```
caves.ilserv.com - PuTTY

                    Welcome to
  .~q`.
 {_}
                                      (c) 1997-2000 Balloon.



              A talker based on Ew-Too by Simon Marsh.
Please enter your name:
```

Internet English: an analysis of the variety
of language used on Telnet talkers

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1: Introduction

Chat, in all its various forms, is doubtless one of the most popular uses of the Internet and has been since its beginnings in asynchronous systems such as bulletin boards. With connection speeds still rising and an ever-increasing number of participants, it is now possible for immense numbers of users to engage in real-time interactions, and today it seems very true that such interactions constitute "an important new communication modality" (Herring, 1996:2). This project deals with the language use in one medium for computer-mediated communication (CMC), the telnet talker[1]. A talker is a program which allows any person with net access to hold a synchromous typed conversation with any other. Talkers can be run on any computer with enough processing power and a 24-hour net connection; they function by enabling users to connect to the program itself rather than with a specific user or machine (as in UNIX talk mode or ICQ), and the program then enables many users to converse simultaneously by receiving and resending messages between them. As of the 21st January 2000, the maintainer of one of the most comprehensive talker listings sites[2] estimates that there are some 175-200 active English-language talkers on the Internet, without counting talk-oriented MUDs and MOOs. In comparison to other media, such as IRC with its thousands of channels, this is a small number: with an estimated dozen active users per talker, and some users active on more than one talker at once, this indicates a community of roughly two thousand regular talker users or 'spods'. The small size of the group, and the welcoming atmosphere deliberately created on many of the talker programs, leads to a very real sense of community between spods; consequently in-group slang and marked usages have arisen. However talkers are also an electronic medium, and their somewhat unusual interface creates some fascinating discursive properties, particularly in the realisation of paralinguistic features such as intonation and in methods of supplying extralinguistic context.

Sadly, a statistical analysis of the corpus gathered for this project has not been possible; however every effort has been made to ensure that relative frequency of occurrence is accurately reflected.

The data

```
- Still_hardcore Soyle asks 'So we should all make sure we
have our spellcheckers running this week?'
*#147# Nairn says 'Internet English: An analysis of typos
and idiotic things that people say.  Also a bloody good
excuse to spod.'
- Skeeve says 'typos are part of internet english tho soyle'
- Soyle nods
- Still_hardcore Soyle says 'And so is foul language'
```

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[1] As far as I am aware, this particular medium has not as yet been documented. Werry's paper on IRC (in Herring, 1996) is perhaps the closest cousin to this project, and gives a good overview of types of Internet chat; studies of bulletin board systems (BBSs) are less relevant due to the considerable differences in function between BBSs and talkers, although general comments on the nature of CMC and the effects of participation on the user remain valid.

[2] Simms, M, *Grim's List Server, Talker List and Mud List* (No date): [Online] Available at http://list.ewtoo.org [21 Jan 2000]

The examples of talker English used in this dissertation are taken from continuous logs of the main room on the EWToo talker Caves, owned and coded by Balloon, and from Surfers, also an EWToo talker. Tamsin's comments about abbreviation conventions on early talkers are taken from an interview conducted by email; general comments on the background of some of the talker users are made from the author's own background knowledge[3]. All conversations were logged with the kind permission of those involved; by necessity my own role in the study was that of participant observer, although the content of my own linguistic production is not included in the analysis[4]. The text assumes computer literacy and a basic knowledge of the functioning of telnet client programs. Due to the heavy use of ASCII characters for visual effects on talkers, all examples and excerpts from the corpus are given in a `fixed-width font` to more accurately represent their actual appearance.

1.1: The medium: how talkers work

Werry (1996)'s brief classification of three main types of interactive written discourse is useful in placing talkers in context: they fall into the category ' "Chat" systems', but talker software is descended from MUDs (online text-based adventure games) and talkers inherit much of their interface and command structure from such games. The important distinction between talkers and MUDs should be underlined: a talker system has no roleplaying or gaming element, and its purpose is purely as a communication channel; thus none of the commands are goal-oriented (for example, on a MUD emoting is primarily designed to aid realisation of the ficitonal characters users are required to present, but on talkers it becomes simply a channel for self-expression).

The environment provided by a talker is considerably more sophisticated than that of many other CMC media, including IRC: they are complete with MUD-style 'rooms', saved character information for each user, and more polished basic commands which produce grammatically correct sentences rather than IRC-style `<character-name>` `utterance` format. A wide range of standard commands is available, from basic 'say' and 'tell' to more decorative modes of communication:

```
- uncle_pat banco thinks . o O ( shocking )

- Pr()n-leeching suB sings o/~ PIE o/~
```

Socials (formulae describing physical interactions between users) and bots (automated users) also exist, although bots are little used except for humour value or administrative purposes such as logging, since as Werry states 'they are felt to divert attention away from conversation'.

---

[3] I have been using talkers for approximately two years, during which time I have come to understand some of the reasons behind observed variations in general interaction style between different groups of users; whilst this study is not primarily sociolinguistic in nature, occasionally such comments are enlightening.

[4] My own comments are occasionally included in examples intended to demonstrate the flow of a conversation.

The talker interface merits a comment: unlike IRC, *unless* a user chooses to have the telnet client display the text he types, or to use a client such as Tinyfugue which automatically displays input, it will not appear in the window at all until he presses the Enter key and his comment is returned to him in the form of the talker's standard output. Therefore, typographical errors, 'mistells' (misdirected private tells) and misspellings are common, although there is a preference among longer-term talker users for precision and correct use of language. The tempo of talker conversations is variable, depending in particular on the number of users active in the room, and it is possible to notice a marked change in length and style of comments between fast interactions and more leisurely ones.

Like users of many other modes of CMC, every talker user identifies him or herself with a unique alias which they use online; these aliases are usually less than revealing, since the user is required to choose both the name and the character's gender herself, and there is no peer pressure on talkers for accurate representation of gender. For example, two Surfers regulars are ogden, which appears in its personal description with neuter gender, and Nicolai, who are in the plural; not to mention the many talker users whose gender may be set to female but who are in reality male. Nicknames on talkers are as varied as elsewhere in CMC: from ordinary names to objects (Balloon) to characters from literature (MacBeth). The stored user files which maintain this information also allow any user to examine any other: what information is stored varies between talkers, but where fields such as real name and real-world location are included, they are not usually obligatory and any information given is not required to be accurate.

