'.

OMG**! BACON**!!!!!!! OMG stands for Oh My God and it is pronounce 'ou-em-dzii'.

4.1.3   Clipping

In the process of clipping, part of the word is removed. The word retains the same meaning and the same word class. The result is often a one syllable long word. Sometimes the initial part of a word is removed. For example, *phone* is a shortened version of *telephone*. In some cases the ending of a word is omitted. For example, *gas* is a shortened version of *gasoline*. (McArthur 1992, 3).

4.1.4   Blend

A blend word is a word combined from the parts of other words. For example, *Oxbridge* is combination of ***Ox**ford* and *Cam**bridge***, or *motel* is a combination of ***m**otor* and ***h**otel* (McArthur 1992, 3).

All forms of abbreviations and shortening words in general are the evidence of the tendency to save time by creating and using these economic expressions. According to Crystal, every 10th word in chats is abbreviated (YouTube 2009, David Crystal on It's Only a Theory S01E02). The number of abbreviations used by different generations in online discussion forums is analysed in the practical part of this thesis.

4.2   Emoticons

An emoticon consists of characters and symbols found on a computer keyboard in a specific order to create a picture or a facial expression. The most popular emoticons represent facial expressions, therefore the name 'smileys' or 'smilies'. These emoticons are mostly read sideways, with the head turn to the left. For example: :), :-) stands for a simple smile, ;) stands for a wink, or +:-) stands for a priest. Sometimes they are read straight ahead, for example: (^_^) (Crystal 2008, 38). Often these symbols are automatically transformed by the computer into the form of pictures. For example :) might in some online discussion forums be automatically changed into 😊. Emoticons in online discussions bring the communication one step closer to face-to-face communication.

Use and especially creation of emoticons requires a certain amount of technical skills with computers, mainly the knowledge of what symbol and character combinations can be created.

Use of emoticons in online discussion forums and what generations prefer them the most is analysed in the practical part.

4.3   Omission of capital letters

Another linguistics feature typical for online discussion forums is omission of capital letters and their overuse. The main rules for using capital (upper case) letters are following (all examples are from my research corpus):

The first word at the beginning of a sentence is capitalised.

That looks utterly annoying.

Personal names are capitalised.

Victoria, I think you meant to say 'soil structure' will be damaged?

Personal pronoun I is always capitalised.

I have to say...

Days of the week, months of the year are capitalised. But not the names of seasons.

Not an April fools... this is a legit concept video.

Geographical names are capitalised.

I'm in Texas USDA Zone 8b.

Religions, ethnic groups and nationality are capitalised.

Are you Scots? 🙂*Me, too.*

Names of the planets and stars are capitalised. If the words *earth*, *sun*, and *moon* are not used in an astronomical context they are not capitalised. (Quirk et al. 1985, 1637)

We live on the planet Earth.

This is quick in full sun, but will work eventually in the shade.

Capital letters can also be used for emphasis or to simulate shouting and screaming.

I never got the hype around iPhone (or i<InsertWhatever>), BUT I MUST HAVE THESE GLASSES!

How often capital letters are omitted and overused is analysed in the practical part.

4.4   Omission of punctuation and apostrophes

Along with the omission of capital letters, the omission of punctuation and apostrophes is common in online discussion forums. There are many types of punctuation marks in the English language; periods, question marks, exclamation marks, colons, semicolons, hyphens, dashes, apostrophes, etc (Quirk et al. 1985, 1610). For online discussion forums omission and overuse of periods, question marks, exclamation marks, and apostrophes is common. The rest of the punctuation marks can be found sparsely in online discussion forums and therefore it is almost impossible to analyse them.

A period (also called a full stop) "." is used at the end of a sentence. Examples are from my research corpus.

I bet the slowly control your brain making you mindless zombies.

An exclamation mark "!" is used to express emotions; anger, surprise, etc. It may evoke an impression of raising one's voice or shouting and it is used for emphasis.

Google.... Helping to eliminate stupid people since 1998!

A question mark "?" is used at the end of a direct question and after a tag question. (Quirk et al. 1985, 1633-1636)

Google is controlled by the Old Gods?

The overuse of punctuation marks is used for emphasize and to draw an attention to the post. It is often used in combination with whole words written in capital letters. For example:

So I beg you...PLEASE STOP!!!

Yes it does SuperMario but why is it wrong???

An apostrophe " ' " is mainly used to create possessive forms and contractions (Quirk et al. 1985, 1636).

*I noticed two silver bikes parked in front of my **neighbor's** house across the street.*

*I **don't** remember the movie but...*

This chapter provided theoretical information about linguistic features typical for online discussion forums; abbreviations, emoticons, omission and overuse of capital letters and punctuation marks. These features and their use by different generations are afterwards analysed in the practical part.

5 MEMES

The Internet memes create a significant part of online discussion forums with teenage and young users. In online discussions they usually take a form of a picture accompanied with a short text message. These texts frequently combine all the previously described linguistic features of online discussion forums. Their texts purposely have many grammatical mistakes, they overuse capital letters and punctuation marks, and the use of abbreviation is very common.

The term "meme" was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, dating back to 1976, in his book "The Selfish Gene". Meme can be an idea, catch-phrase or behaviour that spreads from one person to another within a culture. The concept of memes transmission is very similar to genes transmission: genes transmit biological information and memes cultural information. They can also go through developmental stages similar to evolution; creation of memes, variations and mutations from existing ones might occur, they can evolve or even become extinct (Dawkins 1976, 192).

Internet memes started to first appear around the year 1996, and since then thousands of Internet memes were created. Creation of Internet memes is a competition among teenagers and young people. Who can create the best catch-phrase or who can bend as many grammatical rules as possible and still preserve the meaning.

Texts of 100 Internet memes are analysed in the practical part. An analysis of Internet memes being almost an exclusive phenomenon of online discussion forums with teenagers and young members will be provided in the practical part.

II. ANALYSIS

6 LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

This analysis focuses on the language use in online discussion forums and how different age groups use it differently. For the purpose of this analysis I have visited numerous online discussion forums.

First, I divided users of online discussion forums into three groups. The users are divided based on their age;

1. 16-26

2. 26-36

3. 50+

Second, I identified appropriate online discussion forums with the users that met my set criteria.

