



Processes and variations in language economisation



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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the processes of reducing language in textchats produced by non-native speakers of English. We propose that forms are reduced because of their high frequency and because of the discourse context. A wide variety of processes are attested in the literature, and we find different forms of clippings in our data, including mixtures of different clippings, homophone respellings, phonetic respellings including informal oral forms, initialisms (but no acronyms), and mixtures of clipping together with homophone and phonetic respellings. Clippings were the most frequent process (especially back-clippings and initialisms), followed by homophone respellings. There were different ways of metalinguistically marking reduction, but capitalisation was by far the most frequent. There is much individual variation in the frequencies of the different processes, although most were within normal distribution. The fact that non-native speakers seem to generally follow reduction patterns of native speakers suggests that reduction is a universal process.

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1. Introduction

This article investigates processes of reducing language in online discourse, specifically textchat. Previous studies have identified many such processes, but they have been analysed to different depths, and few have looked at comparative frequencies of use; also, none have looked at individual variation to our knowledge. These are therefore the main focuses of this study: to see what processes appear in our data, how much they are used compared to one another, and how much variation there is between individuals.

Another feature of this study is that we focus on the language of inexperienced Internet users. These users have very limited Internet experience, from which we can assume that they have not been much exposed to the conventions of computer-mediated communication (CMC) both in their native languages and in English. Therefore, we wanted to investigate if they used the processes typically described in the literature, which would reflect on the universal nature of reduction processes.

The data come from textchat discussions in academic settings. They comprise different seminar discussions, both with and without a native English-speaking teacher being present. The students and the course the data was taken from are presented in more detail in the second section. The amount of reduction and the sorts of word-classes that are reduced are analysed first, and this is explained as a consequence of the context in which

reductions are possible and the frequency of the items in question. After discussing the data, the processes we find in our data are presented, as are the metalinguistic markers for showing that a form has been reduced, such as capitalisation and the use of full stops. Individual variations in the processes are considered finally to identify any particular tendencies individuals show in their reductions, including those which deviate from the general behaviour of the cohort. We begin, though, by presenting previous work on reduction processes.

2. Background on reduction

Reduction is a process that has long been recognised in literature on computer-mediated communication, including texting. CMC discourse is typically described as using a simplified language which has the effect of making communication more efficient (Murray, 2000). Thurlow (2003: §4.2.1) refers to the *sociolinguistic maxims* of CMC, which are: brevity and speed, paralinguistic restitution (making up for the lack of body language and intonation), and phonological approximation. Thus, reduction is one clear manifestation of the need for efficient, fast communication. Herring and Zelenkauskaitė (2009) identified more functions for such reductions than simply efficient and fast communication, but the exact functions of reduction are not the focus of this work.

Many authors have identified the strategies used to reduce language in texting and computer-mediated discourse (texting has been investigated by Hård af Segerstad, 2002; Thurlow, 2003; López Rúa, 2005; Kul, 2007a,b; Crystal, 2008, among others). Two

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general types of process have been identified: syntactic reduction, on the one hand, and morphological or orthographical reduction, on the other. Syntactic processes include the deletion of subjects and modal auxiliaries (Murray, 2000) and ellipsis (Lee, 2002). Our focus here, though, is on morphological or orthographical reduction, and there are three basic classes of reduction process that are recognised in the literature: clipping, phonetic respellings and homophone respellings.

The term *abbreviation* is often used by authors to refer to clipping processes in general (by Murray, 2000; Herring, 2012, for example), although for Werry (1996) the term refers to reduction in general. Typical processes include clippings (*info* from *information*), acronyms (*NASA* from *National Aeronautics and Space Administration*) and initialisms (*PC* from *political correctness* or *personal computer*; we use *initialism* to avoid the potential ambiguity of *abbreviation* which is often used as a term for the same phenomenon). López Rúa (2005) classifies clippings (*tom* from *tomorrow*) separately from abbreviations (*pls* from *please*). Lee (2002) distinguishes clippings of individual items from clippings of sentences. Thurlow (2003) sees a difference between shortenings (back-clippings like the *tom* example above), contractions (mid-clippings like *plse* from *please*) and G-clippings (*goin* from *going*), following the classification in Shortis (2001).

