

# **IRC CONVERSATION**

**Aspects of turn-taking and sequence structure  
on Internet Relay Chat**

Master's thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Tutkielman tavoitteena on selvittää IRC-keskustelujen rakenteita, aloitusvuoroja ja niiden jälkeisiä toimintoja sekä vuorottelua. Tutkimuskysymykset koskevat chatin aloitusvuorojen toimintoja ja reaktioita niihin, vuorottelun merkkejä sekä keskustelujaksojen epäyhtenäisyydestä johtuvia mahdollisia häiriöitä vuorovaikutuksessa. Käytän metodinani etnometodologista keskusteluanalyysia (<i>Conversation Analysis</i>, CA). Aineistonani on chat-keskusteluja kahdelta eri palvelimelta, joilta taltioin 30 tuntia keskusteluja eri jaksoissa kolmen viikon aikana keväällä 2010. Taltioinnit ovat julkisia keskusteluja, eikä niiden perusteella voi tunnistaa yksittäisiä osallistujia.</p> <p>Käsittelen IRC-keskusteluille tyypillisiä piirteitä ja käsitteitä, esimerkiksi nimimerkit, keskustelukanavat, hymiöt ja asteriskit. Vertaan IRC-keskustelua myös tavalliseen kasvokkain tapahtuvaan keskusteluun. Analyysiosassa syvennän aineiston esimerkkien avulla keskusteluanalyysin käsitteistöön kuuluvat keskustelun aloitusvuorot, vierusparit, monenkeskisyys, vuorottelu ja vuoron kohdistaminen. Tarkastelen myös aloitus- ja lopetusvuoroja, keskustelun monitasoisuutta, käyttäjien sulkemista chatista sekä IRC-bottien eli kanavia ylläpitävien tietokoneohjelmien toimintaa ja niiden osuutta vuorovaikutuksessa.</p> <p>Keskeisimmät tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että chatissa ei näytä olevan mitään yksittäistä aloitustapaa, johon vastakeskustelijat aina reagoisivat. Aineistossa yleisin aloitustapa oli tervehdys, mutta toisella kanavalla toistui usein myös loukkaus. Toisistaan poikkeavat keskustelutyylit korostuivat kanavilla selkeästi. Ei-kielellistä viestintää käytettiin runsaasti ja varsin innovatiivisesti (<i>emoticons</i>). Usein ne ovat merkkejä myös vuoron vaihdosta. Huomiota herätti se, että näennäisesti passiivisten osallistujien määrä kanavilla oli merkittävä. Lisäksi IRC-botit antavat vuorovaikutukseen mielenkiintoisen aspektin sekoittaen ihmisten ja robottien kommunikointia.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Computer mediated communication (CMC) has experienced an explosive increase during the past few decades. Such relatively new and static means are for example email, bulletin boards and newsgroups on the Internet, and text messages via mobile phones. The more dynamic, so to speak, and synchronous means would include video conferences on the Internet and video calls via mobile phones. In between the static and dynamic lay the text-based, quasi-synchronous conversations. The oldest and most studied chat protocol is Internet Relay Chat (IRC). All chat protocols work under the same principle: they provide a venue for communities of users with a common interest to communicate in real time. As IRC is purely a text-based protocol, there are chat rooms that support graphics, voice chats and video chats, in which people hear or see each other or graphics as they chat (Shelly, Vermaat and Quasney 2009).

Internet Relay Chat, created by a Finnish researcher in 1988, initiated the digital and quasi-synchronous communication through Internet in a wide scale. From the 1990's on, this relatively new means has taken various forms in making communication online more and more popular all over the world. The use and function of those chat channels or rooms, as they are called, are

still basically quite similar, and that is why in most cases we can use the same terminology in describing IRC conversation. In the study, for example, the terms *chat* and *IRC* are used in the same sense, as in most other studies in the field.

This study looks at conversation on two IRC channels, namely #London in IRCnet and #London in DALnet. My goal is to map the interactional structure in the data in order to discover what kind of structures, actions and initiative turns there are in IRC conversation. I will also try to describe the ways in which turn-taking in IRC differs from turn-taking in face-to-face conversation. Many researchers (e.g. Werry 1996, Herring 1999, Garcia and Jacobs 1999) claim that disrupted turn adjacency in IRC conversation is common and may cause misunderstandings especially for novice users. However, there are certain advantages in IRC, too, when compared with face-to-face communication. They will be discussed in the study, as well.

I shall start by having a look at the previous studies in the field. The objectives, an overview of the data and used methods come next, and some methodological key concepts are introduced here, too. The method of Conversation Analysis (CA), originally by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), is applied in this work. I shall try to answer the first questions partly already in Chapter 2, where the specific features of IRC are presented in more detail. The observations will be presented in the analysis, conclusion and discussion in chapters 3, 4 and 5, respectively.

## 1.1 Previous studies

A lot of research has been done and is done on digital communication, and new studies are continuously published especially online. Linguistic study on digital conversations has, with solid reasons, narrowed their scope to specified branches. For example, email has been researched by Baron (1998

and 2001) among others. More recently Baron has also studied discourse structures in instant messaging (Baron 2010). Text messages have been studied in Katz and Aakhus (2002). Susan Herring (e.g. 1996, 1999, 2004, 2010) stands out in the field with her extensive CMC studies. Also Ilkka Arminen (2005) and Ian Hutchby (2001) have provided valuable input on the issue.

As mentioned before, a great variety of studies on chat and CMC, in general, has been published on the Internet. For example, *Language@Internet* is a scholarly, open-access online journal with articles on language and language use mediated by the Internet. An “older” one, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*<sup>1</sup>, is a web-based, peer-reviewed scholarly journal since 1995. Articles have been published, to mention just a few, on chat openings (Rintel, Mulholland and Pittam 2001), ambiguous non-responses in IRC (Rintel, Pittam & Mulholland 2003) and interactional coherence in CMC (Herring 1999). Susan Herring modified content and linguistic analysis techniques for analyzing computer-mediated communication (Herring 2004). Paulus and Phipps (2008) studied students’ talk in CMC environments, and one of their observations was that students made more interactive moves in synchronous environments like chat and less in asynchronous, such as email.