1. 16-26 (www.MMO-Champion.com). This forum focuses mainly on online computer gaming, and all the phenomena related to it. The forum held a poll asking for the age of its users. The poll results show that the overwhelming majority of MMO-Champion.com users are 16-26 years old (MMO-Champion 2012).

2. 26-36 (www.parentingforums.org). The forum serves as a source of information for young and future parents. The users of this forum are women as well as men. It is reported that the average age of first-time mothers is around 26 (Hendrick 2009). In marriage, men are usually 1-5 years older than their wives (Kristiansen, J. Erik 2005).

3. 50+ (www.gardenbanter.co.uk). GardenBanter is a forum for gardeners to share their ideas and knowledge. The average age of a gardener is reported to be slightly over 50 (The Horticultural Trades Association 2010).

The next step was to gather sufficient amount of data for my research. I saved 300 posts (messages) from the listed forums, 100 posts each. I believe the research corpus based on a number of individual posts is better than a sample based on the same number of words from each forum. The same amount of posts will reflect better overall amount of words in posts, average length of posts, density of abbreviations and emoticons per post, etc. These are the typical linguistic features of modern communication technologies. The aim of this analysis is to prove that different generations use these features differently and to a different degree.

Every post is composed of two types of messages, those sent by the users themselves and automatic system messages. System messages record the time when the post was made or edited, numbered order of posts, name of the thread headlined above

every post, etc. System messages, quoted posts, and signatures are not included in the research since they are automatically attached to almost every post. I saved posts sent by the users and then examined them.

I focused on an average post length, number of emoticons and abbreviations, most commonly misspelled words, and omission of punctuation, apostrophes and capital letters. These are the features typical for a language on the Internet, especially in chats. The following is the final research corpus: (numbers are rounded):

1. 16-26 age - 100 posts with approximately 3,500 words.

2. 26-36 age - 100 posts with approximately 5,000 words.

3. 50+ **age** - 100 posts with approximately 8,000 words.

Overall research corpus is 300 posts with approximately 16,500 words.

6.1 Average post length

Different length of posts is clearly visible at the first glance. Some posts are only one word or one emoticon long. On the other hand, some posts can reach the length of over 500 words. Long posts were often met with criticism and the replays such as "tl;dr" (too long, did not read) were not unusual. Lately users started to add "tl;dr" to their own posts if it reached an unusual length. In this case, the tl;dr is a few lines summary of the user's post so the others do not have to read an unusually long post and still comprehend the user's intended message. Here is the example of tl;dr that was attached to unusually long post. It almost gives the impression of a telegram.

TL;DR: Computer lags, so slow, can't run much. What's wrong?

6.1.1 16-26 group

The average post length in the first group was 37 words (202 characters). The shortest post in this group was one word (ten characters) only.

Impressive.

The longest post was 406 words (2,322 characters) long.

1) I am not sure why you think we would have to redesign our infrastructure....

This forum also had the so-called /10char rule. Every posts must be at least ten characters long in order to be posted. This rule shows that young people have tendency to write less in their posts, often only one words replies, therefore this rule was included. Implementation of this rule did not change the situation. Instead of replies such as *lol* or

this people add another meaningless symbols behind their one word reply. Here are few examples from my research corpus.

19 😃 gottaextendmypost

28.=) Hmm. My post is too short.

19, which is not enough letters :<

23, (insert random gibberish here)

Young people tend to write short sentences. Some posts used to be only one word long, therefore the /10char rule was implemented to encourage discussions and motivate young users to write longer comments.

6.1.2 26-36 group

The average post length already shows differences. The average post in this group was 47 words (252 characters) long. It is 27 % more words (24 % more characters) than in the previous 16-26 group. The shortest post in this group was again one word (three symbols) only.

Yep

The longest post was 544 words (3,003 characters) long.

I might sound redundant...but why bring religion into your child's behavior problem?...

The posts made by the users of this group are slightly longer than in the previous one. This forum does not have the /10char rule and still users rarely posted one word long comments. I think users in this group tended to be more comfortable in discussions and did not need any rule to tell them to write more.

6.1.3 50+ group

The last group with users older than 50 years of age had at the average the longest posts. The average post length in the last group was 77 words (411 characters). It is 108 % more words (203 % more characters) than in the 16-26 group and 63 % more words (63 % more characters) per post than in the 26-36 group.

The shortest posts here was two words (nine characters) long.
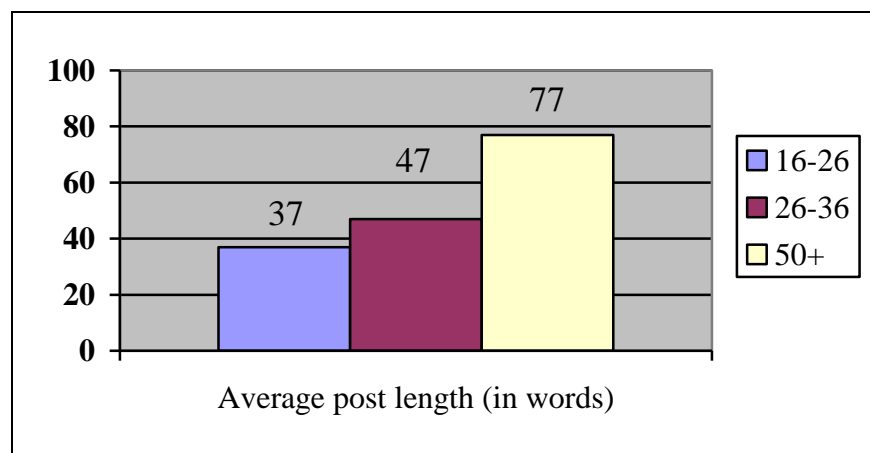
How true!

The longest post was 280 words (1,557 characters) long.

You just dodged the question. Would you mind answering the question about the locks and the presence of the baby?....

I think there are two reasons for older people and seniors to write longer posts. First, they are not familiar with computers as much as young people are so it takes them quite longer to find interesting online discussion forums, register there, create a post, etc. And they do not go through this process to post only a few words. Second, seniors do not go to work, giving them more free time. Plus, if they live alone, this might keep them company.

Graph 1: Average post length

The average post length clearly shows differences in individual groups. The first group had the shortest posts, followed by the 26-36 group and then the last is 50+ group. The differences were quite significant, the average post length in the 50+ group was more than twice higher than in the 16-26 group. I believe the reason for this is life style of members in these groups. Young people tend to hurry so they keep their posts rather short. On the other hand, seniors and older people take their time to write longer posts.

