

# RESEARCHING THE INTERNET LANGUAGE USE AS A MODERN TREND IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS<sup>1</sup>

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Systematically researching internet language use is a relatively new trend in linguistics. It is one of the emerging fields of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and communication studies that raises many problems and is just recently being formulated, especially the researching of the specifics of the internet language use of bilingual communities of practice.

In this paper we would like to give a short overview about internet linguistics as a new trend of applied linguistics, and about the principles and objectives of the postdoctoral research project.

This project began in September 2013, as a postdoctoral research program (Postdoctoral Researcher Dr. Anita Márku) in the Research Institute of Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Science, Research Center for Multilingualism under the leadership of Dr. habil Csilla Bartha, Research Professor, Head of RCM. The project is going to end in 2015.

## ***1 What is computer mediated discourse?***

As the electronic communication first appeared in English speaking countries, so did the first pieces of literature dealing with it, which were connected to the English language (Murray, 1990; Runkehl, Schlobinski & Sierer, 1998; Crystal, 2001/2004; Herring, 2007, 2011; Bergs, 2005; Androutsopoulos, 2006; Siebenhaar, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2011; etc.). It became one of the emerging fields of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and communication studies that raised many questions focusing on computer-mediated conversation, digital media from conversational analytic, discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives. Researchers' attention increasingly turned to different (contact, pragmatic, social, etc.) aspects

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of the internet-based linguistic practices of multilingual communities (Callahan, 2004; Paolillo, 2011; Goldberg, 2009; Vincze & Harwood, 2011, 2012). Central concepts of multi-disciplinary approaches examining the relationship between migrations, language, and identity in the era of globalisation in hyperdiverse environments are mobility, multiplicity and super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011).

Various attempts have been made by linguists to classify computer mediated discourse (CMD), starting in the 1980s and early 1990s (Herring, 2007). Is it a type of writing, because it is produced by typing on a keyboard and is read as a text on a computer screen? Is it “written speech” (Maynor, 1994), as it exhibits features of orality, including rapid message exchange, informality, and representations of prosody? Or is it a third type, intermediate between speech and writing, characterized by unique production and reception constraints (Ferrara, Brunner & Whittemore, 1991; Murray, 1990)?

As Androutsopoulos (2006, p. 419) claims: the “‘language of the Internet’ as ‘a series of abbreviations and symbols’ poses a ‘big problem’ to Internet novices. Labels such as *Internet-Slang*, *Netzslang*, *Webslang*, and *Chattisch* (chat speak) create a myth that the language of the Internet is a non-standard register of language; they exoticize this register through qualifications such as *weird language*, *crazy mixture* or a jumble of digits and letters; and they categorize Internet users according to their experience as ‘novices’ and ‘advanced users’, as those who have been using the Internet for a longer period of time are more versed in using the computer mediated discourse than those who have just joined the community.

Veszelszki, a Hungarian expert, introduced the term ‘digilektus’ (digilect) to describe the CMC (computer mediated communication) (Veszelszki, 2011).

While preparing the research, we formulated the questions: What is computer mediated discourse? Is it the unique combination of written and spoken discourse that is a kind of intermediary state? Or is it a completely self-contained communication genre with well-defined properties?

Studying of the literature, however, we have come to the conclusion that there is no consensus yet to determine the identity of CMC. In order to come closer to understanding it, we need to comprehend what phenomena are typical of it. In addition to understanding features of CMC, an even more important question is: how do we use it and how can we *creatively* use this ‘new communication code’?

### **1.1 The first step in the research program was to answer questions related to the use of language/languages:**

- What phenomena (abbreviations, lexical borrowings, interference) and communicative strategies, pragmatic characteristics (code switching, conversational-organizational, discourse strategies) occur?
- When, by whom and why the different modes (internet, written, oral) of communication are used?

David Crystal (2001/2004) in his book *Language and the Internet* investigates the nature of the impact which the Internet is making on language. There is already a widespread popular mythology that the Internet is going to be bad for the future of language – that technospeak will rule, standards will be lost, and creativity diminished as globalization imposes sameness. The argument of this book is the reverse: that the Internet is in fact enabling a dramatic expansion to take place in the range and variety of language(s?), and is providing unprecedented opportunities for personal creativity.