Using talkers
The function of the four basic talker commands is as follows:

The 'say' command:
If lark types `say hello`, everyone in that talker room will see:

    lark says 'hello'.

If lark types the command `tell Nefilim hello`, only the character Nefilim receives the message:

    lark tells you 'hello'.

but he will receive it wherever he is on the talker.

The 'emote' command:
If lark types the command `emote hugs hello`, everyone in the same talker room as lark will see the message

    lark hugs hello

If lark types the command `remote Nefilim hugs hello`, only Nefilim will see the message

    lark hugs hello

but he will receive it wherever he is on the talker.

The emote command is not used solely to describe actions, whether or not that may have been the intention of its designer; as is discussed below, it can also serve a variety of functions including reported speech, combining speech with a described action, and a third, unusual and direct way of expressing a user's thoughts. Many other commands also exist, such as possessive emotes (`lark's...`), *think*, *shout* and *sing*.
All the above commands, and most others with a communicative function, have single-character abbreviations for convenience. Most talkers also have a function allowing tells and remotes to be directed simultaneously to several users. This type of structure allows multi-layered conversations to take place: it is perfectly possible for any user to be participating in conversation in a main talker room and simultaneously holding an invisible personal conversation by tells and remotes with a friend who is in a different, or even the same, talker room. Channels also exist on talkers, allowing a third layer of communication: anyone connected to a particular channel, such as [gothic] on Surfers, will see all messages sent on that channel, wherever they are. Furthermore, many spods 'multispod', or use more than one talker simultaneously, adding still another layer; the result is an environment rich in potential modes of interaction, bewildering for the newcomer, but for established users a stimulating and pleasurable experience.

1.2: Social structure on talkers

Caves and Surfers: background
Caves is a small talker with a close-knit community of regular users, many of whom know each other in real life as well as online; the main room is often lively, frequently ribald, and little censorship is exercised over interaction content or those parts of users' self-presentation which may be personalised. Surfers, on the other hand, is one of the larger and older talkers on the Internet, and operates in a more controlled fashion, offering channels for dealing with problems such as harrassment and obscenity in a more formal manner.

Crime and punishment
Talkers are a public utility and must as such be regulated in some way to avoid abuse. On small and friendly talkers like Caves, 'policing' is not often necessary as most of the regular users are long-term spods and well acquainted with interaction and politeness norms; larger talkers like Surfers, however, attract new users and often find a need to underline the unacceptability of certain types of behaviour. They do so in a variety of creative and interesting ways. Punishments on talkers invariably revolve around depriving a user of the ability to communicate; thus, for example, he may be sent to a 'prison' which he cannot leave for a specified amount of time and cannot be heard outside of, or he may be turned into a frog- which, of course, can only say 'ribbit'. As a last resort, a saved character may be 'nuked' or wiped from the talker's records; certain usernames or even entire sites may be banned from connecting, removing not only residency and privileges but also access. Such extreme measures are usually only taken in case of

persistent bad behaviour or unacceptable acts such as sexual harrassment. Warnings and punishments are meted out by super-users (SUs), who are normal users granted privileges in the form of access to extra commands (this is a feature also found in MUDs), and administrators (Admin), who have responsibility for the day-to-day running of the talker and for the maintenance of the program itself.

Self-presentation and gender
The flexibility of gender on talkers makes actual counts of male and female users difficult to say the least, although the issue of gender in self-representation is in itself a fascinating one. Real-world gender on larger talkers like Surfers is increasingly a non-contentious issue due to well-implemented anti-harrassment policies; on Caves, there are relatively few female users, and those who choose to remain must learn to hold their own in the often merciless humour of public conversations; however the small size and closeness of the in-group renders harrassment extremely unlikely, and while unsuspecting newbies may occasionally find themselves the victims of gender or identity-based practical jokes[5] by the regulars, there is no threat of genuine malice.
Another interesting feature of self-presentation on talkers is the tendency for users to 'shapeshift', suddenly presenting themselves as non-anthropomorphic:

```
> Molgrips curls up in your lap
> Molgrips purrs
```

It is difficult to ascertain the purpose of such actions, although Wallace (1999:28-31, referring to Goffman's *The presentation of self in everyday life*) suggests that tactical use of self-presentation may be used to achieve a particular interactinal goal such as the respect, liking or domination of the audience.

1.2.1: Talker culture

Regular talker users refer to themselves as 'spods' and to the activity of using talkers as 'spodding'. *The New Hacker's Dictionary* (Raymond, 1997) defines 'spod' as follows:

> [UK] A lower form of life found on talker systems and MUDs. The spod has few friends in RL and uses talkers instead, finding communication easier and preferable over the net. He has all the negative traits of the computer geek without having any interest in computers per se. Lacking any knowledge of or interest in how networks work, and considering his access a God-given right, he is a major irritant to sysadmins, clogging up lines in order to reach new MUDs, following passed-on instructions about how to sneak his way onto Internet ("Wow! It's in America!") and complaining when he is not allowed to use busy routes. A true spod will start any conversation with "Are you male or female?" (and follow it up with "Got any good numbers/IDs/passwords?") and will not talk to

---

[5] One female newbie, logging in for the first time, was convinced by collective effort that Caves regular Acidburn (who is in fact female, and also named after a female character in the film *Hackers*) was male. Whilst such humour may seem in questionable taste, it is nevertheless treated purely as an intellectual game by those mounting the deceit.

someone physically present in the same terminal room until they log onto
the same machine that he is using and enter talk mode.

(This definition is perhaps now less accurate than in the early 1990s, when conserving bandwidth was a serious consideration for any network and access to networked computer terminals was restricted to those in academic institutions or high-tech firms). Although the growth in size of the spod community, from just a few dozen members in the early nineties to hundreds today, has fragmented it to some extent, there is still a thriving social group based around talker friendships; it is common for meetings to be arranged 'in real life' (i.e, offline) at which spods can get to know each other through means other than through a computer screen.

