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**Bibliographical note**

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Abstract

This article compares the language used in four online written asynchronous fora in English, Spanish and Catalan about football. We pay special attention to the use of informal, conversational language in these written texts. The results are then compared to a previous analysis of online fora in the three languages about a more serious topic, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our initial hypotheses were that the linguistic behaviour in the English fora would show more informal, conversational characteristics than the Spanish and Catalan fora and that the fora about football would be more conversational than those about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our study largely confirms that, in the discussion groups studied, online asynchronous computer mediated communication in English displayed markedly more oral elements than in Catalan and Spanish, both in fora devoted to a serious topic and in fora devoted to sport. While the Catalan and Spanish showed more informal, conversational elements than the corresponding fora about politics, this topic related difference was not so clear in the case of the English fora. Another unforeseen finding was that the English asynchronous forum devoted to sport displayed a number of features associated with synchronous CMC.

Keywords: Discourse analysis; Computer mediated communication; Informalization.

1. Introduction

The informalization of discourse and mores in the latter part of the twentieth century is a complex, profoundly ambivalent phenomenon that has been well documented in English speaking societies. It would seem to form a part of a broader, “general pattern of ‘drift’ towards more oral styles” that Biber and Finegan (1989: 487) have documented for three genres over the last four centuries. This tendency towards orality may also be exemplified by the important reduction of the number of words per sentence in written English over the last centuries (Baron, 2000; McWorther, 2003). In the last hundred years this informalization has fractured many traditional distinctions, such as the association of formality with written, printed language and of informality with the spoken word. Current social practices are effecting fundamental changes in the distinction between written and spoken modes of language. In the past, increased literacy and the emergence of genres characterized by scripted spoken language marked a certain shift of speech towards writing, but, at present, as Fairclough (1992: 204) points out “the shifts of speech towards writing may have had their heyday; contemporary cultural values place a high valuation on informality, and the predominant shift is towards speech-like forms in writing.”

Although, as we shall argue, this phenomenon is related to the profound technological revolutions that opened up new modes of communication in the wake of the industrial revolution – advertising for a mass audience, the telephone, radio, cinema, television, the
computer and text processing. Internet – we feel that it is important to avoid an oversimplistic technological determinism. Technology obviously contributes to shaping human behaviour, but the uses we make of technological innovations are ultimately conditioned by broader social and historical processes (see, for example, Hobsbawm, 1994: 287-288).

The informalization of discourse is also related to what Ong (1982) has called secondary orality, a phenomenon intimately related to the development of technologies like radio and television. Prior to the twentieth century, in literate societies, spoken language was clearly identified with the private sphere, while the public sphere was associated with the printed word. Society accorded a higher status to writing and especially printed writing. The history of the twentieth century is, among other things, the history of a dramatic change in the relative status of literacy and orality.

Change is never simple – be it social or linguistic. Upheavals in discourse practices are never linear. Moreover, as Hobsbawm (1994) underlines, the cultural changes that so deeply marked the final years of the twentieth century were global, but did not affect all parts of the world evenly. As regards the tendencies most directly related to the informalization of discourse, English speaking countries were clearly in the forefront, in part, at least, because they spearheaded the technological revolutions that have given rise to the new modes of communication.

The work of Fairclough has centred upon the processes of informalization or conversationalization and technologization of discourse, underlining that in modern discourse practices, there are more and more “mixtures of formal and informal styles, technical and non-technical vocabularies, markers of authority and familiarity, more typically written and more typically spoken syntactic forms” (Fairclough, 1995: 79), as the distinctions between written and oral genres become blurred. Fairclough (1989) has extensively studied the impact on current discourse practices of discourse technologies, which involve the conscious application of social scientific knowledge to the production of texts. In this paper we adopt a broader definition of the term technologization to include discourse practices that have been transformed or rendered possible (which, we insist, is not the same as determined) by new technologies.

This broader definition seems necessary because, as many scholars have underlined, the development of word processing and desk top publishing facilities and the WWW has dramatically increased the number of authors of public texts and blurred the distinction between published, printed texts and personal, web-published texts, a phenomenon eloquently exemplified by the recent development of the new genre of blogs, whose eminently hybrid nature has been underlined by Herring et al. (2004a). Many authors have stressed that computer mediated communication (CMC) in general contains clearly oral traits along with features characteristic of the written language (Murray, 1991; Maynor, 1994; Yates, 1996; Baron, 1998, 2000; Crystal, 2001; Yus 2001; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2008; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2008).