**1.2** Scientifically researching internet language use already has its wide scope of literature on monolingual communities in Hungary (see Bódi, 2004a, 2004b; Horányi, 1997; Kis, 1997; Szépe, 1997; Nyíri, 1996; Veszelszki, 2011). Contrary to traditional written texts, internet texts are less characterized by higher levels of regularities, normative and edited structures (Bódi, 2004a, 2004b). International studies dealing with English have also pointed out that messages forwarded with the help of the internet take place between spoken and written discourse, as the partners do not hear or see each other thus communication also becomes less personal, however, the users clearly construct their texts on the world wide web similarly to their spontaneous spoken language (Bódi, 2004b; Herring, 1996; Collott-Bellmore, 1996). In this vein, the discourse becomes spontaneous enough to give a picture of the vernacular language use of the speakers.

**1.3** Although using the Internet is very wide-spread all over the world, the dictionaries and lay wordlists that mystify the language of the Internet, isolate and create the perception that it is homogenous and distinct and cannot be interpreted by outsiders (see Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2006).

In Hungary, Agnes Veszelszki edited an IT dictionary in 2012 (*Netszótár, @-tól zukbergnetig*), which is designed not to create a new IT professional dictionary, but to document the vocabulary of private digital communication (especially chatting, using social networking sites and through those conversations, blogs, forums, and computer games) (Veszelszki, 2012). The dictionary contains 2000 entries, mostly lexical borrowings from English. But this dictionary does not take into account the bilingual phenomena of the language variants of Hungarian minorities abroad. This is a dictionary of IT vocabulary of Hungarian speakers in Hungary. Transcarpathian Hungarians use two or three languages during their everyday interactions (in CMC, too) (Hungarian which is in minority status, Ukrainian that is the state language and Russian, the non-official state language of the former Soviet Union, *de iure* another minority language). A Transcarpathian Hungarian individual often gets into a situation where they have to choose between two or more languages as their means of communication and sometimes has to switch between these languages (Márku, 2011, 2013, 2014; Csermicskó, 2010). So words are missing from the dictionary that are common in the everyday language of Transcarpathian Hungarians. For example in the ‘Termini’ on-line

dictionary<sup>2</sup> we can find the entry ‘*fles, fleska*’ instead of the Hungarian word *usb-kulcs, pendrive* (English *USB key, pendrive, USB flash*).

**fles** [fless] (flash) (fn) ~ek, ~t, ~e

(Inf) **Ka** (ált) (köz) (köz) öngyújtóhoz hasonló alakú és méretű, USB-csatlakozós memóriakártya; [a memory card with a USB connection of the size of a lighter]

**pendrive** ♥□ **Ka** *Hozok egy flest, amire felmásolhatod nekem a pályázati anyagot. [I'll get a „fles”, on which you can copy the grant stuff over.]*

[or/ukr **флеш-драйв, флешка** szleng ,USB-csatlakozós memóriakártya’ < ang flash drive < ,ua’

(→**fleska**) slang [memory card with a USB connection]

**fleska** (fn) ~k, ~t, ~ja

(Inf) **Ka** (ált) (köz) (kissé biz) öngyújtóhoz hasonló alakú és méretű, USB-csatlakozós memóriakártya; **pendrive** ♥□ **Ka** *Add ide a fleskád, hogy rámentsem az adatokat. [Pass me your fleska so that I can save the data on it.]* [or/ukr **флешка** szleng ,USB-csatlakozós memóriakártya’ < ang flash drive < ,ua’] (→**fles**)

Here are a few more examples of loan words that fit in the IT dictionary:

**bál** – бaл: mobiltelefonon; sim kártyával működő mobilinternet hordozóján a (pénz)egység; [mobile phone; money unit on mobile internet device]

**perevirka** – перевірка: egyenleg ellenőrzés; [balance check]

**odnoklásznyik** – odnoklassniki.ru orosz internetes közösségi oldal neve; [name of a Russian community site]

**kontakt** – **vkontaktye** – vk – **véká**: <http://vk.com> vkontakte ukrán/orosz internetes közösségi oldal neve; [name of a Ukrainian/Russian community site]

**kontakt**: mobileszközök közötti kapcsolat, jel; [signal between mobile devices]

**eszemeszka**: sms, rövid szöveges üzenet; [text message]

**emtéesz/mts, emtécé/mtc**: MTC/MTS ukrán mobilszolgáltató; [Ukrainian mobile provider]

**perezvonyity**: visszahívós sms. „Küldj egy perezvonyitot/perezvonyt, s visszahívlak”. [Send me a ‘perezvony’ and I’ll call you back].