Studies on chat channels have been approached from a very general level starting from nicknames and abbreviations to the technical realization (Herring 1996; Crystal 2001). Similar features were discussed by Werry in his article *Linguistic and Interactional Features of Internet Relay Chat* (1996). Several researchers state that transmission of utterances between users gives IRC a very face-to-face and conversational feel (e.g. Werry 1996; Newhagen and

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/> from 1995 to 2007. From January 2008 on the issues are published by International Communication Association, and they are available in Wiley-Blackwell online library. Online access to the journal [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1083-6101](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1083-6101)

Rafaeli 1996). When it comes to the term text-only ‘conversations’, users are considered to have conversation on IRC, although it is not done orally (e.g. Herring 2010; Anderson & al. 2010).

As mentioned before, Herring (1999) carried out a research on interactional coherence in text-only, both quasi-synchronous (e.g. IRC) and asynchronous (email) CMC. Compared to ordinary face-to-face (F2F) conversation, text-based CMC differs fundamentally in three ways. Herring summarises them, *[...] responses are often separated from the turns they are responding to, topics tend to decay quickly, and multiple, overlapping exchanges often share the same channel.* Nonetheless, the reduced interactional coherence does not seem to prevent the users from enjoying their recreational CMC. In fact, it may as well be one of the reasons for it. (Herring 1999.)

Ilkka Arminen (2005) investigated talk at work applying Conversation Analysis (CA), and he focused especially on information technology in institutional interaction. Giving first a comprehensive look at Ethnomethodology and CA and its applications, Arminen acknowledges that CA studies can be an innovative eye-opener in the social environment and communication. When looking at the computer-supported co-operative multiparty conversation, such as chat systems, he also stresses the constraints on the sequential achievement in them in comparison to ordinary F2F conversation. He suggests that the design for inter-subjective actions in chat systems is neglected, which hinders the communicative success in multiparty communication. (Arminen 2005: 82.)

In his comprehensive study on institutional interaction Arminen (2005) points out two essential technical features explaining IRC communication. First, there is a delay between message production and transmission. Second, participants are prevented from monitoring the production of utterances<sup>2</sup>. In

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, monitoring the production is partly possible in certain chat protocols where the

chat, constraints are caused especially by the multi-sequentiality and the lack of inter-subjectivity, which is easily fractured. Thus, misunderstandings can be difficult to repair or they may grow deeper, although that, of course, happens in face-to-face conversation, too. (Arminen 2005, 215.)

Ian Hutchby carried out his work *Conversation and Technology: from the telephone to the internet* (2001) where he analyses technologies for communication and their sociological dimensions. Hutchby explores the relationship between forms of technology and structures of social interaction. As to CMC such as IRC, he describes it as a form of technologized or virtual conversation. Hutchby bases his interactional model largely on Sacks' Conversation Analysis (1974), which he sees as the best framework for analysing the ways in which non-human technological devices can become significant elements of ordinary arrays of our ordinary conduct. (Hutchby 2001.)

In this study I take part in the discussion on CMC by investigating communication on two IRC channels. As already mentioned, the method for analysis owes a lot to Conversation Analysis by Sacks et al. (1974) and to Herring's work on CMC, especially to her observations on interactional coherence (1999). Moreover, Arminen (2005) proved a valuable source as he provides broad insight into CA, technological innovations and interaction at work, which gives intriguing ideas for the future in the field of CMC.

## 1.2 Aim of the study

In the present work I study what IRC conversation or simply *chat* is and how

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participants can see the typed characters (and possible corrections) apparently synchronously and character by character on their monitor screen. Yet, that is not the case with Internet Relay Chat, where the production itself is not monitored in any ways, but the participants can only see the whole product, the message or an utterance, after it has been sent as a whole.



participants communicate with typed utterances online. I shall focus on the interactional structure, actions and turn-taking in IRC. To begin with, I shall describe how chat is structured and what participants' basic actions are in chat.

The research questions are the following:

- (a) what kinds of actions are used to initiate talk and
- (b) what kinds of responses do these get? Also,
- (c) what kinds of markers can be found in IRC turn-taking? Moreover,
- (d) do disrupted sequences and adjacency pairs complicate interaction significantly?

I shall try to illustrate the data and the present research with the help of the following extract. (The line numbers have been inserted by the author for ease of reference.)

(1)

**DALnet #london March 24, 2010**

[...]

- 1 [21:54] <Charlotte13UK> not so busy now :)
- 2 [21:55] <Charlotte13UK> had some gr8 pm chat tonite ;)
- 3 [21:55] <@Perturbed^Parrot> and we get sloppy seconds?
- 4 [21:57] <Charlotte13UK> yep so come and get it fellas!!!
- 5 [21:58] <@Hairy^Enchilada> Please show me your fanny  
Charlotte13UK
- 6 [21:59] <Charlotte13UK> dont be so dirty
- 7 [21:59] <@Snogs> Guest10496 i could be so dirty.

[...]

In general, on each line sent by the users we can see the time, the user's nickname and finally the line or the utterance itself. We see also that the turns are clearly marked; usually there is one line per message or utterance, and sometimes the users add emoticons or punctuation marks at the end. As to time sequence, surprisingly, those seven lines were sent in a five-minute

period. Nevertheless, the cohesion is maintained despite the relatively long breaks in the interaction. In a F2F conversation a similar conversational sequence would most likely last less than 20 seconds, and should there be breaks, the topic would have been changed most probably several times.

So, in example (1) there are four people chatting on the channel, and the nickname Charlotte13UK gets several responses to her opening lines. In her initiative first-pair part she informs that she has now time for chat with the other users in the channel (line 1). She goes on, and thus there is really no immediate second-pair part as there most likely would be in adjacency pairs in F2F communication. Nor is there verbal or non-verbal response, of course. Charlotte13UK chooses to take the next turn as well and playfully informs the other users on the channel about good chatting she has had (line 2). The second-pair part is finally on line 3, sent by Perturbed^Parrot, and it is, in fact, a somewhat attitudinal question to Charlotte13UK.