The explosion in Internet use between 1992 and today has brought a new generation of users to talkers and with them new interaction styles and usages; Surfers in particular has, according to former administrator Slaine, seen a steady influx of new users, many of whom log on from universities in inner cities; these 'newbies' display an interaction style very different from that of the established users. Many use IRC and other forms of chat as well as talkers, and tend to hybridise their interaction styles between the different media; some older spods ('oldbies') find these styles distasteful to the point where they cease to use main rooms rather than interact with the newbie group. The inexperience of these new users in both general aspects of CMC and specific aspects of talker usage can lead to misunderstandings and occasionally tension between the two groups. It is not with the newer users that this project is concerned, since they may be seen to use IRC-style language and urban varieties of British English which are already well documented; the confirmed spods, on the other hand, have developed an altogether different and fascinating interactional style. Spod culture has a fascination with certain words, most noticeably the curious choice *spoon*; the spoon has become something of a cultural artefact for spods. Presenting someone with a spoon has become a standard response to mistakes:

```
- uncle_pat banco thinks . o O ( tell lark did i upset yer? )
- uncle_pat banco says 'hehe'
- banco grrs at the net
- Molgrips laffs
- Molgrips gives banco a spoon
```

Spoons are also referred to in other contexts, even formalised as part of social commands:

```
 > beN forms from all the spoony things joining together <

= poobear gives lark a silver spoon ---().
```

Spods themselves do not appear to know where this tradition came from, other than speculating that it may be purely for aesthetic effect:

```
- Molennium Molgrips says 'tos a funyn sounding word'
- Molennium Molgrips says 'spoOon'
- [db] MacBeth says 'shut up you spoon'
- uncle_pat banco says 'cos yer go esp-ooon'
- [db] MacBeth says 'there seems to be a link between spodding
and spoons'
- uncle_pat banco says 'spoo-une'
```

2. Sociolinguistic aspects
2.1: When varieties collide

The meeting of two varieties of a language, be they regional or social, is apt to cause certain misunderstandings at first; the most noticeable examples of this in talker English are the occasional clash of cultural norms between English and American talker users, and the head-on collision between the interaction styles of oldbie and newbie spods on Surfers. Many UK talkers are small communities of friends who often know each other offline as well as on; Caves in particular is a good example of this, and as a result the usual interaction style is often lively, with little regard for the politeness norms that would be necessary on a larger talker. It is also frequently perfectly acceptable on UK talkers to tease and torment not only one's own friends but also new users in general-although many larger talkers have imposed a rule against so-called 'newbie-bashing' as it is no longer universally accepted and can easily cause misunderstandings. Newer users on UK talkers tend to make heavier use of abbreviation, like that of the styles found on IRC; this, to many older spods, is a grating set of neologisms. Tamsin, one of the oldest spods on Surfers, confirms this hypothesis:

> 'I can remember there being abbreviations, not on the mud, but on Cheeseplant's House[6] for most of the time. To start with, the abbreviations were not as sophisticated as they are now. They would generally be single word contractions like so...
>
> r u there
> this is gng 2 b fun
>
> mostly through the simple method of dropping vowels where their presence was obvious. There was certainly a vogue of people who talked like this, and many others found it almost impossible to understand what they were saying. The generally stated reason was to reduce bandwidth. (Of course, at that time there was not very much at all). It also caused people to react against this by almost pathologically getting everything correct- Grandma spelling (like me).
> I think there was a bit of a newbies/oldbies thing going on.. because I can remember that the second year of talker users were all very uncouth and tended to use this far more than we did, but then maybe I'm just biased :-)'

Tamsin goes on to confirm that many of the abbreviations she had seen on Cheeseplant's House worked their way into common parlance in the time between1993 and late 1994, when the Internet was first becoming a widely recognised phenomenon; in particular the common greeting 'rehi' was new to her when she first began to use Surfers soon after its

---

[6] A seminal talker, inactive since 1992.

opening in late 1993, and as late as the summer of 1997 she was still coming across neologisms unfamiliar to her ('afk' and 'brb' on the talker Snowplains).

With regard to the clash between US talker cultural norms and British ones, Grim's history of talkers[7] describes a split between European and American talker cultures after the opening of Surfers in late 1993. American talkers now often make a point of welcoming newcomers, and as a result American newbies are often somewhat thrown by their first experience of a UK talker in full derision mode:

(**lurker** has just attempted to ingest **nox**, an American newbie)
```
 - nox brushes lurker's teef
 - lurker chaws
 - _/\#/\_ lurker says 'tastes like shit'
 - lurker spits
 - nox says 'booo'
 - lurker lol
 - nox says 'you ain't nice'
 - lurker smirks
 - nox blames it on this talker being english
 - You ask 'don't you send each other up on american talkers
 nox?'
 - nox says 'i don't know.. but most people are nice to newbies
 :)'
 - NeBbY says 'that'd be the difference'
```

The example below highlights the very apparent divide between old or experienced and new generations of talker users, particularly on large talkers like Surfers: in many cases the interaction habits and English usage of this particular subset of newbies leaves older users unimpressed:

```
lootera takes out his double barrel shotgun and fires it down
deejays throat
shaDownINja says 'charming'
lootera lol
total(lit)y.funded dEEjaY asks 'lootera, do you not find your
violent tendancies rather worrying?  Or are you just showing
off?'
Barbie thinks . o O ( ok ok that enough violence for one day
lootera)
Barbie thinks . o O ( he must be showing off innit as
normal!!! )
lootera says 'deejay i havent even started mate, i got the
whole us armies stockpile to go through, side winder missile
cluster bombs the lot'
AlienHunter ooers
dEEjaY nods
total(lit)y.funded dEEjaY says 'yes'
total(lit)y.funded dEEjaY says 'of course you do dear...'
total(lit)y.funded dEEjaY thinks . o O ( poor sod... )
lootera lol
```

---

[7] M. Simms (No date), A History of Talkers [Online]. Available at http://ulibnet.mtsu.edu/~msimms/lists/talkers/ew/about_ew/history.html [13 January 2000]

Raymond (1997:19-20) comments that experienced net users are often consciously and formally polite in reaction against the de-inhibiting effects of CMC, which can encourage bad behaviour as well as having more positive effects; it is highly possible that this divide lies at the root of the oldbie/newbie problem apparent on Surfers.