2. Purpose of the study

The linguistic characteristics of e-mails, online discussion lists, fora and chats are now beginning to draw the attention of scholars mainly focusing on what Crystal (2001) calls netspeak, studying their neologisms, affixes, compounds, abbreviations, emotional
expressions and discourse conventions (e.g. Crystal, 2001; Yus, 2001; Posteguillo, 2003). But despite the amazing popularity of CMC, there have been relatively few studies of how different modalities of CMC, without imposing explicit guidelines on participants, may differ in their linguistic characteristics, in particular in their degree of formality/informality. Still less has been published on intercultural comparisons between online communities. Murray (2000: 398) claimed that “very little research has been conducted in non-English-dominant countries or among language minority communities”. Despite the growing interest in non-English CMC, as reflected in the special issue of the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication devoted to the “Multilingual Internet” (Danet and Herring eds., 2003), Robinson (2005) still underlines that “there is little content analysis of the Internet discourse produced by members of non-anglophone fora” in her study of discourse styles used in a Brazilian, French and American forum.

In a previous paper (Turney, Montero-Fleta, Montesinos-López and Pérez-Sabater, 2003), we analyzed the presence of oral and written characteristics in the online fora of three different newspapers: The Guardian, El Periódico de Cataluña and Vilaweb1. The fora were devoted to a topic of international scope, the Israel-Palestine conflict. Vilaweb was chosen as the only forum in Catalan on this topic (a language spoken in the North-East of Spain and the South-East of France); the other newspapers were the only British and Spanish newspapers with fora dealing with this topic at the time. We found that there was a great difference of style and tone between the English forum, characterized by its orality, and the Spanish and Catalan fora, which tended to be more formal.

The present paper seeks to ascertain if the same phenomenon occurs in fora dealing with a less formal topic. Thus, we make a contrastive analysis of the characteristics of four different football fora: from the Spanish sports newspapers As and Marca, dealing with Real Madrid and FC Barcelona respectively; the Catalan television TV32 devoted to FC Barcelona; and a forum of the British newspaper The Guardian dedicated to Liverpool FC. As and Marca have been chosen because they are the most popular sports newspapers in Spain. The forum of TV3 was the only forum in Catalan about football and The Guardian was chosen to seek to attain some coherence with the data of the previous article. The results are then compared with the fora dealing with the Israel-Palestine conflict3.

The following research questions are specifically addressed in this study:

1. Are there any significant differences between these online fora regarding their language? In other words, does the language used or its associated culture seem to influence the stylistic characteristics of the posts?

2. Are there any significant differences in style between these online fora regarding the topic discussed?

As we have already mentioned, the point of departure of the present study is the hypothesis that samples of messages from any discussion forum of a given culture are likely to display a similar use of certain linguistic features and that the more trivial the topic

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1 The Guardian is a British broadsheet generally associated with the British parliamentary left-wing; El Periódico de Cataluña is a daily newspaper printed in Barcelona and published in a Spanish and Catalan edition (the forum analyzed was in Spanish); Vilaweb is an electronic daily newspaper in Catalan.

2 As and Marca are the two Spanish sports dailies with the highest circulation; TV3 is a generalist television channel belonging to Televisió de Catalunya.

3 These fora all used web-based interfaces, none of them required registration. As far as we know, they have not been studied before. Both the politics and the sports fora of The Guardian were available from the same interface.
being discussed, the more informal the language being used, the more dynamic and phatic the communication. Moreover, as Murray (1997) points out, “[t]here are many different forms of CMC… Problems can arise if people take the findings from research of a particular type, on one form of CMC, and suggest they can be applied universally to all forms of CMC.” We contend that even within a single form of CMC, there can be important differences and that asynchronous CMC, such as online fora, may exhibit characteristics normally associated with synchronous CMC, such as chats.

3. Methodology

The present study makes a corpus analysis of electronic fora devoted to football, broadly following the computer mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) approach described by Herring (2004b). As our aim is to study stylistic variation in CMC which may be related to language or culture, we have considered it essential to study fora about different teams, in different languages and from different cultures.