The users change the tone and actions constantly in the extract. Charlotte13UK finishes her first two lines with smileys, and they seem to give a happy and even flirty or inviting tone to her comments (lines 1 and 2). The nick Perturbed^Parrot reacts and throws her a question which we could describe as jealous or annoyed, playful or not. She replies light-heartedly and invites more, presumably male users to chat with her. In line 5 Hairy^Enchilada makes a request with a sexual innuendo to her. Charlotte13UK reacts and disciplines him, which arouses a series of comments, even conversations within conversations which are not visible in this excerpt. Snogs sends a line of which beginning is not clear (line 7): he addresses his comment to a nick called Guest10496 who is not an active participant on the channel, or maybe Snogs is chatting in two or several different chat rooms and mixes the lines on purpose or accidentally; in any case, the line seems progressive within the chat in this conversational sequence. What is more important, those extra characters in the beginning of

the line do not prevent a reader from understanding his message, although they might puzzle a novice user of IRC.

When we look at the content, example (1) represents a relatively consistent and readable excerpt of chat in the data. I say consistent, since there are sometimes another or several conversations with a different topic going on simultaneously, and the chat sequences are disrupted by them. It is a typical feature on IRC especially when there are several active users chatting at the same time (Herring 1999). These disrupted sequences are discussed more when I describe the features of IRC (Chapter 2), in the analysis (Chapter 3) and naturally in the Conclusion and Discussion (Chapters 4 and 5).

My proposition is that IRC users invent and apply resourceful ways in making the interaction flow smooth, comprehensible and funny, and the technological constraints or disrupted adjacency pairs do not hinder the communicational success severely if at all, although they may divert it. Furthermore, I argue that actions and language used on IRC are easily much more radical or upsetting than in an ordinary conversation, and that is inherent in this form of CMC. I also argue that IRC's potential could be exploited more due to its advantages to other CMC forms.

### 1.3 Data

The data was acquired from two IRC channels called #london in March and April 2010. Both channels were under different servers, namely IRCnet and DALnet, and consequently the IRC-users were not the same. Apart from very few words or utterances, all the conversation took place in English. The #london channels were observed and documented altogether almost 30 hours during the three-week period, with logs from 10 minutes to 5 hour of duration. In my opinion the excerpts shown in the analysis represent typical and quite distinctive cases of interactional structure, actions and turn-taking

on these two IRC channels.

The participants' identities and even their nationalities remain unknown to us, since the analysis concentrated on the chat and its structure. Thus the users' identities are considered irrelevant here. Consequently, the nicknames in this study have not been changed, since it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to trace the real persons behind the nicks. Some background information on the participants can be seen through queries and directly from the IRC nickname, too, such as whether the user has channel operator rights (marked with the symbol @ in front of the nickname) or is a regular participant.

On DALnet the active participants varied little and the same users seemed to be logged on almost all the time, whereas on IRCnet variation was more common. The name of the channel #london seemed to have some importance on IRCnet as it was referred to in some of the chat sequences, but on DALnet no-one really paid any attention to it.

When it comes to participants or users and their conversational roles on the channels, a common feature seems to be that there are so called regulars who always seem to be there. There are active or occasional IRCers, passer-byes, and observers or visitors. I assume that most 'observers' probably do not really observe the chat too closely but are just logged on to the channel for some reason unknown to us. Often no other sign of life is seen from them but the automated server announcement when they join or quit the channel. Some are probably just hanging around for fun there and some maybe studying IRC and, why not, its structure and actions in it. That, of course, was my purpose of joining the channels.

#### 1.4 Method: Conversation Analysis

Text-based, online conversations or chats can be approached from various angles. For example Jacobson (1999) studied nicknames, and he approached them using the concepts of prototype and association, more familiar in cognitive language studies. In this study the method used is Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis (CA), originated in the work of Harvey Sacks, an American sociologist. CA investigates linguistic communication and interaction between people, and that is what IRC is all about – with its peculiar characteristics. Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 14) point the contrast between CA and linguistic approach this way:

CA is only marginally interested in language as such; its actual object of study is the *interactional organization of social activities*. CA is a radical departure from other forms of linguistically orientated analysis in that the production of utterances, and more particularly the sense they obtain, is seen not in terms of the structure of language, but first and foremost as a practical social accomplishment.

The emphasis on *studying talk as a way of doing* links CA to ethnomethodological sociology (Arminen 2005). As to ethnomethodology, it is a discipline which concentrates on the way people make sense of the world and display their understanding of it (Young 2008: 43). Harold Garfinkel is the creator of ethnomethodology and work place studies (see e.g. Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1984). Harvey Sacks, the CA's designer, was one of Garfinkel's students.

So, taking a step from ethnomethodology towards the research of fundamental human interaction, conversation, the conversation analysis seems the most practical application in its analysis at the moment (see e.g. Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974; Goodwin 1981; Arminen 2005). In brief, CA focuses on three fundamental assumptions in interaction: its orderliness, structure and sequential patterns. First, interaction is structurally organized,

and the social structures always exist. Second, conversation takes always place in a context, and the context also modifies it. Third, these two properties form an intrinsic part of interaction so that nothing can be dismissed random, irrelevant or accidental. (Heritage 1984: 241.)

Data is the starting point for the study in CA. Context, speakers and other possible variables are to be taken into account in the analysis (Hakulinen 1996: 18). CA is also inherently a comparative approach (Arminen 2005: 235). A conversation analyst considers all the features and phenomena in conversation worth analysing. Some common questions are, for example, why turn-taking occurs in some parts, how the turns are structured and how the turns are given or taken. Yet, CA does not deal with the language accuracy or whether someone speaks correctly or not (Hakulinen 1997: 35).

In the beginning CA was applied to investigate face-to-face communication and telephone conversations. Along with the modern communication technology CA has studied conversation through mobile phones, Internet or CMC in general. Researchers also investigate how modern, interactional channels develop new forms of communication and even social identities (Hutchby 2001: 83). Arminen (2005) goes further and he suggests CA applications should help to analyse and develop communication technologies. He manifests that CA studies could and should be implemented inside larger research and development programmes, and they can also be applied in building communication technologies (2005: 83). Since CA is distinctively an empirical field of research, for instance IRC can offer us a huge amount of data for analysis. Their implications could be used not only for heuristic or critical but also for innovative purposes, as Arminen (ibid.) points out referring to CA studies in modern world in general.

There are many challenges in chat for successful interaction, for example in the sequential continuity and time, which are not as linear as in F2F

conversation. The analyses and results on CMC studies can and should be utilised in developing more efficient CMC technology. (Arminen 2005: 226.)