The overall average post length in online discussion forums is approximately 54 words. In chats (synchronous) the average length of a message is only 4,23 words (Crystal 2006, 162). An average post in online discussion forums is almost 13 times longer than a message in chats. I believe it is because of the asynchronous nature of online discussion forums. Users do not expect immediate response to their posts and the discussion usually lasts for several days. The situation is completely different in synchronous chats. Before a user can write one sentence there might be five new messages on the screen. More people communicate with each other at the same time and the discussions usually last for few minutes or hours.

6.2 Abbreviations

Next part of my research focuses on abbreviations (shortened words), how often they are used and what age group prefers them the most. Abbreviations such as *lol, omg, u, r,* etc. are counted. Official abbreviations such as PC (Personal Computer) or LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) and contraction you're (you are) or wanna (want to) are not counted.

6.2.1 16-26 group

The number of abbreviations in 100 posts was 11, which is quite low. The most frequent abbreviations are *lol* and *IRL*. Here are few examples from my research corpus:

*Lenses **WTF** i don't wanna look like hipster.* WTF stands for What The F*ck.

*I so want **IRL** minimap!* IRL stands for In Real Life.

*They play way too much Deus Ex: HR at Google **lol**.* lol stands for Laugh Out Loud.

 I think the result from this group is unexpected and surprising. Only 11 modern abbreviations in 100 posts is astonishingly low. I believe users do not feel the need to abbreviate as much as in Instant Messaging because the length limitation of posts in online discussion forums is considerably higher.

6.2.2 26-36 group

The frequency of abbreviations in this group was 11, which is the same number as in 16-26 group. Same as in previous group, the most frequent abbreviations is *lol*.

***LoL** please religion should be a choice...*

*can u send me the website **plz**. Plz is a shortened form of please.*

 The result here is the same as in the previous group, although this was not that unexpected. I think the reason is the same. Almost no post length limitations and the asynchronous nature of online discussion forums allow people to take their time and write a post with properly spelled words.
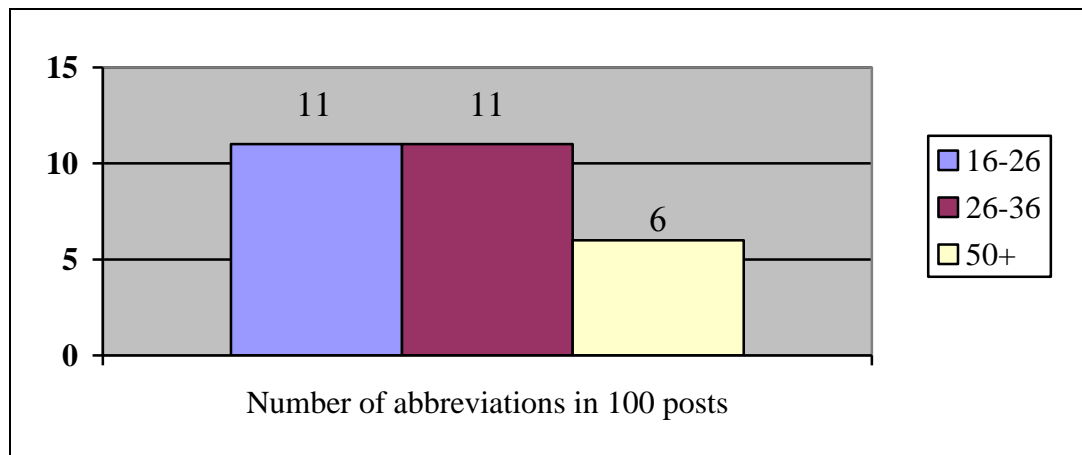
6.2.3 50+ group

Only six abbreviations were used in 100 posts. The minimum use of abbreviations was expected for this group. The abbreviations here were more variable, *lol* was here only once.

*All opinions and experiences welcome. **Thx**. Thx is a shortened form of thanks.*

*I **dunno**... I've only seen one cat in my garden. Dunno stands for I don't know.*

Graph 2: Number of abbreviations in 100 posts

The use of abbreviations in online discussion forums is unexpectedly low in all three groups representing three different generations. In 300 posts (more than 16,500 words) there were only 22 abbreviations (abbreviations such as PC, LCD, SMS, TV, etc. are not counted).

The results can be compared to the research findings of David Crystal. According to Crystal an average number of abbreviations in text messages and in chats is only 10%, in other words, every 10th word is abbreviated (YouTube 2009, David Crystal on It's Only a Theory S01E02). Crystal's number is also higher because it includes usual abbreviations such as PC, LCD, etc. Abbreviations such as *lol, omg*, etc are still new. That is why I believe they are more easily spotted than ordinary words and I think it gives an impression they are being overused.

6.3   Emoticons

This part is very similar to the previous one but instead of abbreviations it focuses on emoticons (also known as smileys). Emoticons (symbols or pictures used for facial expressions) in my research corpus appear in three different forms. The first form is the classic style; :), xD, :P. The second is a form of pictures; 🙂, 😵, 😀. The third form can be called a reference or a link form; **scratching head** or /facepalm. The last form is often used in the case the forum does not support a specific emoticon so the user uses words to re-create that specific one. For example, /facepalm refers to this emoticon 🤦 and **scratching head** to this one 🤔.

6.3.1   16-26 group

The number of all emoticons used in 100 posts in this group was 23. There were 11 classic emoticons:

Bag phone all over again xD

Number of emoticons in a picture form was eight:

Nice work OP!

Only four emoticons were in a form of link/reference:

/facepalm to you dude, no offence.