The messages selected were those that appeared during one week in two of the fora (the Barcelona TV3 and Marco fora), four days in the English forum and just three days for the Real Madrid forum. In the latter two cases the flow of messages was higher than in the others. During the time under study, all the messages were downloaded in their original format, in an attempt to preserve the date and time sent, the title of the message, the sender and the message itself. All this information is important as it supplies valuable contextual information on the electronic communicative act.

The four corpora were then analyzed and compared on the following parameters:

- Apart from the selection of the messages in a definite period of time, the density of the message flow was studied using the parameters of total number of messages, number of messages exchanged within one day and, in some cases, within one hour.
- Data related to the communicative density of the messages themselves were also taken into account employing two different parameters: the average number of words per message and average sentence length.

As several structural modalities of the communicative act come into play in fora, since there are new messages and messages depending on previous posts, other parameters were considered: on the one hand, the number of original messages and replies and, on the other hand, the percentage of messages semantically dependent upon previous messages. It should be pointed out that when we use the term “semantic dependency” we have considered that a message is semantically dependent on a previous message if reference to the previous message is necessary to work out the current message’s propositional meaning: we have not counted instances of interpersonal meaning (Lyons, 1995). Thus, the posting “Damn right mate” has been considered semantically dependent as it is necessary to refer to the previous message to find out its propositional meaning, whereas “what you doing here GD?” has not been considered semantically dependent as it conveys merely interpersonal meaning.

Besides, as the content of messages need not necessarily refer to the forum’s topic, it was considered important to take into account topic drift and to differentiate between on-topic and off-topic posts. Addressivity (Werry, 1996) was also studied.

Finally, the language of the fora was analyzed for three markers of informality: the number of messages containing swearwords, the number of markedly informal expressions
and the number of spelling mistakes per message, following Yus (2001). To evaluate these latter parameters, each posting was coded by at least two of the authors of the paper.

4. Results

Our initial hypotheses based on our former studies were that the linguistic behaviour in the English fora analyzed would show more informal, conversational characteristics than the Spanish and Catalan fora and that the fora about football would be more conversational than those about more serious topics, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

With regard to the communicative density as measured by the frequency of messages, a great disparity was observed among the four fora, as can be seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Football Fora</th>
<th>As</th>
<th>Marca</th>
<th>TV3</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number of</td>
<td>116.75</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>messages per day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of football fora messages

These data are not especially significant as they simply reflect the popularity of the forum. However, what is interesting is the frequency pattern in the English forum. The posts are sent in sudden bursts followed by hours of negligible activity. Thus, when we started monitoring the forum at 16:30 on a Friday afternoon, 17 messages were posted in 20 minutes. This burst of activity gave way to almost absolute silence, with only one message sent in the evening. There was very little activity at the weekend, with fifteen messages on Saturday and only one message on Sunday. This could seem surprising if we remember that football matches are usually played on Saturdays in England. However, the vast majority of the postings on this forum occur in working or school hours and would seem to indicate that most participants are posting to the forum using a computer situated at work or at school. This idea is borne out by a number of messages which indicate that the participant is at work (one participant even laments that, in his current job, s/he can only access The Guardian’s fora). It is also worth observing that, when activity peaks (on Monday between 14:00 and 15:00, possibly the hour after the lunch break), there are 74 messages: more than one a minute. The Catalan and Spanish fora showed no such bursts of activity (unfortunately, the As forum, which is the only one that shows comparable daily activity, does not record the time of the posting).

The data relating to average length of the messages and the average sentence length are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Football Fora</th>
<th>As</th>
<th>Marca</th>
<th>TV3</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number of words</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>57.61</td>
<td>149.83</td>
<td>18.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>per message</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average sentence length</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Length of football fora messages
There are two striking features here. In the first place, the Catalan forum contains long messages made up of relatively long sentences. This may be due to the fact that there is a very active presence of the moderator of the forum, tending to encourage cooperation among the participants. As a result, there are very few offensive and aggressive messages and the forum is characterized by a calm and reflexive atmosphere, which favours the production of longer and more thoughtful messages. In the second place, in the English forum, messages and sentences are extremely short. These very short messages, together with the frequency pattern mentioned above, would tend to suggest that the participants in the English forum are using the normally asynchronous medium of a forum as if it were a synchronous chat.