### 1.4.1 Central concepts in Conversation Analysis

Conversation Analysis offers tools that prove useful for this study. The central and recurring CA concepts here are turn, adjacency pair, sequence and conversation. After examining those terms, we shall have a closer look at the participation framework in the following chapter, since the participants and their actions are in the core of the present study and it is closely related to CA. In addition, one more concept in CA, *turn-allocation*, will be discussed together with IRC in chapter 2.3, where its relevance for the present study can be demonstrated better. Also the turn-allocation methods will be presented in Chapter 2 (see e.g. Sacks et al. 1974; Young 2008).

*Turn* is a constructional unit presented by a speaker or in this study by an IRC user at a time. It may contain one or several constructional units which are called utterances. As Heritage (1984: 139) puts it, understanding language is not a matter of understanding sentences but of understanding actions, utterances, which are constructively interpreted in relation to their contexts. In chat it is relatively easy to spot a turn, because the users' utterances are already in written form, one after another. One turn is a text or an utterance that the speaker has decided to send by pressing enter so that the other users can read it.

In all conversations an utterance anticipates what follows, in other words, speakers often respond to prior talk in some way. The term *adjacency pair*, first used by Schegloff and Sacks (1973: 295-296) refers to these paired actions, two interlocked turns that are organized, constrained and conventionalized (Heritage 1984: 261, Goodwin and Heritage 1990: 288). Such are, for example, a question and an answer, a request and acceptance or

its refusal.

*Sequence* in CA describes stretches of talk that seem to hang together; a series of adjacency pairs are tightly or loosely about the same topic. They are coherent, orderly and meaningful sequences of actions (Schegloff 2007: 2). Heritage (1984: 245) points out that sequences and turns-within-sequences, meaning adjacency pairs, are the primary units of conversation analysis.

With *conversation* we refer to interactive, more-or-less spontaneous communication between two or more conversants, not only between speakers. Interactivity takes place because contributions to a conversation are usually responses to what has been said previously. IRC communication is widely considered conversation despite its textual mode. In chats, as in other conversations, the roles of a speaker and recipients may partly overlap (see e.g. Goffman 1981: 124-159; Seppänen 1997: 157). The roles that vary constantly in a free conversation form participation framework (see next chapter and for instance Goffman 1981: 124-159; Goodwin 1987: 115-131).

The terms that Conversation Analysis offers must be, nevertheless, used with caution in the present study, due to the nature of IRC conversation and IRC channels. For example, in face-to-face conversation saying 'hello' and receiving response is not really considered conversation yet, but in text-based chat we could argue so. Moreover, there are certain medium-related features in IRC that face-to-face conversation does not possess and vice versa, of course. For example, Arminen (2005) describes several studies on work-related interaction, such as doctor and patient or service centre and customer interaction, and the results have contributed to improving communication and interfaces in computer-mediated communication, as well.



### 1.4.2 Participation framework

Eeva-Leena Seppänen (1995: 156-176) illuminates Erving Goffman's work on participation framework initiated in the 1980's. Goffman (1981) built a framework to describe participants' constantly changing roles in a conversation, and one of the principal issues concerns the roles of the speaker and listener. Conversation analysts Charles Goodwin and Marjorie Harness Goodwin developed the participation framework further (e.g. C. Goodwin 1981, 1984, 1987; M. H. Goodwin 1990; C. Goodwin and M. H. Goodwin 1990). In CA, then, the participation framework involves every participant present in the communication situation (Goodwin and Goodwin 1990: 16). The following concepts come in useful in the present study: recipient design, discourse identity, bystanders, access to the subject, and knowing and unknowing recipients.

*Recipient design* means that message is always directed to someone (C. Goodwin 1981: 149-166). It is not always too visible in chat, at least not too precisely, although there are ways of showing it. Yet, if a message is sent to the channel, the user sends it to those who he thinks are there, to one person or several. Participants have also *discourse identities* which may vary, for example, due to different access to the subject (Goodwin 1987: 116). In this particular data, the participants may have different access rights to the medium. For instance, a system or channel operator can subjectively forbid undesired users to access the room, and some users may have 'a vote' whereas the others may not.

As in ordinary conversation we are usually able to discuss with all the participants that are present or with just a few of them, or just keep quiet and seemingly listen. Goffman (1981: 132) calls the latter ratified participants or *bystanders*. He refers to them as participants who are present in the speech act

and listen at least to some parts of the conversation. These quiet participants can be considered to have some effect on the conversation, because the active participants are aware of their presence and these quiet observers can take part in the conversation anytime. Moreover, the conversation situations can be more complex, since the participants often do something else, too, at the same time. Some of them may be more concentrated on listening than on speaking (Seppänen 1995: 157). According to my personal and some other fellow IRCers' experience, all this happens constantly in IRC. Chat may be used while playing an online game, for example. It takes place also when a user is typing his turn and his attention is momentarily elsewhere.

In story-telling, as Seppänen (1995: 161) points out referring to Goodwin (e.g. Goodwin 1981, 1984, 1987), two other discourse identities can be found: a teller and a listener. A significant variable is that not all the listeners or in our case users know what has been told before or whether the topic is known by them. So, there are *knowing* and *unknowing recipients*, and the speaker may modify their story-telling apt for different recipients. Thus the teller creates more frames or locations in the participation framework. (ibid.)

In chat users have access to log which is kept by the server, but it is not visible before the user joins the channel. Yet one can never be sure whether the other users actually read the messages or not. Although we can easily report a variety of discourse identities, knowing and unknowing recipients in IRC, it seems that story-telling takes scarcely place in chat. That is quite understandable when we consider the specific features of IRC as a means of communication. They will be looked into in Chapter 2.

## 1.5 Summary

In Chapter 1 I discussed the growing number of CMC research and some relevant studies for the present paper. They include the work of researchers

like Susan Herring, Ian Hutchby and Ilkka Arminen, who also considers Sacks' Conversation Analysis (1974) a useful tool in this field of interaction where technology is present everywhere. I talked about quasi-synchronous CMC in general, and then I stated the research questions which deal with the actions users take when they initiate chat, their responses and turn-taking markers in IRC. The data from two different chat rooms and the method of the study, CA, were introduced together with its central concepts, such as adjacency pair and turn. Also participation framework was discussed. More about CA and its application in the present study will be talked through in the following chapter concerning the specific features of IRC.