2.2 Influences on talker English

Given the large proportion of IT students and professionals among talker users, it is important to point out that the variety of language used on talkers is not identical to the variety of English which Raymond (1997) calls 'hackish'- that is, the variety used within the programming community. Indeed, an effort is made to prevent public conversations becoming too technical or devoting too much time to computer-related topics, with comments such as the following often occurring when such topics threaten to take over:

```
- MacBeth geeks affectionately at the lot of you

- dOoM ungeeks  ***[8]
```

Talker English is less technically oriented and has far fewer specific lexical items than hackish, but does display something of the same fascination with wordplay ("razor sharp spod-puns", in Caves user Tombod's words), injokes and creative humour. Other varieties which occasionally occur on Caves and Surfers are urban British English, American English, and in one instance what appears to be British Black English, although it is not possible to ascertain this. The very apparent divide beteen the styles of oldbies and newbies is less easy to characterise in terms of recognised varieties, but compare the following comment:

```
> Pendragon tells you 'i did pick up a lot of the way i "talk"
on the net from my first year of spodding. and the people i
walways talked to.. i supose its the same as getting an accent
from listening to our parents and close people'
```

This would seem to indicate a phenomenon analogous to 'accent' in talker English; and indeed a user's personal style can give information about anything from his preferred medium for CMC to nationality. The following examples demonstrate the immense differences to be found within different users' styles:

```
lootera says 'why r u kicking and punching me, and u phelbas
what have i done to u, i just gave u a jumper earlier on'

lootera grinz

Barbie thinks . o O ( it too late nothings gonna work, i aint
here anymore )

- 5 Fenwick asks 'who wants to take my exam for me?'
```

8[8] The three asterisks are assumed to be a reference to the syntax of 'switch' commands in certain computer systems.

```
- Big_Red bAllooN says 'Nor do I, often, either Molly.'

- suB will do yours though if you want banco ..including
revision

> Tamsin shrugs, "but then i'm hardly a polygraph"
```

It is very probable that lootera is an IRC user, although the 'u' and '-z' conventions are now becoming more widespread among talker spods too; Barbie seems to be a speaker of an urban variety of English, or possibly British Black English; Fenwick is in fact American, although as Strevens (1972) demonstrates, the vast majority of differences between British and American English currently lie in speech habits rather than syntax and vocabulary, so that there will be little to demonstrate this in the content of her remarks. Balloon, suB and Tamsin demonstrate three different 'spod accents'. Tamsin's habit of correctness is a clue to the fact that she has been using talkers longer than most (see her comments on the beginnings of abbreviation on talkers above); SuB's habit of emoting instead of using the 'say' command is a common one among talker spods, considered bad by oldbies, although from the point of view of concision it makes sense since it saves typing complete syntax. Molgrips comments that some spods use the emote command almost exclusively, even at the expense of concision:

```
> rrr Molgrips tells you 'I know peple who only talk in
emotes'
You tell Molgrips 'me too'
> rrr Molgrips tells you 'prefix everything with a verb'
> Molgrips demonstrates, like this
```

3. Discursive properties

3.1 Turn-taking

In his discussion of IRC, Werry (1996) comments that

> "overlaps and interruptions are impossible. Each utterance is simply displayed in the chronological order in which it is received by the IRC system. This means that different strands of conversation are juxtaposed, forming sequences that intertwine to form a multidimensional text. The resulting dialogues scroll up (and then off) each person's computer screen at a pace directly proportional to the tempo of the overall conversation. Until one acquires a sense of how to read such conversational sequences, the experience is rather like trying to follow the text of a play in which the characters' lines have been jumbled up."

The same is mostly true of talker interactions, although being small communities, talker conversations are often conducted at a somewhat more relaxed tempo than IRC sessions. Talkers, unlike IRC, have features that make different strands easier to pick out: in Werry's study, IRC differentiates actions by prefixing them with `*** Action` rather than `<name>`, and more advanced IRC clients will apply different colours to the different types of utterance. Talker programs, however, automatically highlight tells in boldface, and usually add a different graphical prefix to every type of remark for users whose

terminals cannot show highlighting. On Caves, for example, a different ASCII character appears in the margin according to what command has produced the utterance:

- denotes *say*
\> denotes *tell* or *remote*
= precedes socials
\+ precedes echos
\> (Dis)connection messages are enclosed in angle brackets <

Nevertheless, in a main room conversation the same ability to sort turns is still vital to communication. However, apart from the issue of interruptions and turn order, the conversations which take place on talkers are real-time and proceed much as ordinary conversations do.

3.2 Openings and closings

A user's connection message (conmsg) or entry message (entermsg) functions not as first turn but as a signal of their presence, and conversation does not usually start until an opening in the form of a greeting has been given:

```
> Vega is <
- You emote: lark just avoids work. still not got that essay
done.
- Used_to_be_LL Bagpuss says 'SACD.. better the DVD audio, but
no-one else is going to support it'
- Vega erros
= dOoM wuffles Vega bashfully.
- lark nods vegawards
- Vega larks
- dOoM vegas
```

An exception to this occurs when a new user connects for the first time, in which case a message goes to all users informing them of this, and a greeting is usually offered as a welcome to the talker. Closings vary in their realisation: they may be nonexistent, take the form of a remark indicating the user's loss of interest directly followed by logout:

```
- spaceboy hmmms... much idleness
```

or take more standard forms:

```
- uncle_pat banco says 'see yer im off'
```

However, unlike the complex 'dance' of closing identified by Schegloff and Sacks (1973, cited in Murray, 1988:8-9), talker closings almost never comprise more than two turns: at most a topic closure like the above utterances will occur, followed by one half of a terminal pair, e.g. 'bye', from another user.

3.3: Spoken versus written properties

The nature of talker interactions is of some interest to linguists: like spoken discourse, it is real-time and interactive, and displays more features commonly found in spoken English than some other CMC media; but unlike spoken discourse it is conducted entirely in typed (written) form. Ferrara, Whittemore and Brunner (1991, cited in Herring 1996:3) characterise an emergent discourse genre which they call 'interactive written discourse'; Collot and Belmore (1996:14) concur that "Messages delivered electronically are neither 'spoken' nor 'written' in the conventional sense of these words", citing the ease of interaction as a feature common in spoken varieties of English, but the participants' lack of face-to-face contact as disqualifying talker interaction from definitive spoken status. Despite the written nature of talker English, it is fully interactive, and in fact bears more relation to spoken forms of English than to written, as may be seen from comparison with descriptions of spoken English. Brown and Yule (1983:14-19) list ten characteristics commonly found in spoken language, which can be briefly summarised and compared to talker English, as listed below. It is important, however, to note that interaction styles vary considerably between individuals, much as individual speech styles vary, and some users will consistently use a more formal style whereas others will be very relaxed.