Such lexical borrowings are used in other cross-border regions too, for example in Transylvania *fácse*=facebook.com. Therefore, it is important to collect, and to document these lexical items.

The (vernacular) language of Transcarpathian Hungarians can be defined as the “*po zakarpatski*” contact variety, called so by the community of locals themselves, identified as the Transcarpathian dialect of Hungarian. Contact phenomena

<sup>2</sup> ‘Termini’ Hungarian-Hungarian on-line dictionary is the most important project of Termini Hungarian Language Research Network (see <http://ht.nyud.hu/htonline/htlista.php?action=firstpage> and Márku, 2014).

as lexical borrowings, interference in translation and code switching are integral parts of this language variant (see Bartha, 1992, 2005), however, in the everyday interactions of individual speakers, they appear with varied frequency (Márku, 2011).

*An example for lexical borrowing kvász (KB&C) on facebook.com*



*Examples for code switching and borrowing*

B1: ezzigen) geroj\*\* [hős, itt inkább vagány] [tough guy]

B2: nem gerojobb [eredeti jelentésben hősiesebb, de itt inkább vagányabb] a tiédnél :Dtejányka [not tougher than yours, you, gal]

B3: peremen, mö zsdjom peremen [változást, változást várunkszállóigévé vált dalrészlet] [We are expecting, expecting a change]



B1: Mindenhol bekerestem a pendrive-om, a fene tudta, hogy már benne van a gépbe :DDD [I'm looking for my pendrive all over the place. I had no idea that it was plugged in.]

B2: Az semmi.a nyomtatam betepte a papirt allandoan,a szerelő elvitte megnezni. kiderult h a flessem beleesett es megakadt:DDDD [That's nothing. my printer was tearing the paper, the repair-man had a look, and it turned out that my fles had fallen into it and it got stuck.]

B1: DDDDDDDD

B2: A pasinak is ez volt a reakcioja xD [This was how the man reacted.]



S1: Mission completed! [A misszió teljesítve]

S2: kakoj? [Melyik?] [Which one?]

S1: munkanap volt estig... [it was a working day until the evening]

To be able to describe the regularities and sociolinguistic patterns of this computer mediated discourse and bilingual (multilingual) contact variant, we needed plenty of language data gained carefully, applying different methods. In the last

decade, numerous research studies have been done in this respect, profound analyses were made, summarized in monographs, handbooks (Csemicskó, 2003, 2010; Márku, 2008, 2013, etc.) and in a PhD theses "*Po zánkárpátszki*" *The Socio- and Psycholinguistic aspects of Bilingualism, effects of Bilingualism and bilingual communicational strategies (language choice, code switching) in the Hungarian community of Transcarpathia* (Márku, 2011). However, to date, studies CMC, new internet-based activities, the impact of the internet on the native language, bi-/multilingual competence and repertoire, language ideologies, ethnicity, social identities, and language vitality have been completely missing.

Apart from a few sporadic systematic analyses of internet language within bilingual (especially Slavonic-Hungarian) communities, it is still a disregarded research area in the Carpathian Basin. Up to now, bilingualism and contact phenomena that represent Transcarpathian Hungarians have mainly been examined via spoken and written discourse samples. In contrast, the empirical basis of the present research will be an electronic corpus of different computer mediated language genres and social activities. Internet language (see also computer-mediated communication – CMC, internet-based communication, digital media) is understood here as different types and genres of communicative activity supported by a heterogeneous collection of technologies.

In addition, the proposed project is innovative in terms of its theoretical framework and methods: the Transcarpathian Hungarian community (a bilingual speech community) will be approached from a bottom-up, dynamic perspective of communities of practice, where besides the phenomena of language use, the questions of identity construction, language change and preservation, and educational issues could also be put into focus.