Overall 23 emoticons in 100 posts is not a high number at all. One emoticon was found in every 4th post, some posts had more than one emoticon so this number would be even higher.
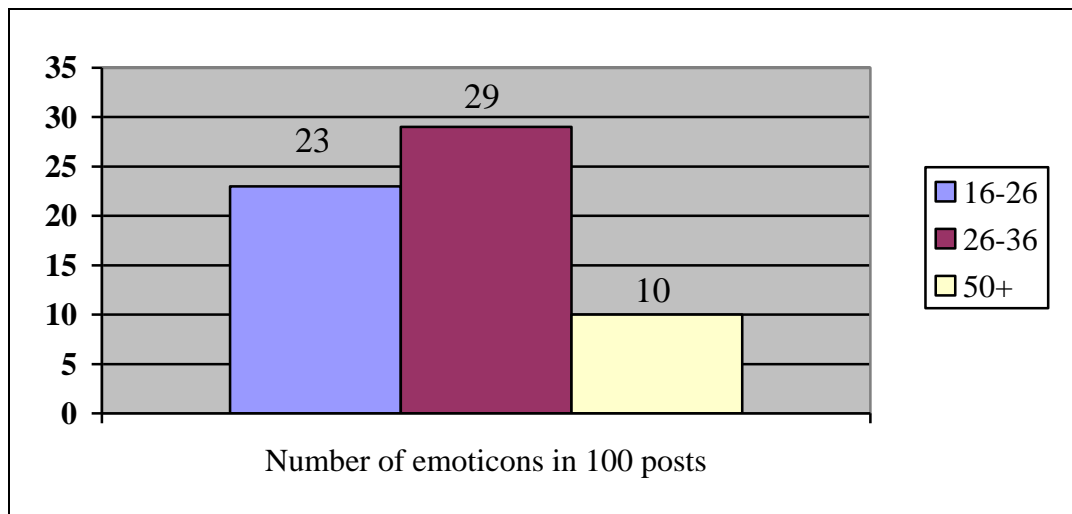
6.3.2   26-36 group

Here the number of emoticons used in 100 posts was surprisingly higher. Overall number of emoticons was 29. There were no classic symbol emoticons. I think the reason for this is that all symbols for emoticons are by some forums automatically transformed into emoticons in a picture form (:) =). Picture emoticons were used 27 times and referential emoticons only twice. There were 29 emoticons in 100 posts. It is a bit more than in 16-26 group but it is still quite low.

6.3.3   50+ group

As expected, the number of emoticons in 50+ group was the lowest. Only ten emoticons were used in 100 posts. One emoticon could be found in every 10th post on average. There were only two classic emoticons, picture emoticons were used eight times and there was no referential/link emoticon. This result was expected. I think older people are not so much familiar with PC technology and online discussions features. The lack of referential/link emoticons partially support this. To use this type of emoticons, the user has to be familiar with what symbols are used for each specific emoticon.

Graph 3: Number of emoticons in 100 posts

The number of emoticons used in 100 posts is surprisingly low in all three groups. The most emoticons are used by the 26-36 group, which is only 25 % more than in the 16-26 group. The lowest number of emoticons, as expected, is by 50+ group. I think people in 50+ group are not so much familiar with computers and they tend to write longer posts where they can express their attitude or emotions instead of inserting emoticons.

6.4   Misspelled words

Since almost every online discussion forum has implemented a spell-checker, the number of misspelled words is minimal. Here spell-checkers often times do not control the use of words in specific situations. Spell-checkers do not correct words, such as *your* instead of *you're* or *than* instead of *then*. Some of these mistakes might be also a simple typo. Here is the list of most commonly misspelled words in online discussion forums with few examples from my research corpus:

1. your instead of you*'*re

    ...***your*** *going to know if the train is out...*

2. loose instead of lose

    they all have win / ***loose*** *ratio around 60%...*

3. there instead of their (or otherwise)

    I could say the same about healers yet ***their*** *is 1 more...*

4. its instead of it's

    Are you sure ***its*** *not the hitbox?*

5. alot instead of a lot

> *i remember the graphics being **alot** better than that*

6. than instead of then (or otherwise)

> *... I like diplomacy and being agile and fast rather **then** bulk.*

Misspelled words in posts from all three groups are rare and most probably a simple typo. The main reason for only few misspelled words are installed spell-checkers in online discussion forums. Additionally, people can look up the words in online dictionaries if they are not sure. The search speed in online dictionaries is incomparable to a search in books, and online dictionaries are always at our disposal. The nature of asynchronous chats allows them more convenience than in synchronous chats.

6.5 Omission of capital letters

Another linguistic feature of posts in online discussion forums is the omission of capital letters, especially in the case of pronoun *I* or at the beginning of a sentence. Next to the omitted capital letters there can be found whole words written in capital letters.

6.5.1 16-26 group

Number of omitted capital letters in this group was 19. There were 10 sentences with omitted capital letter at the beginning.

and then you must go into the brain room and...!!! oh wait. nevermind.

that looks so cool!

Personal pronoun *I* was written in lower case nine times, from overall 54. Every sixth pronoun *I* was not written correctly. Sometimes even one user used both, correct and incorrect form of a personal pronoun *I*.

i'm a dinosaur so i underestimate.

i like the idea of possibly realistic pricing.

There are 100 posts in this group, together they consist of approximately 3,500 words and 22 of them were written in capital letters. These 22 words out of 3,500 represent 0,6 %.

BUT I MUST HAVE THESE GLASSES!

That sounds HORRIBLE.

The overall number of omitted capital letters and words written in capital letters is quite low. I believe some omitted capital letters were due to inattention. Words written in capital letters were used mainly for emphasis.

6.5.2   26-36 group

The situation in this group is worse in the case of capital letters at the beginning of sentences. The capital letter was omitted 20 times:

pretty much, but he found me. 😊

lets not debate religion here...

The omission of the capital letter in the personal pronoun *I* occurred less frequently. From an overall 123 personal pronoun *I's* only eight were written in lower case. The situation where one user used both capital and lower case letters for the personal pronoun *I* can be found here:

i know where I am.

i made a new post musicmom...

Users of this group wrote almost 5,000 words in 100 posts with only 28 words in capital letters. That is slightly above 0,5 %.

I'm SO excited to find

Not only they can learn without EVER being hurt.

The results are very similar with the other two groups except for the number of omitted capital letters, which is twice higher than in the previous group and almost seven times higher than in the 50+ group.

6.5.3   50+ group

The results in this group are quite surprising. In 100 posts (almost 8,000 words) all sentences, except for three, started with capital letters and there was not a single use of personal pronoun *I* written in lower case.

once dog has finished...