## 2 FEATURES OF IRC

My aim in chapter 2 is to describe how one joins a chat room conversation and what users do on IRC in general. Moreover, here I shall discuss the medium and the linguistic features in chat I consider most relevant in this study. Some less common features in IRC are pinpointed in the analysis. Due to similarities and as often in IRC environment, the term chat will be used here as synonym for IRC conversation. Also, the participants in IRC are referred to as users, IRC users or IRCers.

The most typical concepts of chat include channels, nicknames and emoticons. They are discussed briefly here, as they form essential parts of IRC conversation. Chat is examined both alone and compared especially with ordinary face-to-face conversation. The starting point of this chapter is discourse analysis from where we move on to conversation analysis, the method in the study. At the end of this chapter I will apply conversation analysis and focus on chat as textual, near-simultaneity and multiparty conversation. Although the analysis itself comes later, I consider it reasonable to make some semi-analytical observations already here in this chapter.

### 2.1 Nicks, channels, emoticons and asterisks

Every user creates a *nick* (nickname or alias) and a username before the first session in IRC. Using simple commands he then creates a *channel* or joins a channel or *chat room*, and the nick is shown at the beginning of each line the user types and sends there. There can be hundreds of thousands of channels one can join, and often although not always the chat room's name indicates the general topic for chat. The user's nick is always displayed automatically in the main frame as they join or exit a channel. While logged on, users can

type messages or utterances and send them to the channel, and all the users there can see them. One can also send private messages to the other users through IRC, and then they are not visible for everyone, naturally.

Nicks are self-appointed names given by the users themselves, and they are in general invented and quite imaginary, yet not random. Jacobson (1999) states that nicknames arouse different associations about age, sex, appearance, education and other features or interests, just to mention a few. In the present study, for example, we see nicks like Perturbed^Parrot, cyrus666 and came\_in\_ur\_mouth. The users may underline some of their characteristics or direct the other IRCers to certain direction. The nicknames can be seen as masks to the real personalities (see e.g. Danet, Ruendenberg-Wright & Rosenbaum-Tamari 1997) because through them one can cheat, lead or mislead the other parties. Nicks themselves can provoke discussion, too. As Turkle (1997: 180) points out, people may play with their personalities and test their limits in chat.

The appearance of IRC conversation may first prove rather confusing and lead to breakdowns in communication, since there is quite a lot of information visible on the screen. Moreover, in a vivid chat room users may send messages in a very fast pace as if they were competing for turns. In such a situation the text scrolls up the screen rapidly with the new lines, and it may be rather difficult to follow the conversation.

In example (2) we can see another excerpt of chat. Notice that in this example the users' utterances can be found in lines 1-3 and 7, whereas three of the IRC system lines (lines 4-6) have not been edited from between. In the other examples the automatic system reports and operators' action lines have been deleted for readability reasons unless their information is considered relevant for the study.

(2)

**IRCnet #london March 23, 2010**

```

1 16:52 <@Ranthor> sup Spider_VL
2 16:52 <+Spider_VL> same shit different day :)
3 16:52 <+Spider_VL> you?
4 416:53 -!- aioe [~ezec@dynamic.casa-162-243-12-
  196.wanamaroc.com] has left #london []
5 16:55 -!- AcidFlazh [AcidFlazh@shit.hu] has joined #london
6 16:55 -!- mode/#london [+v AcidFlazh] by Ranthor
7 16:55 <@Ranthor> Spider_VL I am good thanks

```

Here alias (nick) Ranthor asks Spider\_VL a question ('What's up?') stating the addressee's nick, and in the answer Spider\_VL finishes his line with an emoticon (lines 1-2). A couple of minutes later Ranthor answers to Spider\_VL stating the nick in the beginning of the reply. Thus also the other and possibly newly-joined participants (here AcidFlazh) know that the line has been addressed to a certain user.

*Emoticons*, also known as *smileys*, are facial expressions that are pictorially represented by punctuation and letters, usually to express a writer's mood. They are mostly used to express emotion, to strengthen a message and to express humour. More emoticons are generally used in a positive context than in a negative context. All in all, participants seem to use emoticons in a way that is similar to facial behaviour in F2F communication, and users tend to consider the interaction partner and social context. (Derks et al. 2008.)

Emoticons were used quite a lot in the studied data. As stated before, emoticons imitate face-to-face communication, just as smile and laughter in general express playfulness or non-serious attitude they do so in IRC in an adapted format, as we saw in examples (1) and (2).

There is one more peculiar feature in IRC which has to do with communication: *asterisks*. Slightly separated from the conversation lines, users can describe, for instance, actions by using a simple command and

writing a line and pressing enter. We can see one in the following extract.

(3)

**DALnet #london March 27, 2010**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | [20:55] <@Snogs> I wana personal chat with me?  |
| 2 | [20:55] <LadyGimikera_onCAM> who  |
| 3 | [20:55] <cyrus666> *jake beat snogs with a english dictionary and say "dont be so rude" |

In example (3) cyrys666 describes an action, in this case beating and the act of saying (line 3), instead of sending an ordinary chat line and telling it. This particular example is grammatically incorrect since the verbs lack third person singular '-s'. Users often take that into account when sending these asterisk lines, and they send them not as themselves but in third person. In any case, the line is preceded with an asterisk, and that is the reason for its name. In my data there were not too many of them, but asterisks are typical in chats.

The purpose of using asterisks and emoticons is to describe something that is not normally seen on the computer screen, such as gestures, actions or some other extra information. It is arguable whether the asterisks would belong to non-linguistic descriptions as emoticons do, and we shall argue that in the discussion. However, they both play a part in IRC community 'code' language, and it is useful to know about them in order to understand communicative features in chats.

## 2.2 Conversation in IRC in comparison with face-to-face conversation

Conversation in IRC differs from face-to-face conversation in many ways. The most distinct is the fact that IRC is a text-only based medium of communication. The use of auditory channels is limited to a few simple alarms. Herring (1999) describes IRC as a "lean medium", meaning that the

participants in IRC can only make use of a limited number of communicative practices. IRC has its own paralanguage, however, which enables the users to convey a variety of facial expressions in the form of emoticons, for example. According to Herring (1999) IRC breaks the rule of "no gap, no overlap" (from Sacks et al. 1974: 700-701), which is often seen as the ideal of face-to-face conversation.