This idea is also borne out by a number of other characteristics of *The Guardian* forum. There is far more semantic dependency on previous messages in the English forum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Football Fora</th>
<th>As</th>
<th>Marca</th>
<th>TV3</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependency on</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>previous messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Football fora: dependency on previous messages

Thus, in almost 90% of the messages in the English forum it is necessary to consult previous messages to work out the meaning of the message (we shall take up the question of explicit reference to previous posts below). This is surprising if we bear in mind that, in the Spanish and Catalan fora, the format makes it possible to reply explicitly to a given message, which is not the case in the English forum.

Our hypothesis that the English forum is something on the borderline between a forum and a chat is also corroborated by the large number of off-topic messages, a phenomenon found only in the English forum. While no messages were off-topic in the Catalan and Spanish fora, only 41% were on-topic in *The Guardian*’s forum. The nominal topic of the forum was *Liverpool* (rubbish or just underachieving) and we have regarded as on-topic all posts making reference to Liverpool or any other football club, even so nearly 60% of the messages were off-topic having to do with other participants, their lack of computer literacy, incidents in pubs, especially related to hooliganism, movies, work, etc.

Lack of topical coherence is a typical feature of synchronous CMC. As Herring (1999) writes:

... some as yet unpublished research supports the perception that topics tend to decay rapidly in computer-mediated groups. In their study of a social chat channel on the Internet, Herring and Nix ... found that nearly half (47%) of all turns were “off-topic” in relation to the turn to which they were responding.

Herring contrasts this lack of topical coherence in synchronous CMC with the preoccupation for coherence in asynchronous groups noting that “concern for topical coherence is reflected in the organization of asynchronous discussion groups on the Internet” and that, in asynchronous groups there are structural mechanisms that “mitigate the tendency towards topical fragmentation in extended exchanges”.

The chatlike nature of the English forum and a general tendency for shorter messages in the football fora can also be highlighted if we compare the results obtained in the fora dealing with football with the results we obtained in a previous intercultural study of online
fora dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (we have averaged out the two Spanish football fora). As can be seen in Table 4, the three fora dealing with international politics show a very homogeneous total message length of around 110 words, longer than that of the Spanish football fora and considerably longer than that of the English football forum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Football and International Politics Fora</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Catalan</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number of words per message (football)</td>
<td>67.25</td>
<td>149.83</td>
<td>18.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of words per message (politics)</td>
<td>114.4</td>
<td>109.9</td>
<td>109.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average sentence length (football)</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average sentence length (politics)</td>
<td>23.85</td>
<td>32.71</td>
<td>22.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency on previous messages (football)</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency on previous messages (politics)</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Comparison of football and international politics fora

As regards average sentence length, the fora devoted to the more serious topic have generally longer sentences, with the English political forum more than doubling the sentence length of the English football forum. This important difference within the same modality of CMC may lend weight to the hypothesis that there are stylistic variations according to topic in these online fora. In the football fora analyzed the average sentence length tends to correspond to that posited for conversation by Chafe and Danielewicz (1987), 18 words per sentence, while the results from the political fora are similar to the average sentence length that the same authors found for written sentences, 24 words per sentence.

We find a similar situation with regard to the amount of implicit semantic dependency on previous messages: the Catalan and Spanish fora show a similar number of messages dependent upon previous posts in both topics, while the English football forum exhibits a considerably higher number of such messages. As regards on-topic and off-topic messages, we found that all messages in all three political fora were on-topic, while almost 60% of the messages in the English forum devoted to football were off-topic.

Related to the question of topical coherence is that of addressivity (Werry, 1996), whereby a message is prefaced by the nickname of the intended addressee. This is important in synchronous CMC to clarify in order to whom the message is addressed. It is sometimes equally important in asynchronous CMC where cross-turn reference is often made or accompanied by quoting (Herring, 1999). In our study of the political fora we found that initial quoting was absent from the Catalan and Spanish fora, but 54% of the messages in the English forum incorporated this coherence enhancing feature.