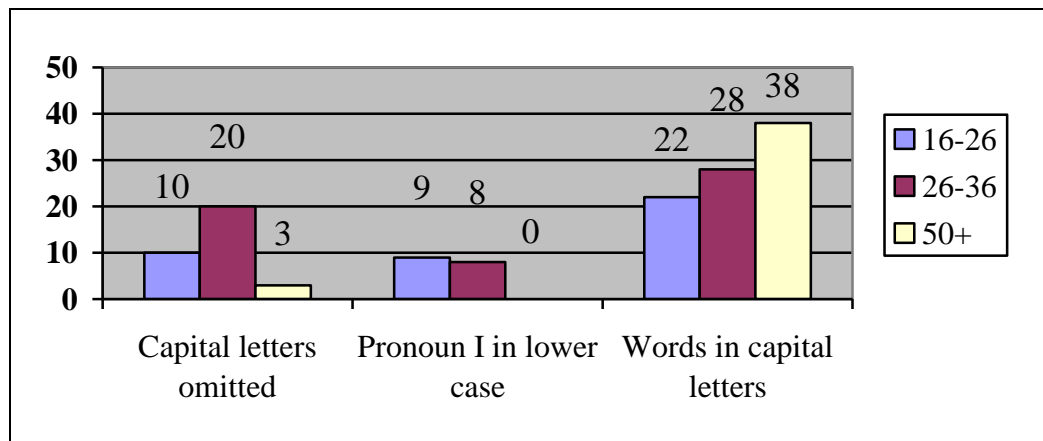*we have ideas on raised gardens on our site...*

With almost 8,000 words written in 100 posts, users of this group used 38 words written in capital letters. That is not even half of a percent.

I just got another TWO copies.
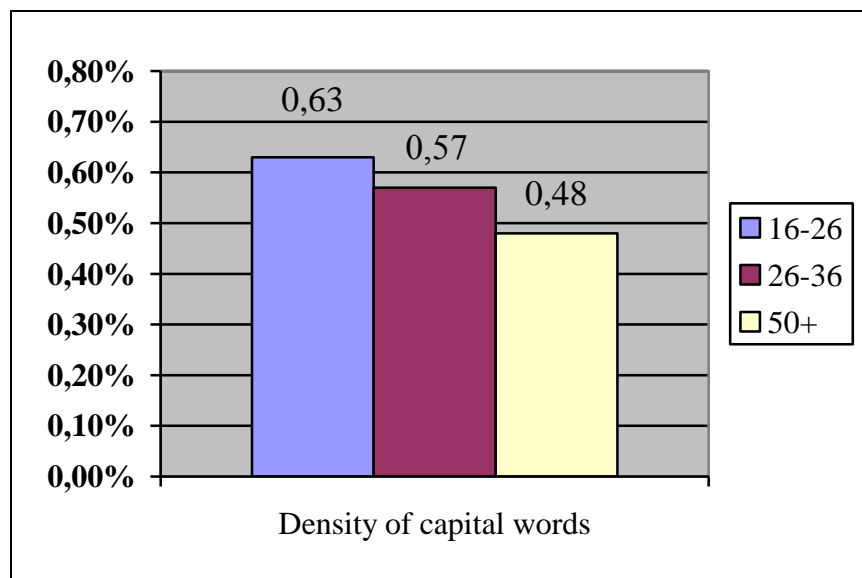
Threads with that subject line NEVER go well. :-)

As in the previous analysis, the results from this group are the best. Older people and seniors omitted the least capital letters and their density of capital words is also the lowest.

Graph 4: Number of omitted capital letters and words in capital letters in 100 posts

Graph 5: Density of capital words in 100 posts

As the graphs show, the results from my research corpus are unexpectedly low. The worst from all three groups with 28 omitted capital letters is 26-36 group, followed by the 16-26 group with 19 omissions. The last one is 50+ group with only three omissions. Words in capital letters are used mainly for emphasis and are often seen as shouting. The number of whole words written in capital letters is very low in all three groups and they are used very sparingly. I believe older people are more conservative and their language use is not an exception. They have been using language the longest of all three groups and they see no reason to change now.

6.6   Omission of punctuation and apostrophes

Not only users of online discussion forums omitted capital letters but also punctuation and apostrophes. People tend to use contractions but without apostrophes and they end sentences without any or with more than two punctuation marks.

6.6.1   16-26 group

In 100 posts 30 sentences were ended with more than one punctuation mark. In most of the cases three dots instead of one were used:

These glasses will cause SO many car accidents...

Yea, really useless...

There were 18 sentences not properly ended. Eight were without any punctuation mark at the end and 10 were ended with an emoticon instead of a punctuation mark:

We shall share it to our circles

That's not an issue these days 🙂

There were 64 properly used apostrophes and 15 words were missing apostrophes:

*things that they really **dont**.*

*then **its** already in use somewhere*

The correct use of punctuation marks and apostrophes is very impressive in this group. As in previous analysis, I expected much higher numbers of omitted apostrophes and overuse of punctuation in this group. I believe the reason is the same as in previous cases. Asynchronous nature of online discussion forums allows users to take their time and use proper grammar.

6.6.2   26-36 group

The situation in this group was very similar to 16-26 group. There were 31 sentences ended with more than one punctuation mark. In this case question marks (?) and exclamation marks (!) were used more often than the simple three dots.

The flavored kind??? 😨

two birds with one stone there!!!

Only eight sentences were not ended with any punctuation mark and two of them with an emoticon.

...hmm wonder if its the same person

I really hope you stick around 🙂

In 100 posts (almost 5,000 words) 93 apostrophes were used and only eight contractions did not have apostrophe.

well thats not true

lets not debate religion here

As in the previous group, overuse of punctuation marks is very low and usually used for emphasize and the number of missing apostrophes is also very low.

6.6.3 50+ group

Similar to its previous results, language use by 50+ users differs the most from the other two groups. One hundred posts in this group consist of almost 8,000 words (more than twice the amount of 16-26 group) and still had the best results. Only nine sentences were ended with two or more punctuation marks.

So I beg you...PLEASE STOP!!!

I don't believe I said someone didn't deserve and explanation...

