Preface

This book presents a linguistic investigation of two genres of computer-mediated communication (CMC), namely two modes of conversational writing: "Internet relay chat" (synchronous CMC) and "split-window ICQ chat" (supersynchronous CMC). The investigation employs Douglas Biber's multifeature multidimensional methodology, taking into account the six dimensions of textual variation in English identified in his 1988 book *Variation across speech and writing.*

The book came about as an attempt to disentangle my puzzlement in the early 21st century with some fellow university students' frequent propensity to prefer written conversation (computer chat) to spoken conversation. I was a member of the board of the university's computer society and one of few in the society from outside the technological sphere. At board meetings, I noticed a reluctance among board members to sit down and discuss face-to-face. It seemed as if the members had a lack of practice and rather wished to meet and discuss in chat room channels or in Unix Talk. Occasionally, items on the agenda were left unfinished or postponed to discussions in the online environments, and several board members appeared to be more comfortable conversing in writing.

I became curious about the board members' choice of modality – opting for writing instead of speech. Much like the interlocutors in social media today, they appeared to feel safer in the graphemic interface, while still being able to solve issues of the computer society efficiently because of the real-time communication. Conversation in writing seems to filter away a number of cues that users potentially find threatening in face-to-face communication. If I was a psychologist, I might have embarked on a study involving in-depth interviews with chat room users like the board members, but since I am a linguist, I decided to limit my scope to the language communicated in each respective medium.

Questions that I address in this book are what the most salient linguistic features of computer chat are, how synchronous writing is similar to speech and how written conversations differ from spoken conversations. My study does not involve any of the individuals described above, but chat room conversationalists in international, public channels (for synchronous chat) and adolescents in an English-speaking country (for supersynchronous chat). The multidimensional methodology chosen for the investigation identifies, among other things, the most salient linguistic features of their computer chats (features conspicuous either by their high relative frequency or by their relative rarity), and the procedure of positioning the two genres represented by the chats on Biber's (1988)

dimensions enables a systematic lexico-grammatical description of the genres relative to other genres of writing, and speech.

Although none of Biber's (1988) dimensions constitutes a dichotomous distinction between writing and speech, they all differentiate among literate and oral genres in various respects. Among the genres studied by Biber are face-to-face and telephone conversations. By relating the CMC genres to the oral conversational genres on the dimensions, it is possible to assess the degree of orality in computer-mediated conversational writing, another undertaking of the study. The investigation presented here considers previous assumptions that synchronously mediated texts display more speech-like properties than asynchronous texts, and discusses whether supersynchronously mediated conversational writing texts are more speech-like than synchronously mediated ones.

The study further employs M. A. K. Halliday's model of semiotics, among other reasons to explain differences in the outcome of subtly divergent communicative settings, and argues for the inclusion of Halliday's measure of lexical density in studies of linguistic variation involving conversational writing. Finally, two features not included in Biber's (1988) methodology are here found to be particularly indicative of conversational writing texts: inserts, specified in Biber et al.'s (1999) *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*, and "emotives" (comprising emoticons and sentiment initialisms), a feature introduced in this study.

Why, then, is it important to study conversational writing genres from such an in-depth linguistic point of view? Firstly, linguistic research has found register/genre variation to be a fundamental aspect of human language. Biber & Conrad (2009: 23) note that "all humans control a range of registers/genres" and that "[g]iven the ubiquity of register/genre variation, an understanding of how linguistic features are used in patterned ways across text varieties is of central importance for both the description of particular languages and the development of cross-linguistic theories of language use." Biber & Conrad call register/genre variation a linguistic universal. In the light of this, a study of conversational writing genres is as natural, relevant and important as the study of other genres of language. Variationists aim to describe language adequately, to enable the comparison across genres, to map out language users' competence and to eventually facilitate, for instance, cross-linguistic comparisons. A thorough description of conversational writing may in turn facilitate the development of computational tools for automatic genre classification, editing and translation, as well as the development of new software for digital communication. And last but not least, it may lend a clue to psychologists' and sociologists' investigation of people's motivations for opting for written, rather than spoken, conversations.