(1) Less structured syntax than written language, typically using parataxis, little subordination and preferring active declarative forms over passives or clefting
A statistical syntactic analysis of the corpus assembled for this project is sadly beyond its scope; however, even a cursory examination reveals that active declarative forms are abundant, and that a phenomenon analogous to parataxis, in the form of juxtaposed remarks, is common:

```
- Nairn nopes, everything
- Nairn would love to see piglets face

- Fenwick wants to go back to bed
- Fenwick yawns again
```

Passives are not found in the corpus, which would tend to confirm Brown and Yule's point.

(2) Omission of metalingual relation markers and of rhetorical organisers (*that, when/while, besides, however; firstly, in conclusion*)

```
- Nairn is just disappointed that it's not more like the film

- uncle_pat banco says 'that was when they was new and quite
  fast'
```

As can be seen from the examples above, relation markers are not uncommon in talker English, and are often included in sentences where spoken English would tend to omit them, probably because of their usefulness for giving clarity in the sometimes chaotic conversation; however more formal rhetorical markers such as *besides, however, firstly* do not tend to occur.

(3) Usually no more than two premodifying adjectives in noun phrases

Given the real-time nature of talker interactions, there is a practical limit on the length of the text that any command contains: if a user enters too long a remark the conversation will have moved on and the remark may no longer be relevant. Therefore it would be logical to find shorter noun phrases on talkers; mostly, this is true, particularly when the tempo of the conversation is fast, but occasionally at slower moments longer phrases may be found, particularly where they add humour to an utterance:

```
- uncle_pat banco says 'and shelves full of leather bound
tomes'

- uncle_pat banco says 'load yer pipe with some of that number
47 cherry mash mix'
```

(4) Topic-comment structure, as in 'the cats + did you let them out', rather than subject-predicate form

Again, this point is affected by the nature of the medium:the emote command forces the syntax of the resulting utterance into subject-predicate form, but the 'say' command leaves

(5) Passive constructions are replaced by active contructions using indeterminate group agents (*they*)

It would be logical, given the lack of passive constructions in the corpus, to find constructions using 'they' and similar impersonal agents to replace passives; however, most constructions using 'they' are anaphoric or pronominal. This may be a consequence of the feature demonstrated in point (2).

(6) Reference to the immediate environment may be supplied non-linguistically, eg. by direction of the speaker's gaze

This point is not literally applicable to talker English for obvious reasons: however, emoting allows such context to be supplied in the form of descriptions:

```
- Nairn looks at his office
- Nairn thinks . o O ( bombsite )
```

The direction of the speaker's gaze may also be described:

```
- MacBeth looks at lark
```

(7) Expressions may be replaced or refined by a speaker as he goes along: '*this man + this chap she was going out with'*

This is an aspect of talker usage which will not be physically apparent in the program's output: most telnet clients make it possible for users to alter what they type in, although since the input may not be visible on the screen the extent to which re-editing is possible

depends almost entirely on the particular user's memory of what he typed and where the cursor is within that text, much as a speaker cannot remember too far back in a sentence.[9] Secondly, only the current command may be edited- once a command has been sent by pressing 'Enter', it is no longer accessible, unlike previous paragraphs in a continuous text. In the following example MacBeth uses a second remark to correct a typographical error and clarify his meaning, much like a speaker elaborating on a previous utterance:

```
- [db] MacBeth says 'good questions'
- [db] MacBeth thinks . o O ( -s )
```

These processes seem far more analogous to that of correcting a spoken sentence as it proceeds than to editing a text, in which the entire content may be revised and altered at will.

(8) Use of generalised vocabulary such as *a lot of, thing, stuff, nice, place, got, do*

```
- Fenwick hugs and atuff [stuff]

- banco pats you lots.

- nox says 'you ain't nice'

- Que asks 'where can I get some mp3's?'

- Nairn doesn't like this bright light thing
```

As can be seen from these examples, use of such general vocabulary is common on talkers.

(9) Repetition of the same syntactic form several times

The importance of concision in CMC causes this phenomenon to be redundant on talkers, although repetition can occur in the form of lists, usually for humorous effect:

```
- lovely Acidburn says 'curry'
- lovely Acidburn says 'curry'
- lovely Acidburn says 'curry'
- Acidburn is going for a curry this evening
```

(10) Use of prefabricated 'fillers' such as *well, erm, I think, you know, if you see what I mean*

The purpose of fillers in speech is to maintain the flow of the conversation whilst allowing the speaker time to formulate his next remark (Brown & Yule); on a talker this

---

[9] In email and on Usenet, this process of revision is sometimes highlighted by the ^H convention, which represents text under deletion. As Raymond (1997:17) explains, strings of ^Hs may be intentionally included in the text of a mail or news article in order to make it appear that the author has tried to delete the previous word and replace it with the subsequent one. Such statements are often humorous, in the style of 'I'm looking for some mugs^H^H^H^Hvolunteers to...'.

is not in fact necessary since, as Murray (1988:10, citing Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) confirms, linearity of discourse is not preserved in CMC. The set phrase 'if you see what I mean' in fact has a standard abbreviation (IYSWIM) on Usenet, but acronyms longer than four characters (brb, lol, rotfl) are rarely used on talkers.

Brown and Yule's points make no reference, however, to the abundance of paralinguistic features normally found in spoken English which are reproduced in a variety of ways on talkers (see section 4.5).