There was not a single sentence without a proper punctuation mark or ended with an emoticon. If there was an emoticon, it was after the punctuation mark.
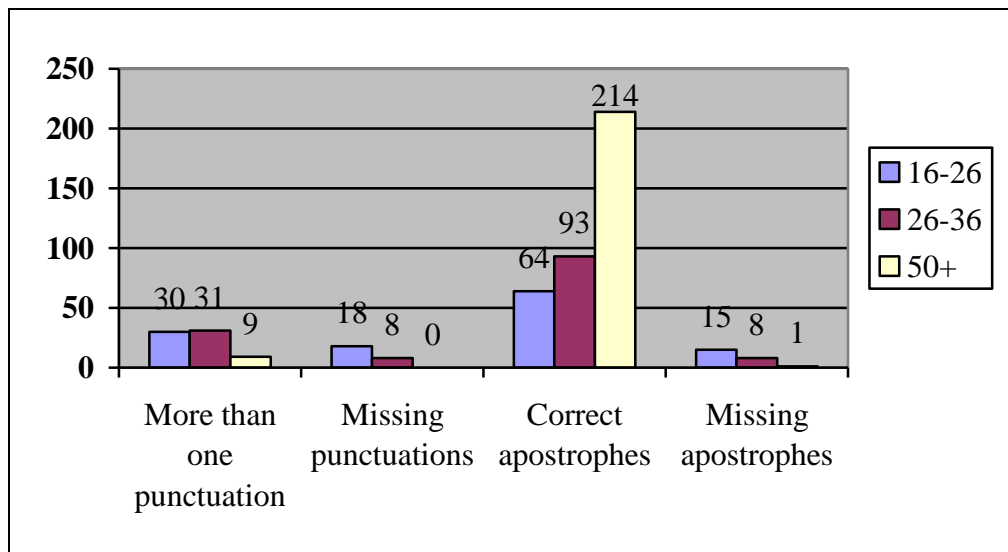
I don't want it. 😊

The number of apostrophes is 214,the highest in all three groups. There was only one word with a missing apostrophe.

and lambs ears, etc.

Use of punctuation marks and apostrophes in the 50+ group is almost 100 % correct and the best from all three groups.

Graph 6: Number of missing punctuation marks in 100 posts

Results prove again that older and senior people tend to write more grammatically correct posts. With the most words written they made the least mistakes. They rarely overused and never omitted punctuation at the end of the sentences. They used apostrophes three times more than 16-26 group and still missed only one. Users in 26-36 group omitted punctuation marks at the end of only eight sentences. Apostrophes were missing in no more than 8 % of words where they should have been. The 16-26 group had similar results as the 26-36 group, only apostrophes were omitted in 19 % of words. I believe the use of more punctuation marks was for exaggeration. Three exclamation marks add the impression of urgency or five dots leave the space for the readers' own interpretation. It adds the feeling of face-to-face conversation to discussions.

Analysis in this part was focused on changes in the English language caused by modern communication technologies, especially online discussion forums. Research corpus was approximately 16,000 words (87,000 symbols) long. The sample consisted of texts from three different generations, 16-26 years old, 26-36 years old and 50+ years old. The aim of this research was to prove that age of the participants is relevant when considering changes in the English language appearing in the online discussion forums.

The analysis was split into six different parts reflecting the most visible changes in the English language in online discussion forums. The first part was the average length of the posts. It was proved that users in the 50+ age group prefer to write twice as long in their posts (77 words) than young people (37 words). The second and third part dealt with the

number of emoticons and abbreviations in posts. The 50+ age groups showed again the least changes. In 100 posts young people (16-26 and 26-36 years old) used emoticons and abbreviations twice as often over users from 50+ age group. Despite the fact that older people tend to use less emoticons and abbreviations, all three groups use them very sparsely. In 16,000 there were only 62 emoticons and 22 abbreviations used. It is a enormous difference in comparison to synchronous chats where 10 % of the words are abbreviated. The fourth part was most commonly misspelled words. All three groups showed almost no misspelling, which is probably due to the implemented spell-checkers in online discussion forums. The fifth and sixth part focused on omission of capital letters, punctuation and apostrophes. It was again the 50+ age group that showed the least omitted punctuation marks and apostrophes. In all six parts the 50+ age group had the best results.

I believe there is an explanation for this. Older and senior people are not very familiar with computers and the Internet. The structure of online discussion forums and how emoticons are used might be slightly confusing for them. They do not rush anywhere, they take their time to write longer posts and they pay more attention to grammar. Older and senior people are often conservative. They do not like to change the way they communicate, after having used the language for more than 50 years. On the other hand, the modern life of young people is hectic. They want to save time, therefore, they type fast. To type faster they use more abbreviations, omit capitalization and punctuation marks. Individuals also tend to use specific language features to distinguish themselves in the community. They take language as a part of their image.

7 SPECIFIC PHENOMENA

Along with the linguistic changes analysed in posts themselves, online discussion forums brought features specific to them. These features reflect other changes in the English language in online discussion forums. Every user has a nickname, an avatar, and a signature (described on page 16). Some posts start with a greeting and end with a closing, as it is in e-mails. Users can also attach a picture or a video to their posts. This caused a widespread of memes. The aim of this part of the analysis is to provide additional proof that the changes in the English language are a result of different generations using specific technology.

7.1 Nicknames

For the research corpus I collected 150 random nicknames from the same three online discussion forums as in the chapter 6. Every forum is represented with 50 random nicknames. In the analysis I was looking mainly at linguistic features that cannot be found in general names such as numbers, unusual symbols, capitalized words, emoticons, etc.

7.1.1 16-26 group

From 50 analysed nicknames eight of them had a number in it.

[)357R0Y3R

Demon1865

There were 13 nicknames with other than letter symbols in them.

[L.B.Team] MR.FRAG'$™

N3WBK1NG[CP]N77

Some nicknames were play on words or complete nonsense.

Napoleon BLOWNaparte

Theysaidthisnamewouldntfi

HUEHUEHUEHUEHUEHUEHUEHUE

From the overall 50 nicknames, 27 contained numbers, capitalized words or unusual symbols. In many cases so called "leet, l33t or 1337 speak" was used. Leet speak matches every letter from the classic alphabet to a number or a symbol. For example, I = !, A = 4, H = #, etc. Here are examples from my research text with translations.

J0#/\/ can be translated as John.

4PP13J4(K the translation is probably Applejack.

7.1.2 26-36 group

In 50 nicknames from this group 12 of them had a number in it.

Kristina1980

21stCenturyDad

Only in two nicknames other than classic letter symbols were used.

MiaSofia`s dad

1mom.4kids

From the overall 50 nicknames, 14 contained numbers, capitalized words or unusual symbols. The result is almost half as many than in the 16-26 group.