Herring (1999) states that despite user adaptations, chat remains only loosely coherent in comparison with the interactional norms for F2F conversation. This is especially the case when CMC is used for recreational purposes. However, text-only CMC has certain interactional advantages, too. First, it is an inherently playful medium, where users clearly intend to be humorous. Second, it allows multi-tasking where users can, for instance, take part in several activities or even chats simultaneously. Hence it enables a greater intensity of interaction than is possible F2F. Third, the textual record or log makes interaction more persistent than spoken language, which leaves no real trace once it is uttered. Log helps the user's cognitive processing and it also facilitates meta-linguistic awareness. Without log IRC and all CMC would undoubtedly be more incoherent in interaction and thus more limited in its uses. (Herring 1999.)

Hutchby (2001) discusses the technological affordances which are centrally involved on IRC. I quote (Hutchby 2001: 183),

'[...] I want to emphasize four specific constraints which serve to distinguish IRC interaction from the normative order of ordinary conversation:

- 1 Participants can only 'take a turn' in the ongoing conversation by typing something in their talk-line box and pressing <Enter>.
- 2 That 'turn' only reaches all others on the channel once it has been accepted and distributed by the server (temporal lag).
- 3 There is a difference between a turn's course of production (typing in) and its public 'enunciation' (sending), such that other turns may appear in the interim which disrupt the turn's sequential relationship with its intended



- prior.
- 4 While all this is happening, the conversation is going on in a scrolling window on the monitor screen; which means that, on occasions of high traffic through the server, the prior contribution to which a turn is intendedly tied may have scrolled off the screen by the time the second contribution appears.'

Communication gets easily complicated in multiparty conversation, and that is probably why channel operators sometimes control the number of participants in chat. Also, in IRC channels there are often a number of participants who do not take part in the conversation but rather stay idle and possibly follow the conversations of other users. This can be a significant factor in recipient design, that is, in the way the turns are shaped by the expected audience.

### 2.2.1 Sequentiality

IRC communication is synchronous in the sense that all the participants on a channel are online at the same time. Yet, the interaction is not synchronous as in co-present spoken interaction, because the utterances may overlap, and the coherence is not necessarily too clear. For this reason, Garcia and Jacobs (1999) refer to IRC and other IRC based protocols as 'quasi-synchronous computer-mediated communication' (QS-CMC).

As Herring (1999) and Garcia and Jacobs (1999) point out, it is clear that also the turn-taking system is different in QS-CMC from that in ordinary conversation. However, it is not non-existent or inconsequential for the interaction. The choices participants make about where and when to take turns affect the placement of messages and that way their sequential context. This sequential context is crucial for the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of messages in QS-CMC. As discussed in the previous chapter, chat log kept by the system helps users to follow conversational sequences, since users can have a look what has been said before while they have been logged on in a

channel. However, it is often problematic for IRC users to successfully relate *current and prior* or *current and next turns*, partly because participants tend to 'import the organisational procedures of oral conversation to the [IRC] environment, with some problematic results' (Garcia and Jacobs 1999: 360).

There is another significant feature that is fundamental in QS-CMC. Rather than being a linear sequentiality as typically in oral conversation, the QS-CMC represents a multidimensional sequentiality. In between the typed utterances there are often some other written lines with a different topic, so there may be, in fact, one conversation within one or more conversations going on simultaneously. (Herring 1999; Garcia and Jacobs 1999.)

Some examples of disrupted sequences can be found in my data, although there were not too many active users chatting in the channels at the same time. As mentioned before, in multi-participant chats the topics and turns tend to be mixed more, and thus the sequences in those conversations do not appear too coherent. Nevertheless, the users do not seem to worry about it but accept it as a feature of IRC. My analysis of the data seems to be in accordance with that.

### 2.2.2 Chronology

QS-CMC is multidimensional also chronologically (Garcia and Jacobs 1999). It is so because the participants often write their messages simultaneously but they do not know the exact location of their line with respect to the others' when they send them. Another example of this chronological multidimensionality is when a participant sends an addressed line but the addressee may have quit or turned physically away from the computer just before the line appears on the dialogue box. This happens because the message or any part of it is not visible to the group until posted by hitting the Enter key. However, the addressee may see the line later if they log on the

channel again and if they scroll back. There are chat protocols in which the typed characters appear on a dialogue box keystroke by keystroke (or disappear if edited), but it is not so on IRC.

Because of the limitations of IRC as a medium of communication certain things need to be taken into account when analysing IRC conversations. To start with, there is no similar overlap of talk in IRC conversations as in F2F interaction. The participants' turns, even when produced and posted simultaneously, will appear in a linear order on the screen. Herring (1999) points out two properties that are often cited as obstacles to interaction management. First, 'listeners' cannot give simultaneous feedback and thus show that they are following the chat. Second, turn adjacency is often disrupted and in consequence overlapping exchanges can and do occur. Multiple conversations (of multiple parties) can overlap on the screen, as the system does not separate the comments into any kinds of groups according to who is speaking to whom.

Because everyone's posts are seen on the screen, there is no actual need to compete for turns. Yet sometimes that happens because the topics change and especially in multi-user chat people often try to send their lines swiftly if the topic interests them somehow. Although a person's turn-taking can be prevented by kicking them out of a channel, for example, there is no actual way or need to prevent a person from posting a turn. In F2F conversation the need to compete for turns often exists because it is difficult to listen to more than one person at a time. However, on IRC most turns are clearly in text form, and they are read separately even if they are posted simultaneously. Accordingly, everybody can get their turn although its exact location cannot be known in advance.

### 2.2.3 Silence

Since IRC is an asynchronous, chronologically multi-dimensional text-based medium, it has its effects on turn-taking as for communication in general. All audio-visual cues are limited on IRC. For example, there is no eye-contact between the participants or voice heard, so no one can be sure, whether anyone is in fact reading the messages that are being posted. That can sometimes change the meaning of *silence* in a conversation. Whereas in F2F conversation participants may feel uneasy if there is a lull in the conversation, in IRC conversation silence is usually tolerated much better. The lack of eye-contact also means that turns cannot be allocated by a gaze but only by verbal, textual actions, such as addressing or producing the first part of an adjacency pair.