4. Features of talker English

Most of the distinctive features of talker English are not syntactic or lexical (there are very few non-jargon lexical items specific to talker English, apart from those mentioned in section 3.2) but instead fall into one of two categories: aspects of text formatting or other visual devices intended to achieve a certain effect, and devices intended to reduce the effort or time involved in producing a remark. There is also a noticeable tendency towards wordplay among talker users, particularly on Caves; Werry (1996) comments that in IRC "Participants tend to play with language, to produce hybrid, heteroglossic forms that incorporate all manner of communicative styles". On talkers, however, wordplay is often more based around punning on other users' remarks, on cultural references and on creative use of the various commands available: Raymond (1997:9-14) comments that various forms of wordplay are common in hackish; given the large proportion of IT professionals on Caves, it is assumed that this is more a function of the users' background than of talker usage. It is germane at this point to note

4.1: Abbreviations and ellipsis

Aitchison (1967:62) states that "a normal person often utters over 200 words per minute". However, even qualified and practised touch-typists can rarely exceed 80-90 words per minute in text; as a result, there is a considerable disparity between the rate at which a user mentally formulates a remark (which logically must be as fast as or faster than he is able to utter it) and the rate at which he can type and transmit it, so that concise expression becomes important simply for speed. Utterance length is of course influenced by this, among other factors: fast-paced main room conversations usually contain turns of 2-4 words in length; slower main room interactions hover around 6-10 words, and conversations in tells or in private rooms may have turns of more than twenty. Additionally, talker English also contains an enormous number of features arising from the wish to reduce the time taken to type words, stock phrases or common utterances.

Acronyms
Acronymic abbreviations such as brb, afk, irl, ROTFL, lol, and others have now become standard across the Internet as convenient contractions, and appear on talkers as they do anywhere else online. Therefore, I will not deal with them at great length here[10].

10^{10} An acronym finder is available at http://www.acronymfinder.com [25 Jan 2000]

Acronyms such as brb (be right back), lol (laughing out loud) and ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing) are the most common on talkers, and vary in capitalisation in talker usage: it is an accepted convention of many CMC media that TYPING IN ALL CAPS IS SHOUTING[11], and therefore, a user who types LOL may well be laughing louder than one who types lol. It may be that these standard expressions of laughter are losing force through overuse: on Caves, the expression `<user> ROARS` [with laughter] is occasionally used as the most enthusiastic response to amusing comments.

In addition to the standard acronyms mentioned above, talker English also plays host to homophonic, single-grapheme abbreviations:

```
Barbie asks 'yeh phlebas y u kicking him for???'
```

Others include r (are), n (and). Similar abbreviations of longer words are also used: *u'r* for *you're*, *ur* for *your, tho* for *though, laff* for *laugh, prolly* for *probably* and *ppl* for *people*, each of which contains about half as many letters as the original word. Murray (1988:12) describes similar features already in use in UNIX talk mode within IBM. Character names may be abbreviated (e.g. moly for Molgrips, baggy for Bagpuss), although usually only between friends; consonant clusters may also be simplified phonetically:

```
- bAllooN lix Prossy
```
[Balloon licks Prospero]

This type of abbreviation is very practical since it dramatically reduces the keystrokes needed to type some of the most common words in talker English. Similar abbreviations use numeric characters in addition to letters, such as *l8r* (*later*, used as a farewell) and *k3w1* (cool). Alphanumeric ellipsis is considered somewhat suspect by established talker spods, possibly due to its kinship to the legendary d00d5p34k (doodspeak, the usage of software pirates or 'warez doodz'), in addition to its popularity among neophytes. Use of *u*, *n* and *r* is beginning to take hold even amongst the old guard, due to their sheer convenience- although few spods use alphanumeric abbreviations, since these are purely stylistic and do not reduce the number of characters which form a recognisable word.

A related convention on talkers is the use of the *-z* suffix where written English would have *-s*, such as for example third person verb endings:

```
- suB grinz
```

Some spods generalise it to words like *thankz* also, which do not phonetically have a final / z /. Others omit the ending entirely:

```
- banco prod suB
```

Users are not faulted for this, although it appears to be a matter of individual style rather than a collective tendency.

11[11]Netiquette - Etiquette for the Internet [Online]: Available at http://www.berean-houston.org/Netiquette.htm [17 Jan 2000], taken in part from: Shea, V, *Netiquette* (1996): San Francisco (Albion)

Syntactic ellipsis

Given the proliferation of auxiliary verbs and 'small words' in English syntax, it is hardly surprising that spods have developed the habit of omitting all syntactic elements which are not strictly necessary to convey their meaning, and reordering those which are to avoid using more than one clause. Adjectives may be placed before the noun, avoiding a relative clause:

```
-Katie talks to gone Molgrips
```

Auxiliary verbs are frequently omitted, as in:

```
- Vega not like hassling
```

Sometimes a standard phrase is condensed beyond all recognition: when logging back into a talker after a period of absence, it is common to 're' as a greeting:

```
- MacBeth re's
```

```
- Molennium Molgrips says 're'
```

'Re' is a condensation of 'hello again' > re-hello > re. The form *rehi* (spoken only) is also occasionally found. Other ways of condensing verbs into shorter forms use the emote command and the present tense in place of the 'is + participle' present continuous[12] (see section 4.4 for a more complete discussion of these examples):

```
- Que sometimes watches traffic jams for hours.
- Que lies,  btw [by the way]

- baLLOoN wonders what to do for food tonight.
```

Similarly, intransitivisation of normally transitive verbs allows the object to be omitted:

```
- Nairn slaps
```

```
- suB looks
```

In cases where there is immediate context available for such verbs, objects are omitted since it is pragmatically fairly clear who is being looked at or slapped and what for:

```
- Nairn says 'it loks nothing like it, dear'
- yoda Acidburn says 'may u should stop using a 12inch monitor
nairn'
- Nairn slaps
- Acidburn grins
```

Where there is less clear context, however, objects tend to be included:

---

[12] These examples are also analysed in the discussion of emoting under section 3.7.

```
- Smokey says 'oh'
- Smokey says 'this is caves'
- Danedoom Soyle says 'Not sure where I can fit another 21"
tho'
- [+] dOoM says 'well done smokey'
= Soyle mashes Smokey with a potato masher.
- [+] dOoM thinks . o O ( the motd cave it away )
- Nairn slaps doom - that was awful
```

Prod has become almost entirely intransitive in public use on talkers since it is used only in the sense of prodding idlers in order to wake them up: a user may emote *<user> prods* to the room at large, equivalent to prompting all other users to wake up and speak to him, or may direct the emote to a particular user with whom they wish to communicate, alerting them to this fact. *Hug* may also be used generally; in tells (rather than says) there is the interesting point that while the syntax remains intransitive, it is always self-evident who the prodee or hugee is since only one person receives the message. It is interesting that among the oldest of oldbie spods, it is more common to use such verbs transitively, and to be in general more specific and less elliptical.