The spread of internet-based communication and other forms of technology-mediated linguistic practices have had a significant impact not only on formerly preferred modes of interaction within the Transcarpathian Hungarian community but also on the concepts of private and public communication. "Through the internet one can engage in a range of communicative practices which provide privacy for the interlocutors, but which take place in public virtual spaces reaching a large number of people. Such communicative environments may constitute 'safe' places for young bilinguals in which to experiment with, use, or enhance their bilingual practices" (Pauwels, 2012, p. 1).

## ***2 Communities of practice***

The Transcarpathian Hungarian community is a bilingual speech community in which two or three languages are used during everyday communication (Hungarian which is in minority status, Ukrainian that is the language of the majority (the state language) and the non-official state language of the former Soviet Union, *de*

*iure* another minority language, Russian). A Transcarpathian Hungarian often gets into a situation where they have to choose two or more languages for communication and sometimes has to switch between languages (Csernicskó, 2010; Márku, 2011, 2013).

The concept of speech community was formed by William Labov. According to him, a group of people becomes a speech community, if all members apply the same language rules. This does not mean, though, that the members of a speech community speak in the same way, but it does mean that the variations in their language use show a kind of system of rules and can be organized into a unified pattern (Labov, 1972; Szabó, 2012c).

A speech community, though, is often alive in *communities of practice*. Communities of practice are voluntarily organized groups. People of similar interests and of similar experiences tend to join together and learn from each other – either by talking about a given topic, or by performing some activity together, ensuring the mutually constitutive nature of individual, group, activity, and meaning: “The value of the notion *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology lies in the fact that it identifies a social grouping not in virtue of shared abstract characteristics (e.g. class, gender) or simple co-presence (e.g. neighbourhood, workplace), but in virtue of shared practice. In the course of regular joint activity, a community of practice develops ways of doing things, views, values, power relations, ways of talking. And the participants engage with these practices in virtue of their place in the community of practice, and of the place of the community of practice in the larger social order. The community of practice is thus a rich locus for the study of situated language use, of language change, and of the very process of conventionalization that underlies both.” (Eckert, 2006, p. 1)

The model of communities of practice supposes that the type of activity one takes part in might be in close relation to his interests, his set of values – these factors correlating with his application of language. A group of users of community forums can also form such a community of practice.

Susan Gal (1987) researched the appearance of a special language application in an Italian – German bilingual community in Constance. She found a group of youngsters constantly switching between German and Italian: within a conversation, they used both languages. The community expressed its own identity with this practice: they did not want to turn their backs on their Italian roots; however, they also refused to totally assimilate into the German society. By continuously practicing of this language mode developed by them and different from the language use of other groups, their own identity and the language use mutually strengthened each other. The members of the community of practice thus strengthened reinforced in their own identity. The concept of the community of practice can be applied not only for the study of physical activities, but also for the study, passing on and strengthening of some communicational practices (Szabó, 2012b).

In this way, the present research project aims to examine bilingual linguistic practices of Transcarpathian Hungarians from a new perspective.

During the research process, the following concepts, theoretical questions will hopefully be clarified, thoroughly discussed and analysed:

- How communities of practice get formed (linguistically) within the internet media, the community websites.
- How the Internet may affect linguistic change in a well-defined community: the language use of speakers by age, education level, background of language socialisation, ethnicity, as well as the structure of language per se.
- What role the internet, digital media may have in language preservation and the reinforcement of identity.
- How internet-based new technologies and non-traditional learning environments can support mother tongue education (in a minority context)
- How digital media influence ideologies and attitudes about vernacular language variable.

### ***3 Instead of summary: the research directions, steps***

The aim of the proposed research is to obtain a deep insight into the nature and functions of internet-based language activities of Hungarians in Transcarpathia. Besides focusing on the peculiarities of language use and the presence of contact phenomena in the electronic discourse of the communities of practice of Transcarpathian Hungarians, the project is aimed at exploring ‘digital’ language and communicative practices and the actual as well as potential impact these have on Hungarian language maintenance, the increase of language vitality, identity reinforcement and stabilizing and balancing bilingualism. As Vincze and Harwood argued, the “new spaces of media require for language planners to understand media as an integral part of all social activities rather than just one domain or a separate instance, measurable on its own right. Narrowing down media influence on linguistic vitality to output hours or audience numbers would not provide the whole picture of the linguistic situation in the media. The new relationship with media requires a new way to measure linguistic vitality, conscious that it permeates all spheres of social interaction. Increased space for multilingualism and support for linguistic variety across the media has to be part of any type of public broadcasting remit.” (Vincze & Harwood, 2011, p. 26)