We find a rather different situation in the football fora. There is no initial quoting in the Spanish and Catalan fora and very little in the English forum (3.3% of all messages). The absence of initial quoting in the Spanish and Catalan fora, independent of the seriousness of
the topic, may indicate that this device for assuring intertextual coherence is not so common in CMC in these languages. In the case of the English fora, the important use of initial quoting in the political forum probably reflects the seriousness of the topic and the users’ preoccupation to ensure coherence. As we have seen, in the English forum devoted to football, 41% of the messages were off topic, which would seem to indicate that the users are not worried about the overall coherence of the forum. In such a situation, the relative lack of initial quoting is normal as the participants simply rely on the temporal immediacy of the messages to create short term coherence, as happens in chats.

A related topic is the use of nicks. In the fora dedicated to politics, we found that the participants in the English forum made extensive use of humorous word play in their nicks, with user names like PistonBroke. This phenomenon was entirely absent from the Spanish and Catalan fora studied, where participants used formal titles, normal names and, in the Spanish forum, sometimes made explicit addressee reference using the standard salutation of formal letters. In the fora devoted to football, the situation was very different: we found that roughly half of the nicks in the Spanish and Catalan fora implied imaginative word play or humour. Thus, one user in a forum in Spanish is called Ojo hinchado in Spanish (literally swollen eye, but equivalent to the English black eye) and incorporating Catalan spelling (tx instead of ch). In the English forum devoted to football, all the nicks but one involved word play or humour. Moreover, the participants normally abbreviate nicks (BYFseagulls is regularly referred to as BYF, HighburyHigh becomes HH, GeneralDisorder is addressed as GD) and sometimes use the familiarity marker –y (Cheesemonger is sometimes called Cheese and sometimes Cheesy).

To assess the relative formality and informality of the fora, we have counted the number of spelling mistakes, instances of markedly informal language and swearwords. Swearing is a notoriously complex sociolinguistic phenomenon. In this paper we have made no attempt to analyze the way swearing intrudes into the grammatical structures of the postings or to consider the pragmatic values of swearwords (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990). Nor have we sought to make a classification of swearing and non-swearing based on the purported gender of the participants in the fora (Herring, 1994). Swearwords have simply been used as a measure of orality and informality in the postings.

The results, together with those found in the analysis of the more serious, political fora are shown in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Football and International Politics Fora</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Catalan</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Messages containing swearwords (football)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages containing swearwords (politics)</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal language (football)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal language (politics)</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling mistakes per message (football)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling mistakes per message (politics)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Markers of informality in football and international politics fora
As Table 5 shows, the English forum devoted to the Middle East conflict contained significantly more swearwords and informal language than the Catalan and Spanish fora. Given the serious nature of the topic, this would seem to suggest that the participants in the English forum were more prone to mix styles, combining formal and informal registers.

We had supposed that the football fora would contain more swearwords and distinctively informal language than the more serious fora and, on the basis of the data from the fora devoted to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, that the English forum would prove markedly more informal. While it is true that the Spanish and Catalan football fora studied contained significantly more swearwords and more informal language than the equivalent fora devoted to politics, the English football forum contained fewer swearwords and informal expressions than the Spanish and Catalan fora and than the English forum about the Middle East. Without further research, it is difficult to interpret this finding. While there is a clear correlation between subject matter and formality of language in the Catalan and Spanish fora, no such correlation appears to exist in the English forum. A tentative explanation could be that, in the English football forum, the messages were so short (18 words per message) that participants could not exhibit the stylistic markers of informality that we have selected as a measure of informality. Another potentially more interesting reason for the asymmetry in the frequency of swearwords in the political and football fora could be that there are substantial cultural differences as relates to topic between British swearing and non-swearing behaviour on the one hand and Spanish and Catalan behaviour on the other.

As regards the number of spelling mistakes per message, a frequent phenomenon in CMC according to Crystal (2001), there are, unsurprisingly, more spelling mistakes per message in the fora devoted to football than in the serious fora. There are far more spelling mistakes in the Spanish and Catalan fora devoted to football. The vast majority of the mistakes in Catalan are cases of a systematic lack of accentuation, a phenomenon identified by Climent et al. (2003).