Homophone respelling is mentioned by most authors. Lee (2002: 8–10) goes into more detail into the different types of respellings:

- (1) letter homophone (*u* meaning “you”)
 - number homophone (*4* meaning “for”)
 - combination of letter and number homophone (*b4* meaning “before”)
 - combination of letter initial and letter homophone (*oic* meaning “oh I see”)

Rebus writing is sometimes mentioned as a different category from homophone respellings. Lotherington and Xu (2004, : 314ff.) include this under the category *hybridised codes*:

- (2) abbreviations (these include homophone respellings in English, like *4* meaning “for”)
 - hybridised codes (rebus writing like *b4*)
 - homophones (mostly in Chinese)

Hård af Segerstad (2002) also distinguishes homophone respellings from rebus writing.

Phonetic respellings are mentioned in particular by Yus (2011: 176–179) who categorises them as follows:

- (3) phonetic spellings (*cos* meaning “because”)
 - colloquial spellings (*wanna* meaning “want to”)
 - homophone spellings (*every1* meaning “everyone”)

These are all included under the category *phonetic orthography* (other sub-categories relate to prosodic spellings, regiolectal forms, etc.). Androutopoulos (2000) distinguishes phonetic from colloquial spellings (non-standard orthography, like *wuz* for *was* vs. reductions typical of colloquial speech, like *wud* for *would*), and gives homophone respelling as a separate category. Thurlow (2003) also mentions a difference between non-conventional spellings (like *sumtime*) and accent stylisation (like *wivout*). Al-Sa’idi and Hamdan (2005) distinguish g-dropping from other colloquial and phonetic spellings.

To summarise, we can see a very similar set of basic categories that are recognised by all these authors. These are: clipping processes of different types, phonetic respellings including informal oral respellings, and homophone respellings. The exact classification of particular processes is up for debate, though; for example, should rebus writing be recognised as a separate category from homophone respellings; and what is the status of informal forms like *goin* and *yeah*? We recognise the very broad categories for now, and will develop a detailed classification later. We will now present our data and informants in detail.

3. The data

The data analysed was produced by learners of English (28 in total) who were all students on a distance MA programme in English Linguistics run by a university in Sweden. From a survey the author carried out to collect metadata on the learners, we see that their ages range from 25 to 55 (although most were between 25 and 35). Admission onto the programme was contingent on a documented IELTS average score of 7.0, with no lower than 6.5 in each component. These students are mostly novice Internet users even in their native languages—one is a speaker of Bangla, and the rest Vietnamese. Thus, we can suppose that they had not been very much exposed to the discourse norms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general, and of CMC communication in English in particular. This was also the first time any of them had taken a distance course.

The data consists of seminars on different topics from an introduction to core linguistic and sociolinguistic topics run in Autumn 2007. There were nine sessions: a general introduction, language and the media, language and politics, language and gender, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics/pragmatics. Students divided themselves into four groups, and for four of the sessions (media, politics, gender and morphology) the groups arranged a pre-seminar where they discussed the reading on the relevant topics and data analysis alone without the teachers being present. All these pre-seminars took place through Skype textchat. The chatlogs were sent to the teachers, which helped focus the seminars, and these also took place through Skype textchat. Unfortunately, the logs from the introduction session and final session on semantics and pragmatics had not been saved, and therefore were not available to the author for analysis.

At the start of the course, students were informed about research conducted by their teachers, and were asked to give their consent for material they produced on the courses on the programme to be used in research. Only students who gave their permission were included in this study. All students have been made anonymous in the presentation of the data, and are referred to as, e.g. Student 15, including as address forms in the contributions. Typographical errors have been preserved in the extracts.

The data was analysed by reading through the transcripts and identifying the reduced forms. It was only possible to identify mistypings if there was an explicit correction on the part of a student, so otherwise the forms were treated as deliberate spellings. As much as possible, deliberately generated forms were identified, mainly by whether students repeated their use of particular forms. Repetition of a form, in particular by another student, was taken as confirmation that the form was deliberately generated. The analysis was gone through multiple times to ensure accuracy, and identified forms were searched for in the documents to ensure a correct count. The AntConc freeware concordancer was used to calculate frequencies and to search the corpus in general (available from http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/antconc_index.html).

Now we look at how many reductions there were in the data and what was reduced.

4. What do the informants reduce and Why?

Let us begin by looking at the number of reduced forms that appear in each session of the course. Table 1 shows the division according to session and pre-seminar/seminar (the three sessions without pre-seminars have an *n/a*, *not applicable*, in that section of the table):

In the table, we present the reduced forms attested per session of the course. *Red* refers to the tokens of reduced forms attested; *Wrds* refers to the number of words in that session; and *%Red* refers to the percentage of reduction in that session calculated from those

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