

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of the study

Since Biber's (1988) comprehensive multidimensional analysis of variation in spoken and written English, a wealth of linguistic multidimensional studies have been carried out by a great number of scholars (cf. section 2.2). Some have applied the approach to a single genre or a few genres, with a synchronic or a diachronic perspective, to investigate patterns in, for instance, child and adult language, variation in interdisciplinary texts and historical shifts in the language of women and men. Others have analyzed patterns of variation in languages other than English, and a few have made cross-linguistic comparisons of variation in several languages. Yet, to the present author's knowledge, prior to this study, no multidimensional linguistic analysis of English computer-mediated conversational writing has been presented. The investigation at hand has attempted to fill this gap.

A conversational writing corpus, UCOW, introduced in section 1.2 and described in sections 3.1–3.3, was compiled and annotated for this multidimensional analysis, as was a subset of the Santa Barbara Corpus (SBC) of face-to-face conversations. The foremost aim of the analysis was to situate the two UCOW corpus components, Internet relay chat and split-window ICQ chat, and incidentally also the SBC subset genre, on Biber's (1988) dimensions of variation among the previously positioned genres of writing and speech (from LOB and LLC; see Biber 1988). The investigation was motivated, among other things, by an anticipated similarity between conversational writing and conversational speech (as the status of conversational writing proposed in previous research was that of a hybrid between speech and writing) and a desire to elucidate the relationship between conversational writing and traditional writing. Chapter 1 set the stage for the study by presenting the hypotheses to be tested and the research questions to be answered; chapter 2 provided a background of previous research into writing, speech and CMC and presented the interfaces of the synchronous (IRC) and supersynchronous (ICQ) chat clients; and chapter 3 described the material to be investigated and the methodology for obtaining the data required (inter alia, the frequencies of the 67 linguistic features) for the genres to be contrasted with the genres of writing and speech.

In chapters 4 and 5, the results of the empirical investigation were presented. The primary purpose of chapter 4 was to exemplify and discuss the distribution of the salient linguistic features in conversational writing, those identified to be

most frequent compared to the mean of Biber's (1988) written and spoken genres, as well as previously understudied features, such as lexical density, inserts and emotives. Whenever possible, functional comparisons of feature distributions were made across the genres and media, in order to relate conversational writing to writing and speech, as well as to Collo's (1991) genre of ACMC. The results consistently showed a similar distribution of features in conversational writing and conversational speech, and a different distribution in writing, recurrently also in ACMC. In chapter 5, the dimension scores of the conversational writing genres were plotted on Biber's (1988) dimensions, revealing, on most dimensions, positions in the vicinity of oral conversations. On Dimension 1, conversational writing and conversational speech both display involved, interactive and occasionally affective discourse. A majority of the most salient linguistic features identified in conversational writing in chapter 4 (e.g. first and second person pronouns, direct WH-questions, analytic negation, demonstrative pronouns and present tense verbs) contribute to this similarity. On Dimension 2, conversational writing is slightly less narrative than conversational speech, although neither is particularly concerned with narration. Dimension 3 evidences, for conversational writing and conversational speech alike, a discourse with abundant situation-dependent reference, Dimension 4 generally little overt expression of persuasion/argumentation in either, and Dimension 5, for both, a discourse with typically non-abstract/non-impersonal information. Dimension 6 indicates a slightly more complex relationship between conversational writing and the spoken and written genres.

In chapter 6, the ample and multifaceted results were brought together and discussed. The primary purposes of the chapter were to interrelate the results in order to test the hypotheses of the study, quantitatively and qualitatively, and to sum up the answers provided to the research questions. Via statistical calculations, relating the conversational writing genres to the oral conversational genres on Biber's (1988) dimensions, the degree of orality in the former was assessed quantitatively (i.e. the genres' proximity to oral conversations), initially showing a slightly higher degree for split-window ICQ than for IRC. Collo's (1991) genre of ACMC was also assessed and was observed to be the least oral of the three CMC genres. The chapter then analyzed and discussed the multidimensional character of the three CMC genres, to identify their most prevalent text types (Biber 1989, 1995) in order to assess the degrees of orality qualitatively. In brief, the combined quantitative and qualitative assessments evidenced no higher degree of orality in split-window ICQ chat than in IRC, but a higher degree of orality in both conversational writing genres than in the ACMC genre. The orality in

conversational writing was then examined by way of a semiotic analysis, which found the “higher” degree of orality initially observed in split-window ICQ to be due to a semiotic structure more similar to that in intimate, oral conversations. The similar semiotic structure of split-window ICQ and such conversations was seen as a more decisive contributor to the greater lexico-grammatical correspondence between split-window ICQ and oral conversations than was its supersynchronicity.

More qualitative, contrastive discussions of conversational writing and the modalities of writing and speech followed upon these findings. Traits that liken conversational writing to writing were brought to light (such as the persistence of the graphemic script in both) as well as traits that distinguish conversational writing from conversational speech (such as the inability in the former to convey a particular tone of voice). The degree of shared context and the synchronicity of communication in the media were also contrasted and discussed in order to determine the potential status of conversational writing as a modality of its own, alongside the modalities of writing and speech. The discussion yielded no support for the formulation of a new modality; rather, conversational writing may be regarded as the most oral-like form of writing, just as, for instance, broadcast and prepared speeches, cued by props or manuscripts, may be regarded as some of the most written-like forms of speech. Genres of writing and speech simply intersperse in linguistic space. The most accurate and fine-grained representation of the relationship between genres across writing and speech, moreover, is a multidimensional one, as illustrated in Biber (1988) and, for the conversational writing genres, in chapter 5 here.