As internet linguistics and language use of mobile communication is a quite novel, dynamically developing research direction, its research methods and corpus building procedures and the balance between quantitative and qualitative ways of analysis are far from being elaborated (Siebenhaar, 2008; Márku, 2011). In addition, it needs a locally designed application of the methods and tools of linguistics, communication theory, computer science, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis and network study. Social network theory provides an



important point of departure in approaching existing or newly formed communities of practice (Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Barabási, 2011; Szabó, 2012a) Based on the tools of network analysis, strong and weak connections between members of the group can be revealed. There are members of communities who are loosely connected to a certain group and are also loosely connected to other communities. They are the ones who tend to bring in innovations in the language use and are able to function as 'bridges'. Since superficial connections can have language consequences, identification of these network ties is of particular relevance.

**3.1** As *Fieldwork techniques* continuous participant observation, permanent on-line and off-line data collection, interviews, on-line and tape-recorded questionnaires will be applied. Digital corpus will be analysed with tools of quantitative and qualitative sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, CDA and contact linguistics. Special attention will be paid to internet discourse of Transcarpathian speakers (narrative, dialogic and contact linguistic data can come from chat-room conversations, public message boards of community forums, etc.). A multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework as an innovative approach will inevitably lead to a holistic, dynamic and applicable interpretation of 'linguaging' in cyberspace. Results may contribute to the existing knowledge in the fields of linguistics, minority studies, sociology, education research, as well as language policy. Expectedly, the current research will also add to the clarification of methodological principles and ethical concerns (Márku, 2012).

**3.2** The current research will be built into the research and policy agenda of the Mercator Network of Language Diversity Centres where Research Centres for Multilingualism of the host institution is the only partner from the Eastern-Central European region. Based on its Annual report of 2010<sup>3</sup>, the following goals can be formulated:

Research recommendations

- Linguistic preference studies in a variety of languages and language situations may provide extra information about how this decision-making process takes place.
- Use of internet peer-to-peer and social media still requires lengthier and more elaborated studies, which allow for models to be developed and linguistic situations to be evaluated and compared.
- Innovative ways of measuring linguistic impact of media output are deeply needed to understand in which ways these new tools can provide spaces for language maintenance and development.
- The corpus built via systematic occasions of data collection might also be useful for linguistic analyses with different foci. Besides, it can also be incorporated into the Termini Transborder Database, especially the lexical borrowing section of the corpus. In this way, it might also contribute to

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ciemen.org/mercator/pdf/Mercator%20Network\\_Annual%20Report%202010.pdf](http://www.ciemen.org/mercator/pdf/Mercator%20Network_Annual%20Report%202010.pdf)

strengthening the Hungarian-Hungarian relations, and to ‘deconstructing’ borders as far as language is concerned.

#### Policy recommendations

- The new spaces of media require for language planners to understand media as an integral part of all social activities rather than just one domain or a separate instance, measurable in its own right.
- The results of the research might well be used in prospective steps taken in the process of educational planning. Those children who learn to understand language, to think and develop visual conceptualization, to read and to write and to socialize with the help of a computer, might be helped better by the introduction of education reforms that are more effective using the findings of research on the above-mentioned children (Gonda, 2011).
- The new relationship with media requires a new way to measure linguistic vitality, while being aware that it permeates all spheres of social interaction.
- Increased space for multilingualism and support for linguistic variety across the media has to be part of any type of public broadcasting remit.
- The results of the present research might help in understanding everyday interactions better, as the internet affects our life, community forums affect our relationships, in a similar vein, electronic discourse, i.e. internet communication affects our everyday language use and our spoken language, too.

The combination of micro- and macro-level analyses of internet-based communication within a multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework as an innovative approach will inevitably lead to a holistic, dynamic and applicable interpretation of ‘language’ in cyberspace. Therefore, results may contribute to the existing knowledge in the fields of linguistics, minority studies, sociology, education research, as well as to language policy.

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