6. Conclusions

In general, our study has largely confirmed that, in the fora studied, the online asynchronous computer mediated communication in English contained markedly more oral elements than in Catalan and Spanish, both in fora devoted to a serious topic and in fora devoted to sport. However, it has also given rise to a series of issues that we have not been able to address fully in this paper and some of which require further research.

As far as the difference between written styles in Spanish and English is concerned, the results would seem to concord with Grabe and Kaplan’s (1996: 195) conclusion with respect to Spanish-English rhetorical contrasts in the written language: there is “a more elaborate style preference for Spanish writers” and with Machin and van Leeuwen’s (2007: 142) idea about the existence of “well-patrolled boundaries” in discourse practices in Spanish and the reluctance to mix information and entertainment. The English fora that we have analyzed show more oral traits than the Spanish fora, although the process of informalization in Spanish CMC is certainly beginning to appear as Yus (2001), Grijelmo (2001) and Belda (2003) suggest. Regarding the Catalan fora, the situation would seem to be similar to the Spanish fora, although any interpretation of the data must take into account that Catalan is a minority language undergoing a normalization process. Climent et al.
(2003) argue that most of the deviations from the prescriptive norms in their data in Catalan are probably caused by interference from Spanish. Our data also tend to confirm this idea.

On the whole, the messages in the fora devoted to politics seem to be the result of a more mediated argumentation of ideas rather than the immediate reaction of the sender to a recent sporting event or to a previous message.

Our initial hypotheses then seem to have been largely confirmed, but certain phenomena have surfaced in the study that we had not foreseen.

Firstly, as regards the communicative density of the football fora, as measured by postings per day, the enormous variation (ranging from 4.26 messages to 116.75) would seem to indicate that asynchronous CMC gives rise to very different communicative uses. This is largely confirmed by the average length of messages (ranging from 18.36 in The Guardian to 149.83 in the Catalan forum) and the average length of sentences (ranging from 10.8 in The Guardian to 21.7 in the Catalan forum).

As we have argued, these data, together with the frequency pattern exhibited in the English forum, its lack of topical coherence and its semantic dependency, would seem to suggest that, in the forum in English, participants are tending to use the asynchronous ‘forum’ as a synchronous ‘chat’. As we have argued in the Introduction, it is important to avoid facile technological determinism: language users may use technology for their own very disparate goals. Yates and Orlikowski (1993) observe that patterns of language use in CMC “reflect both the capabilities of the medium and the characteristics of the group” and Herring (2004b) underlines that, while computer mediated discourse may be shaped by the technological features of computer mediated communication systems, this is not inevitably the case.

In the light of this, it may be interesting to examine, in future research, to what extent the distinction between certain CMC genres is intrinsically fuzzy, with the nature of such genres depending more upon communicative ‘intention’ than on the sociolinguistic ‘conventions’ that have evolved within the technological constrains of a given medium (Strawson, 1964).

Secondly, while the use of humorous word play in the choice of nicks seems to be generalized in both of the English fora analyzed, in Spanish and Catalan this phenomenon only occurs in the fora devoted to football and is completely absent from those dedicated to the more serious, political topic.

Thirdly, there is a curious asymmetry in the results about swearing and non-swearing behaviour: in the case of the English fora, there are more messages containing swearwords in the forum about international politics than in the forum dealing with football, while the opposite is true in the Spanish and Catalan fora. It is difficult to draw a meaningful conclusion on this point as the data analyzed are limited and we have not made a general analysis of profanity in the three languages. Further research is required to clarify this issue.

Finally, in their study of the differences between ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’, Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) point out that, while there is an enormous variation in the mean length of spoken sentences, they are consistently shorter than written sentences. It may be interesting in further research to seek to examine if their idea that “writers possess an intuitive concept of normal sentence length” applies to CMC and if it can be extended to the concept of ‘normal message length’ for different CMC genres, in different cultures and on different topics.

We argued that the general, long-term shift towards orality in English identified by Biber and Finegan (1989), Baron (2000) and McWorther (2003) has been accelerated in
certain genres by social and technological changes. In this paper we have sought to study how the informalization of discourse is manifested in a specific CMC genre and to compare the tendency towards orality in different languages. The results would tend to suggest that in this CMC genre the tendency towards orality and to genre mixing is more pronounced in English than in Spanish and Catalan and that there are significant stylistic variations according to subject matter.

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