7.1.3 50+ group

The group results here are completely opposite from the results of the previous groups. Numbers were used in only two nicknames and only three nicknames contained other than classic letter symbols.

wendy7

adavisus@aol.com

Members of this group used as nicknames mostly general names. It is impossible to find out whether the names are real users' names or they are made up.
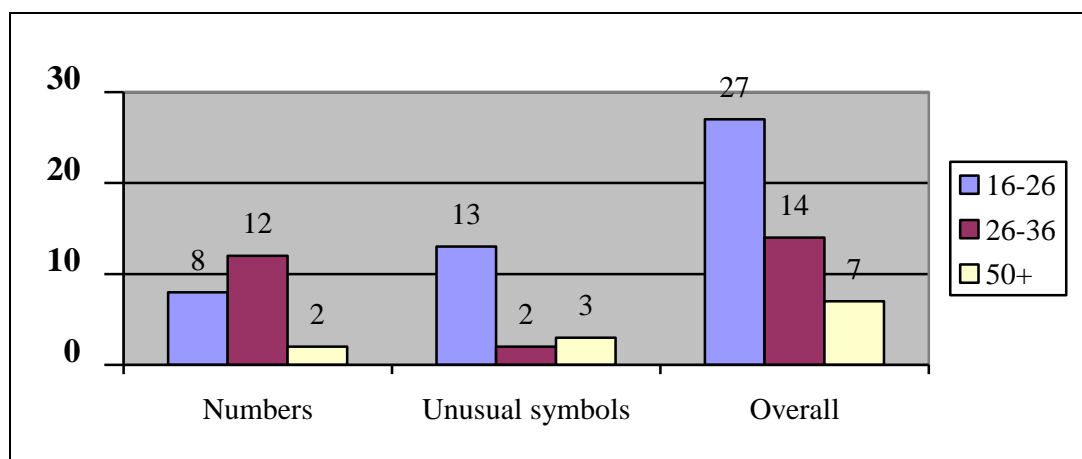
Bob Hobden

Donn Thorson

Martin Brown

Seven nicknames of the overall 50 contained numbers, capitalized words or unusual symbols. It is the lowest number in all three groups.

Graph 7: Number of unusual symbols in 50 nicknames

Members of the 16-26 age group were the most creative. In some cases (*ICantFindSockSoIVideogame[VGN-r*) I had no idea what the nickname stood for. In more than 50 % of 50 nicknames they used numbers, capitalized words or unusual symbols. The number of unusual nicknames in the 26-36 group was 14. The 50+ age group proved again that language use is affected by the users' age. Older and senior people used mostly general names, something undetectable in the 16-26 group. They did not experiment with unusual symbols and numbers. They do not have a need to be *c00l* on the Internet.

7.2 Greetings and Closings

The structure of some posts was very similar to the structure of letters or e-mails. Some posts contained greetings and closings. Use of this approach in online discussion forums is very rare and strange. If someone wants to reply to a specific post they use a quote function provided by the online discussion forum instead of using a normal greeting. There is also no need for a closing or salutation since every member can see the author's name right next to the post. In my research corpus from 16-26 group there was not a single post with a greeting or closing. The results from the 26-36 group contained only one post with the greeting (*Hi Everybody!*) and the closing (*Kim*). It was in the first post of the thread, where this feature can be occasionally seen. The situation was completely different in the 50+ age group. In 20 out of the 100 posts there was some type of greeting or closing.

This fact shows that different age groups tend to use language differently. Older and senior people try to be more formal. I believe older and senior people see online discussion forums as some type of instant letters. With this fact in their minds, they approach writing posts to writing letters.

7.3 Internet memes

Over the past few years Internet memes, a term as defined in the theoretical part (chapter 5), gained huge popularity on the Internet. Online discussion forums are one of the means through which they are spread and where they are kept "alive". In online discussion forums they predominately take the form of pictures and short videos. During the process of gathering data I noticed memes are mostly presented in online discussion forums with young members. In forums with older and senior members memes were almost never presented or only in rare cases. In online discussion forums with young members, especially the 16-26 group, memes created a significant part of their posts. Many forums

even implemented the rule that posting memes is not allowed and can lead to a temporary ban. This decision was made for two reasons. First, memes have often large data size in comparison to plain text and they can slow down the loading speed of online discussion forums. Second, users posted too many memes and frequently there was nothing else but a thread full of memes. If memes are not allowed to post, users use only the text that the meme was accompanied with. Only one sentence or a catch-phrase can point to a specific meme. There are still a few online discussion forums that allow posting memes and their members are often teenagers or young people.

For the purpose of this research I gathered 100 memes from online discussion forums. These memes are in a form of pictures and every one of them is accompanied with a text. Mostly the text is short and often breaks many grammatical rules. I examined these texts and noticed that the breaking of grammatical rules is not random but also follows its own set of rules. This grammatically incorrect language is often referred to as LOLspeak. Then I created a small guide showing how these texts of memes were constructed.

Definite article *the* is almost always misspelled *teh*, *d* or *dah*.

> ***Teh*** *oranges ones... ...r...poysin*
>
> *just koolin mah harbles on* ***dah*** *marbles*

Demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that* are misspelled *diz*, *thiz* or *dat.*

> *when i meetz mccane im make* ***dis*** *face*
>
> *I IZ SERIOUS ADMNIM* ***THIZ*** *IZ SERIUS BIZNIS*

Personal pronoun *my* is misspelled *mah.*

> *oh noez* ***mah*** *mortgage dun readjusted*

Subject verb agreement for 3rd person singular is used for 1st person singular.

> *Catnip kitteh* ***tinks*** *colurs r pretteh*
>
> *Pleez Santa, i can* ***haz*** *kitteh?*
>
> *I* ***iz*** *furrocious. No to be messin wif me!*

Words *you, are* and *your* are abbreviated to *u, r* and *ur*

> *Im in* ***ur*** *bookz Killin ur plotz*
>
> *I* ***r*** *not suprized...* ***U HAZ NO GIRLFRIEND.***

Words or whole sentences can be capitalized.

> *iz piture time?* ***IZ PIKTURE TIME***
>
> ***IN UR EMURGENZY PURRFORMING UR CPR***

Overuse of exclamation and question marks.

> *OMG! BACON**!!!!!!!***
>
> *iz abonm... abomilnal...RAWWRR**!!!1!***

Common abbreviations on the Internet are used.