Silence can be also due to private chats users may be having. On the contrary to an ordinary conversation, those who are having a private chat can also follow what is being talked about in the main conversation or using chat terminology, in the main frame. This is again thanks to log and separated dialogue boxes: a private chat is opened in another window. It is not likely that in a face-to-face conversation one could follow another conversation too well while whispering with someone else. At least that is what teachers say. There is another important point: the other users can never know whether one IRCer is talking privately with someone else if a user appears silent. Moreover, as mentioned earlier in Participation framework (chapter 1.4.2), doing something else while chatting seems to be more than a rule on IRC. It is impossible to find out what the users are really doing if and when they are not sending any messages in a chat room.

### 2.3 Turn-allocation in CA and in IRC

Conversation usually consists of two or more people talking to each other in turns. As a rule, one participant speaks while the others listen, then the turn to speak is either given to or taken by another participant. Turn-allocation deals with the selection of the next speaker. As for example Young (2008: 46) states, long stretches of overlap are avoided in conversation. This means that if one person speaks, the others listen. Although short overlaps are common at points where one turn ends and another begins, longer overlaps are rare. In face-to-face conversation overlap enables the listeners to show that they are actively following the conversation without interrupting the speaker who has the turn, as Herring states (1999). She continues saying that not only (long) overlaps but also gaps are avoided in an ideal face-to-face conversation. It is not always so on IRC.

Turn-allocation is divided into three different techniques; the current speaker can select the next speaker (CSS), next speaker can self-select (NSSS), or the current speaker may continue speaking (CSC), that is, take a new turn right after the previous one (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 704). Young (2008: 47) states that while CSS is a common means of turn-allocation in a formal conversation, NSSS is often used in more informal communicative situations.

Conversational actions often occur in pairs. For example a greeting is followed by a greeting and a question is followed by an answer. Such commonly co-occurring pairs are called adjacency pairs, as introduced in Chapter 1.4.1. If a speaker produces the first part of an adjacency pair, for example a question, it is expected that the second part, in this case an answer, is produced by someone else than the current speaker. Adjacency pairs can thus be used to give the turn to the next speaker (Young 2008: 47). Young

(2008: 46) points out that failure to produce the second part of an adjacency pair is often sanctioned by a verbal action. Such an action could be, for example, repeating the first part of the adjacency pair.

In F2F conversation a current speaker can select the next speaker by addressing him or by using eye-contact or gestures (Young 2008: 47). Of course, in a text-only conversation, there is no eye-contact or gestures to give someone the turn. Also, as Garcia and Jacobs (1999: 353) point out, in an IRC conversation it is impossible to select the next speaker, because the conversational floor is open to anyone all the time. Hence, it is more appropriate to use the term 'future speaker' instead of the term 'next speaker'.

## 2.4 Summary

IRC conversation with its specific features and system lines may appear rather confusing for a novice user. In general, though, basic chat literacy and 'code of chat conduct' seem to be quickly learnt. Users send typically brief lines or utterances in chat and topics typically change swiftly. Users in chat seem to imitate some features of F2F conversation quite innovatively, and some peculiarities of the medium are often used as its strengths. Log, anonymity and the use of emoticons or actions (asterisks) can be considered as a few of them.

Some further comparison between F2F and IRC conversation was made. The latter being text-based only and thus its general lack of non-verbal communication are the most distinctive properties. Moreover, disrupted sequentiality and chronology can cause problems in IRC communication, as users cannot know exactly when and at what point of the conversation their utterances are displayed on the chat window for the others, despite the milliseconds' lapse between sending a line and its appearance on the screen.

Thus there may be more than one topic overlapping and mixed turns, especially if there are more than two active users chatting simultaneously.

We also discussed silence which is tolerated more on IRC than in an ordinary conversation, although the topic and the participants play some part in it, too, of course. Silence is not necessarily sanctioned by the other users, since multi-tasking is very common while chatting, and the users generally accept it. Importantly, users have a possibility to have private chats with the other IRCers. That can also have an effect on turn-allocation and turn-taking in general.

Turn-taking is very different on IRC by nature from that in F2F conversation. Anyone in a chat room can take a turn basically at any time and send their utterance or chunk of utterances for others to see. As to the use of IRC, it is typically used for fun, and the medium itself invites people for playful interaction, as several studies and experience have shown.

### 3 ANALYSIS

In this chapter I study the data seeking answers to the research questions presented in chapter 1.2. First I will look into some general, mostly quantitative points, and then I will concentrate on the interactional structure and turn-taking conventions found in the data. As the general technological dimensions and features were mostly introduced in the previous chapter, here I will focus on the actions and their responses especially in the initiative adjacency pairs. Also, I will look into the turn-taking practices in the data. Furthermore, some other phenomena that proved intriguing in terms of ordinary conversation and conversation in IRC will be presented in the analysis. They will be argued in more detail in Conclusions (Chapter 4) and Discussion (Chapter 5).

Before we turn to the analysis itself, I would like to clarify two issues considered relevant in the study: private chats and the users' sex. First, chats are usually seen as multi-user conversations, but users can easily split them into smaller chats. Users can invite any other IRCer on the channel to have private chat with them, and when or if that happens, the other users do not know about it. Neither does a chat investigator and in this case, I. Evidently, when one is not chatting privately, all the sent lines appear on the main IRC frame for all the other users to see, and that is what is and can be studied here.

Second, as to the sex of the IRC users, we cannot say who is male and who female in real life. Yet, for practical reasons, I refer to the users with the masculine pronoun 'he' unless their nicknames would be clearly considered feminine.



### 3.1 General facts and observations

In DALnet server's channel #london users took 280 turns (or utterance lines), whereas the automated system lines exceeded 540 lines in the main dialogue frame during the sessions. In IRCnet channel #london 370 lines were sent by the users, while the number of automated system lines were considerably less with 160 lines. Table 1 shows the figures.

**Table 1. The number of utterance lines sent by the users and by the servers in DALnet and IRCnet.**

	Sent by users	Automatic system announcements
DALnet	280	540
IRCnet	370	160
Total	650	700

What seems surprising here is the huge amount of extra announcements that really do not promote human interaction. That is especially so in DALnet. In DALnet's channel #london the users' lines occupied about one third (34%) of all lines sent; thus the automated system information occupied almost twice as many lines as the utterances sent by the users. The automated system shows information for example on the users joining and leaving the channel, operators changing configuration and some other server information. Nevertheless, the figures mean that in DALnet only every third message or utterance was sent directly by assumingly human user on average. I stress the word assumingly, since there may be some scripts (bots) that sent automated messages using sometimes human nicks. I call them semi-bots, and they will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.8.