Lexical category changes
By converting what is normally a noun or adjective into a verb, users can often save several lexemes. Commonly on talkers this occurs as verbalisation and the conversion of nouns into adjectives. One of the most common instances of verbalisation on talkers is 'user [name]s', used as a greeting when someone first logs on:

```
- Molgrips larks
```

The word 'hello' is also often verbalised: a user may emote *<user> (h)ellos*, or even the more elliptical *<user> lo(s)* when he logs on, rather than saying hello. Any noun or interjection which is relevant to the conversation may be verbalised:

```
> AlienHunter sorries...desertion from where?
```

Some other examples are *curries, newbies, nos, phews, pubs, wheees, nah nah nahs, lols, acks*, and expletives. It is almost certain that verbalisation has become popular due to its convenience when combined with the emote command, allowing users to express in one word what would otherwise take a full sentence; it is also noticeable that the proportion of such verbalised utterances increases with the tempo of the conversation. Converting nouns into adjectives mostly occurs in prefixes, which are one of the aspects of talkers that can be configured by each user, usually giving some comment on their current status or a humorous allusion:

```
- yoda Acidburn says 'no'[13]
```

```
- mysteryallergy Prospero asks 'is it still up?'
```

<div align="center">

4.2: Lexical items

</div>

1[13] Yoda, of course, is a character from the Star Wars films.

While most of the vocabulary used on talkers is the same as that found in colloquial English, one or two items stand out: the word *spod*, which is not restricted to talkers (*to spod* is to engage in any form of online interaction, even email), but which has been adopted as an identifier within the talker community, and may be compunded with other lexemes to give a more specific reference, for example *talker spod*, *Surfers spod* or (in a specific medium) *the Camspods*. The onomatopoeic interjection *meep* would seem to be used only on talkers; it serves a variety of purposes, but is largely just a written rendition of what one Caves user calls 'a timid noise':

```
- Molgrips meeps
- Molennium Molgrips says 'charming'
```

The origins of *meep* are cloudy; some spods claim it is a reference to the cartoon character Roadrunner's characteristic call, while others believe it evolved simply as onomatopoeia.

The noun *newbie* is not specific to talkers; however the verb *newbie*, with the meaning 'to confuse the say and emote commands, making oneself look like a newbie' is current among Caves residents at least. The unusual form *atta* is sometimes used in emotes:

```
->AlienHunter laffs atta lark
```

This is possibly a way of highlighting the addressivity of a remark: the form is more visible than the shorter 'at'.

Other English words have a acquired a different usage on talkers: curiously, 'lick' has become a standard form of friendly greeting, suggesting a pack of dogs or similar social animals:

```
- bAllooN lix Prossy

- Rael lixs all and lo's
```

'Nod' and 'hug' also tend to be used differently on talkers, although more as paralinguistic descriptors, and hence they are dealt with in section 3.7.

4.3: Diminutives

Talker English has a tendency to use diminutives, especially in conversations between friends, rather more than other forms of CMC: however, the reasons for this are somewhat obscure. It is possible that by diminution users make affectionate intention clear, as Wallace suggests in *Psychology of the Internet*[14]; in the case of *pokels*, a diminutive of *pokes,* this is probably true, since otherwise a virtual poke in the ribs could be easily misinterpreted. In other cases, such as *huggles* or *bouncies*, the diminutives are

---

2[14] Wallace (1999:18-19)

more likely to be intensification of what is already a rather cartoonish action. Diminution is usually restricted to commonly used verbs such as *hug, spod, nod, wave* and to character names:

```
} Rael wavels (to your friends)

- rrr Molgrips asks 'does yer gfx card work then doomles?'
```

A tendency similar to that of hackish towards the overgeneralisation of certain suffixes[15] is apparent here: *huggle* is an intuitively natural formation, as are *noddle* and *spoddle*, but *wavel,* which has probably been created by analogy with these, is less so; it is interesting from this point of view that the form *wavie* exists in parallel to *wavel*, possibly due to the unintuitive feel of the latter, and *noddies* has also been known to occur. The compound suffixation *hugglies* has also been observed, although it does not occur in the corpus for this project.

4.4: Representation of paralinguistic features

On a talker, there is no implicit paralinguistic information of the type found in speech (intonation etc) available to the user. The only indication of such features is what is represented by punctuation and the way utterances are segmented:

```
Pendragon thinks. fri morning

> AlienHunter sorries...desertion from where?
```

Intonation may be represented in a variety of ways; a question can be reduced to its simplest component, given enough context in the preceding utterances:

```
- [db] MacBeth thinks . o O ( ? )

- Molennium Molgrips asks '?'
```

Other forms of paralinguistic expression in CMC have already been remarked on, for example in Werry (1996), who describes 'an innovative set of linguistic devices...that functions to create the effects of voice, gesture and tone through the creative use of capitalisation, spelling and punctuation.' The range of such devices appears to be somewhat larger on talkers than IRC: the same use of dots and hyphens to create pauses may be seen in longer remarks, although the same effect is also often created by producing two separate, juxtaposed remarks in quick succession:

```
- suB grinz..mine neither..thats why I have them

- lardybartfast dEEjaY says 'I object'
- lardybartfast dEEjaY says 'she's a bloke'
```

3[15] Raymond 1997:11-13

```
- lovely Acidburn says 'i must'
- lovely Acidburn says 'wake up'
```

Non-standard capitalisation is used to much the same effects, as shown below:

```
- Big_Red bAllooN thinks . o O ( Molly is STILL eating his
sarnie. )

- Nairn says 'he is TOP GEEK, acid'
```

It is noticeable, however, that talker spods, especially older ones, tend more towards standard capitalisation:

```
- Smokey asks 'How was Cream ?'

- Big_Red bAllooN says 'One of the first things he said to me
on the phone was 'Oink''
```

Other forms of showing emphasis such as *asterisks* and _underscores_ are also used:

```
> AlienHunter tells you 'now *that's* weird'
```

Emoting
Physical gesture is also represented on talkers, in the form of brief descriptions made with the emote command; certain common actions like laughter have been enshrined in acronyms such as ROTFL or LOL- and many usages such as *slap, meep, hug, lick, laff, grin, sigh* have become common enough to be standardised as social commands, or at least to be used identically by most spods. Sometimes actions are simply reported using emotes:

```
- beN waves

- banco looks

- Que grins.
```