> *I DUNNO **LOL***
>
> ***OMG**! BACON!!!!!!!*

The changes are mostly in spelling. Almost every word is misspelled. The capitalization of words or whole sentences is often used to draw attention. The overuse of punctuation marks for emphasize can be commonly found. Improper pronouns and incorrect plurals look more rebellious and cool.

Here is the small step-by-step guide in how to transform an ordinary English sentence into LOLspeak. The sentence used for this guide is:

Hi, I am your sister and this is my cat.

Demonstrative and personal pronouns should be misspelled and *your* is always written *ur*.

*Hi, I am **ur** sister and **diz** is **mah** cat.*

Conjunction *and* can be written as *n*.

*Hi, I am ur sister **n** diz is mah cat.*

Subject verb agreement for 3rd person singular is used for 1st person singular and *s* is substituted for *z*.

*Hi, I **iz** ur sister n diz **iz** mah cat.*

Rest of the words can be additionally misspelled.

***Hai**, I iz ur **sistah** n diz iz mah cat.*

Diminutive words can be used.

*Hai, I iz ur sistah n diz iz mah **kitty**.*

Additional punctuation marks are commonly used in LOLspeak.

*Hai**!!!!!** I iz ur sistah**....** n diz iz mah **kitty!!!!!***

Some words can be capitalized.

*HAI**!!!!!** I iz ur sistah**....** n diz iz mah **KITTY!!!!!***

There is never enough abbreviations in LOLspeak.

*ZOMFG??? HAI**!!!!!** I iz ur sistah**....** n LOL diz iz mah **KITTY!!!!!***

The ordinary English sentence *Hi, I am your sister and this is my cat* was in a few steps transformed into *ZOMFG??? HAI**!!!!!** I iz ur sistah**....** n LOL diz iz mah **KITTY!!!!!*** There are numerous more variations that could be classified; whole sentence can be capitalized instead of few words, some words can be left in correct spelling, etc.

The Internet memes can be found primary in online discussion forums with young users. In the 26-36 group memes were rare and in the 50+ group memes were almost nonexistent. This fact provides additional evidence to my hypothesis that the language use is affected by the users' age. By using and especially creating memes, young people show their creativity with the use of language. I believe this helps them to create their image on the Internet. More often than not, the sentence is changed to LOLspeak, seen as more visible, cool and popular.

The analysis of nicknames, greetings and closings, and memes provided an additional proof that language use is affected by the users' age. I analysed 150 nicknames, 50 from each age group category. The 16-26 group showed most creativity in creating nicknames. They used numbers and other than classic alphabet letters four times more frequently than the users in the 50+ age group and two times more frequently than the users in the 26-36 age group. The situation with greetings and closings was never encountered in the 16-26 age group and only once did it occur in the 26-36 age group. On the other hand, the 50+ years old users used some type of greeting or closing in every fifth post. The Internet memes could only be found in online discussion forums with young users. Use of the Internet memes showed a high degree of creativity with the language.

8 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

For the purpose of my thesis and to prove my hypothesis I linguistically analysed posts in three different online discussion forums, based on the average age of their users. I focused on average length of a post, density of abbreviations and emoticons, most commonly misspelled words, omission and overuse of capital letters and punctuation marks. In addition, I analysed nicknames and language of Internet memes.

The average length of a post was 54 words, which is 13 times longer than a message in synchronous chats. Young people wrote on average 37 words in a post while older and senior people used 77, which is approximately double. Older and senior people also avoided the use of modern abbreviations and emoticons. They used only six abbreviations and ten emoticons in 100 posts, approximately double than in the other two groups. Spelling of words was almost perfect in all three groups, probably thanks to the implemented spell-checkers. The situation with omission and overuse of capital letters and punctuation marks was again most correct in the 50+ group. Older and senior people did not miss a single punctuation mark at the end of sentences, they used more than one punctuation mark nine times and missed only one apostrophe. In the case of nicknames, young people showed the most creativity and imagination with the use of unusual symbols. Older and senior people preferred to use general names and did not experiment with the language. The Internet memes could only be found in online discussion forums with young users.

All parts of analysis proved my hypothesis that language use is affected by the user's age. Young people tend to experiment with language, they use it as a part of their virtual image. They use abbreviations and emoticons more frequently, and at the same time they play with unusual symbols and numbers to create interesting nicknames. They use Internet memes where the experiments with language can be seen most clearly. On the other hand, older people and seniors avoid abbreviations and emoticons, they use ordinary names as their nicknames and they do not use Internet memes.

I believe there are a few reasons for these differences. The use of abbreviations, emoticons and other language experimentation is modern and requires users to be familiar with computers and online discussion forums. Older people and seniors are usually not technically capable with computers. This can be seen in the non-use of referential emoticons, unusual symbols in nicknames or Internet memes. All these features require a certain skill with computers, especially the creation and use of Internet memes. Also older

people and seniors are more conservative and they do not want to change or experiment with the language they have been using for the past 50 years.

CONCLUSION

English is considered to be the most widespread language in the world as well as on the Internet. The Internet brought several new communications technologies and the new means of communication brought changes in the language use.

One of the new types of communication on the Internet are online discussion forums. Online discussion forums combine linguistic features from face to face communication, written communication, formal and informal communication, and anonymous communication.

This bachelor thesis was focused on the changes and novel trends in the English language in online discussion forums. The theory part provided general information about communication on the Internet and focused on online discussion forums and their predecessors. Grammatical features of online discussion forums, such as abbreviations, punctuation marks, etc, were described. The last part described a phenomenon called "memes" which is closely related to online discussion forums

The analysis part focused on linguistic features of online discussion forums. Research corpus for the analysis was composed from 300 posts (16,500 words), 150 nicknames and 100 memes. The results from the analysis proved that the degree of changes is closely related to the age of the users. Young people write short posts, use abbreviations and emoticons more frequently. They are more creative and they use language as a part of their Internet personality. On the other hand, older people and seniors avoid abbreviations and emoticons. They are more conservative in their language use.

This behaviour can be also seen in the language of nicknames. Young people showed very impressive creativity and combined many different linguistic features in order to create interesting nicknames. Older people preferred to use general names and were not experimenting with the language as much as young people.

Memes could only (with rare exceptions) be found in online discussion forums with young users. I analysed the text of 100 memes, pointed out the most common grammatical changes and created a small guide about how to understand LOLspeak.

I believe I have successfully proved my hypothesis that the changes in the English language in online discussion forums are affected by the age its users.

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LIST OF GRAPHS