In an extensive special issue on “computer-mediated conversation” in the online scholarly journal *Language@Internet* (volumes 7 and 8), a collection of original research articles from several disciplines (including conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and pragmatics, spanning more than a decade of research) is presented, articles that all contribute significantly to the field of CMC linguistics, exploring the conversationality in various modes of CMC. Introducing the collection, Herring (2011b) acknowledges the unique contributions of the articles, but notes that only a few of them directly assess the relative degrees of conversationality across different modes and that “no single set of methods is employed, or questions asked, across the collection that would make the results of the individual studies directly comparable with one another” (2011b: 7; as seen in section 1.1 here). Herring proceeds to suggest additional studies, especially systematic comparisons of several modes using “a common set of methods” (2011b:

7) and incidentally calls for studies that compare “CMC with spoken and/or written genres (cf. Collot & Belmore, 1996; Ko, 1996; Yates, 1996)” (ibid.).

The present study has responded to Herring’s (2011b) call for research by providing a description of prototypical conversational writing, a description methodologically comparable to Collot’s (1991) and Collot & Belmore’s (1996) description of APMC, partially comparable to Yates’ (1993, 1996) study of APMC, and complementary to e.g. Ko’s (1994, 1996) and Freiermuth’s (2003) studies of SCMC. Biber’s (1988) dimensions have here enabled the systematic comparison of two conversational writing genres, and BBS conferencing (the latter from Collot 1991), relative to a range of written and spoken genres and particularly provided a methodology to elucidate the CMC genres’ relative degrees of conversationality (here called orality). Via multidimensional characterizations, among other things, it was possible to explore just what it means for the chatted texts to be conversational, i.e. to assess their similarity to oral conversations. In sum, just as there was a gap in variationist linguistics as regards a description of synchronous and super-synchronous conversational writing genres, there was a gap in CMC linguistics as regards a systematic variationist analysis of the same genres. While filling the first gap, the present study also incidentally filled the second, an effort which, taken as a whole, might be regarded as the major contribution of the study.

Biber’s (1988) dimensions, for a time, may constitute the gauge for lexico-grammatical descriptions of computer-mediated conversational writing genres and other CMC genres, although eventually, of course, the currency and universality of Biber’s (1988) genres (from LOB and LLC) and features may be called into question, motivating a new comprehensive multifeature/multidimensional analysis of the English language. Until then, Biber’s (1988) approach, as employed here, is one of the more rigorous ways to systematically compare existing and emergent genres of CMC. For future purposes, the present study has underscored the importance of including conversational writing genres, and other genres of CMC, in any analysis of the full variation in the English language, and suggested the consideration of lexical density, inserts and emotives in such analyses.

The conversational writing carried out in split-window ICQ chat is arguably the most intimate, “oral” (or, in Herring’s 2011b terms, “conversational”) form of writing ever documented. In fact, the corpus of split-window ICQ chat presented in this study is believed to document a unique stage in the history of English, in which written texts, functionally and lexico-grammatically, were closer than they ever have been to extremely involved, oral conversational texts. In conclusion, the linguistic documentation of this distinctive genre is another significant contribution of this study, to the fields of variation and CMC studies alike.

7.2 Suggestions for further research

In the decade that has passed since the recording of UCOW, CMC has evolved in several directions. Computer-mediated conversational writing, for instance, appears to have developed along at least three *prima facie* discernible trajectories, those involving privatization (i.e. a popular move from public chat channels, such as in IRC, to the private conversations in IM, such as Facebook chat); desynchronization (by which supersynchronous modes have become synchronous, such as present-day ICQ, and by which synchronous modes are gradually supplanted by asynchronous ones, which enable users to receive messages at a time of their convenience); and specialization/topicalization (which makes public chat increasingly used for particular events, such as web chat with public officials after their televised appearance, or for public or commercial services, such as library and travel agent chat services). The latter developments suggest that synchronous conversational writing today is found in a range of contexts, both private and public, that may have given rise to several genres of conversational texts, or possibly to sub-genres. To explore and contrast the linguistic properties of current and emerging genres/sub-genres of conversational writing would be an intriguing area of research.

At the same time, a few asynchronous modes of CMC and telecommunications are increasingly used for two-way synchronous communication. Mobile texting, for instance, is occasionally used for interaction resembling conversational writing as defined here. Software seamlessly incorporated into text messaging functions in mobiles, such as iMessage (really an IM service with push technology), indicates in the message window (in iMessage by three dots) that a user is keying in a message, making users aware of each other's simultaneous participation in the communication. It would be interesting to investigate whether, and if so, how, the language in the synchronous exchanges of such communication differs from that in the asynchronous exchanges between the same users, whether the synchronous sequences, for instance, give rise to more backchannels.

The present study has far from exhausted the topic of conversational writing. Rather, in the flux of developments, CMC and telecommunications continue to give rise to ample reconfigurations of linguistic material, to texts that may be explored from the variationist's and the CMC scholar's perspectives alike. Emerging texts need to be closely surveyed and analyzed in order for linguists to effectively contribute to the collaborative scholarly effort of elucidating the workings of human interaction. It will be fascinating to continue the pursuit.

