

Texts, Tweets, Twitch, and TikTok: Teaching Linguistics Through the Study of Computer-Mediated Communication

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Abstract:

Drawing on the broad appeal of computer-mediated communication (CMC), this presentation introduces a replicable curriculum centered on CMC as a vehicle to introduce a variety of elementary linguistic concepts to novice learners. Just as online communication has enriched and accelerated language change, linguists should consider CMC a mechanism to accelerate interest in the field. A focus shift towards CMC in the linguistics classroom facilitates a leveling of the roles of instructor and students in order to expand linguistics recruitment by centering students' empowerment, interest, comfort, and confidence.

Students benefit from learning complex linguistic theory by examining the types of language patterns with which they are most familiar. In fact, the Covid pandemic served to accelerate the movement away from face-to-face, in-person communication. In 2021, the average American teenager (13- to 18-year-olds) spent almost nine hours (8:39) on a screen device daily. Entering the world of language study through what students do on a daily basis makes sense in a time when the tools for linguistic expression are expanding and changing with each new software application and technological invention.

While most introductory linguistics textbooks and courses both exoticize and mathematicize language study, the CMC approach doesn't alienate, but invites, through examples familiar to young people. In this talk, I provide examples of how the instructor of a CMC-focused linguistics course can incorporate lessons on phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic, discourse-analytic, and pragmatic touchstones. For example, innovative CMC spelling practices include phonetic spellings that may or may not reflect dialectal variation (*u*, *nite*, *fo sho*), adjacent character repetition (*yesssss*), abbreviations (*pls* = *please*), acronyms (*lmao* = *laughing my ass off*), and keyboard smash to express strong emotion (*sdfghjkl*). In a unit on phonetic spelling, students discover relationships between the phonemic inventory of English and its quite archaic orthographic system, as represented in dictionaries. (Why is *nite* replacing *night*?) In CMC, adjacent character repetition is used pragmatically for emphasis, but follows predictable and non-obvious patterns about which character can repeat. (Why does *yesssss* look familiar but *yyyyyyes* doesn't?) The patterns of abbreviation in CMC reveal the phonetic and cognitive load differentials between consonants and vowels. (How is it that we recognize *pls* for the word *please*, but *eae* doesn't work as an acronym for the same word?)

Emoji and emoticons (:-/) use can be introduced as an entry into discussion of pragmatics, embodied linguistics cues such as facial expression and co-speech gesture, and syntax (emoji placement is restricted in the linear relationship to text). Asynchronous and synchronous texting yield lessons on conversation analysis and phenomena such as turn-taking, overlaps, and politeness. Data from YouTuber vlogging underlies units on narrative structure and on language and identity. Orthographic creativity such as small caps aesthetic (*i love u*) yield sociolinguistic modules on language and identity. And, just as in face-to-face communication, linguistic patterns of translanguaging, borrowing, and second language acquisition all show up in CMC data. The presentation will include sample instructional units, assignments, accessible articles, and a textbook that can be used to adopt a CMC-centered approach to introductory linguistics.

Keywords: linguistics pedagogy, computer-mediated communication, digital communication, course design