Interestingly, the emote command also makes it possible for extralinguistic communication to take place, for example the nods or sounds of agreement common in face-to-face interaction:

```
[Gothic] Nefilim nods
```

This type of utterance is also possible in both MUDs and IRC, although no data as to the frequency of such usages is available; during talker interactions, usually those in which one participant is giving information and another listening, phatic use of emotes occurs in much the same way as phatic interjections during spoken conversation. Emotes are also heavily used during general conversation on talkers, for a variety of purposes. Actions or gestures which accompany a particular remark are usually expressed by a partial emote, such as the following:

```
> Tamsin shrugs, "but then i'm hardly a polygraph"
```

```
- Nairn slaps doom - that was awful

> BAllOOn nods. True

> AlienHunter smiles..i get away with three
```

Sometimes emotes function similarly to reported speech in written texts:

```
- banco ooks¹⁶

- Que slept thru a whole monday once

- Fenwick may be a yank, but you're a wanna-be yank Banco
```

Indeed, some users almost never 'say' anything, but prefix all utterances with a verb and emote them instead:

```
> Rael grins.. jackal, american.

[gothic] Rael laffs. and when you going to brum?
```

As Molgrips would seem to agree in section 2.2, this is not for any tangible reason other than style, since it defeats concision by the inclusion of an extra verb.
In some cases it is difficult to separate instances of using the single-word present tense instead of *is + participle* from instances of this type of 'reported speech'. For example, compare this utterance, taken from the corpus, with the possible alternative versions given in italics below:

```
- baLLOoN wonders what to do for food tonight.
```

- baLLOoN says 'I wonder what to do for food tonight.'
- baLLOoN is wondering what to do for food tonight.

The first alternative version is a 'spoken' rendition of the remark; the second is the type of emote which appears to be in the style of reported speech. Balloon's actual remark is neither: it is a description, given in the third person, as is the remark

```
-Que lies, btw
```
[*Que is lying, by the way*]

given above. This use of the emote command to express many, if not all, of a user's remarks is the 'bad habit' Pendragon refers to in his comment above; however, as a means of expression it is remarkably elegant and concise. Balloon disregards the conventional necessity to 'speak' (to express himself in the first person or in very immediate syntax, in forms already accepted as standard) but nevertheless clearly expresses his current mental state; by breaking the syntactic convention, he also saves himself typing extra characters. Que's treatment of this new style of expression is fascinating: he describes his action in the third person, then appends a filler of a type far more usual in utterances using the first

---

4¹⁶ Possibly a reference to the characteristic 'Oook' of the ape Librarian in Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels; alternatively, another onomatopoeic interjection lke *meep*.

person, but in an abbreviated form. Mixing styles in this way is unorthodox, but at the same time both expresses meaning clearly and maintains impressive concision.

4.4.1 Graphical features

```
cHEEsetong says 'its crap isnt it  :('

- Smokey says '\/'¹⁷

> AlienHunter points to his website :P~~~
```

A smiley, also called an emoticon, consists, according to Raymond, of "An ASCII glyph ued to indicate an emotional state in email or news". Like every other CMC medium, talkers provide no visual context for the user, and smileys are as widely used on talkers as elsewhere online. Murray (1988:11) comments on such 'icons' as a recent and 'seldom used' phenomenon in her study of CMC between employees at IBM; Werry (1996) does not comment on them, although they do occur in the examples he includes.
Smileys are usually appended to the end of a clause or sentence, and represent a cartoon human face rotated ninety degrees. The two most common are :-) , the standard smiley, and :-(, also called a 'frowny'. They may also be rendered as :) and :(. These two, along with the winking face ;-) which denotes a joke or sarcasm, and :-P which tags tongue-in-cheek remarks, generally account for a large proportion of smiley usage on talkers. The smiley itself invariably adds context to the remark it accompanies:

```
> AlienHunter didn't relise there were more than one page of
who, and isn't really watching convo
> AlienHunter is at work you see :)
```

AlienHunter's remark could be interpreted as a complaint were the smiley to be a 'frowny' face, but in the opposite context, this remark reads as an explanation of why he has not been paying attention. The existence of smileys is perhaps of more interest than the finer points of their usage: the fact that graphical representations of human facial expresisons have evolved in a text-based medium is surely a comment on their enormous importance to human interaction.

5. Conclusion

This project has realised a cross-disciplinary study of the language and interaction styles fouind on telnet talkers. Talker English is a dynamic variety of English found on a particular electronic medium, the telnet talker; it is akin to IRC in its synchronous nature and high informality, although its interface is more closely related to that of MUD systems. While the language used on talkers inherits features from older forms of CMC

---

[17]The symbol \/ represents the British osbcene gesture of two raised fingers, and is read left-to-right instead of rotated 90° as for smileys. It is used on Caves by several regulars but is not common on Surfers, although it apparently originated there.

and is influenced by crossover with other varieties such as IRC english and hackish, it is not identical with any of them. The small and close-knit community of talker users has produced some unusual features, among which are lexical items specific to the group of talker users and an unusual use of tenses motivated by the need for concision. The more sophisticated interface, particularly the 'emote' command, which as a non-goal-oriented function is unique to talkers, gives scope for an interesting approach to the realisation of utterances, paralinguistic features and self-presentation.

Talker English, like other CMC media, displays many features of spoken English, with the exception of those which obstruct concision or clarity of reference, in which respects it uses features more common in written English. Discursive features of talker usage are much the same as in other CMC media; other features shared with different modes of CMC include methods of ellipsis and graphical icons. Many paralinguistic features realised on talkers directly represent those commonly found in spoken English, including phatic communication; others reproduce gesture and action as context for utterances, and others serve purely social phatic functions. Features such as diminution, described action and even changes in self-presentation are employed to heighten the affective content of utterances. Much as Werry concluded on IRC, the desire to reproduce the informal, affective style of face-to-face communication is an important motivation; however talker English does not simply try to reproduce spoken language, but instead delights in creating new ways in which to realise this goal.

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    Communication* 8, 56-78

Credits

All staff and users on Surfers; Simon Tatham; James Greenhalgh (slaine);
Steve Fairbairn (Balloon); Tamsin; Molgrips; and all the Caves regulars
(just hold still while I focus the microscope...)

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