In IRCnet's channel #london the relation appears quite a lot more reasonable, as seven out of ten lines (70%) were sent directly by the users. It is obvious that the more automated system announcements there are the more tiresome

is the real interaction between people. However, the system announcements are differently marked from the users' lines when they appear on the screen, so actually the interactive, real users' lines are quite easily sorted out from the text load, once one learns to filter the unimportant information. And that is what users seem to learn very quickly (see e.g. Herring 1999).

There were also divergences between so called active participants and silent users in the channels. In DALnet the difference between the active and silent users was significant. Practically only about 10 or so users sent lines there in public, whereas there were more than a hundred visitors who never dropped a line in the channel, or not at least in public. In contrast, there were 26 active users in IRCnet and silent visitors a little less. The figures can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2. The number of active users and quiet visitors in #london on the two servers.**

	Active users	Visitors with no lines sent
DALnet	12	104
IRCnet	26	23
total	38	127

In IRCnet's channel #london the relation between the participative and silent users was about one to one during the documented time. In DALnet's channel #london, on the other hand, there seemed to be a small, quite an active group of regular users who met up with them, and surprisingly many quiet visitors. Many of them stayed on the channel just for a brief moment and then they left without sending anything, but some stayed there longer, too.

The quiet visitors include the ones for whom the channel operator denied the

entry for some reason. Using IRC terminology, they were ‘kicked out’, or their entry was ‘banned’, as can be seen later in extract (8). Some of them may have done several attempts to rejoin the channel for example by changing their nick and giving it another try. That did not prove too successful for the ‘non-regulars’ in #london in DALnet. Again, we can only guess why the entry was denied from some users, but possibly the channel operator wanted to keep the channel open for only certain IRCers. Besides, if a user did not show any activity in 90 minutes on the channel, they were logged off automatically in DALnet. There was no such time limit in IRCnet. In DALnet the operator also varied the number of participants from 8 to 20 users, whereas in IRCnet the limit was set even to 60. Yet, there were never that many participants simultaneously at any time.

Despite the differences on the two #london channels on the DALnet and IRCnet servers, I do not see it necessary to separate them here, and thus they are analysed as one source of conversation. The reason for this is my idea to describe actions and turn-taking in IRC, and therefore I consider the IRC server irrelevant in the present study, although it would certainly be worth having a closer look in another one.

In general, the documented chats were usually relatively short in the data; some of them lasted only about ten minutes and most of them less than half an hour. A typical conversation in the data had only two to four participants taking turns, while other users on the channel did not seemingly participate in any way.

Looking at the data as a whole, only 32 users out of 165 received at least some kind of a response (Table 3). There were six users who did not get any public response from the others, and 127 visitors who never sent anything while they were logged on to the channel.

**Table 3. The users who received or did not receive a response and quiet users.**

Received a response	32 users
Did not receive a response	6 users
Was quiet	127 users

In the following chapter I will study the users' utterances, especially their initiative turns which received a response. Those who did not receive any response will be briefly discussed there, too. The quiet users will be considered in Conclusions and Discussion (Chapters 4 and 5).

### 3.2 Initiative turns

There were 32 users who received a response at least from one other user at some point of the documentation<sup>3</sup>. In fact, many of those users joined the same channel several times during the time period documented, and as mentioned, they also took part in the chat more or less actively. Therefore the same users may have had more than just one initiative turn, because the openings took place on different days.

Now, let us concentrate on the active users and the sequential structure in their IRC conversations. To be more precise, here I shall study the initiatives and their responses applying the adjacency pair division (see chapters 1.4.1 and later 3.3). Although adjacency pairs tell little about the turns and content themselves, they give us some ideas how actions and reactions are divided (Table 4).

---

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that the figure '32 users who received a response' is not likely to be exact. The documentation was not carried out in one but in several takes, and some of the users may have sent and received something before or after the documentation started or ended. However, it is not considered to alter the study's reliability significantly, although the possibility still exists. The same possibility of inaccuracy remains with some of the initiative turns.

**Table 4. Initiative turns with or without response applying adjacency pair division.**

First-pair part (including one auto-correction)	42
Second-pair part	16
First-pair part with no response	6

A user joins a conversation producing normally, but not nearly always, the first-pair part of the adjacency pair. The first-pair is often a greeting. Sometimes a user's opening line is a reaction to something that was previously said, and thus he produces the second-pair part directly. Table 4 shows the users' initiative turns with response, and 42 of them began more or less the ordinary way with the first-pair turn (first turn) and 16 were second-pair turns (second turns). It seems that ordinary first-pair parts are clearly more frequent initiative turns than the second-pair parts, although there were quite many openings with the second-pair part, too. Six users did not receive any response to their first-pair part. Typically they stayed a moment in the channel expecting an answer, and as nobody answers they leave, as can be seen later in extract (13). Two of those six stayed in the channel longer but they kept quiet in public.

In my data one user received a response without really producing the first turn himself; the automatic system did it for him, as can be seen in excerpt (4). The automatic system announces when any user joins the channel, since the other users see him 'enter the chat room'.

(4)

**IRCnet #london March 20, 2011**

- 1 15:23 -!- Sav\_\_ [~tin.it@host20-72-dynamic.33-79-r.retail.telecomitalia.it] has joined #london
- 2 15:24 <@Ranthor> Hey Sav\_\_
- 3 15:24 <Sav\_\_> Hallo
- 4 15:24 <Sav\_\_> I'm Italian
- 5 15:25 <@Ranthor> good

Greeting a user in advance is fairly common in IRC, although usually the other users tend to greet an entering user only if they know him in some level (Rintel, Mulholland & Pittam 2001). Yet, this welcoming greeting took place only once in the data. Curiously, in line 2 Ranthor greets the newcomer Sav\_\_ but the conversation clearly implies that they do not know each other in any level.

It often happens in multi-participant chats that there are two or even more conversations going on simultaneously, and that is why the first and second turns are not always adjacent as in ordinary face-to-face conversation (e.g. Garcia and Jacobs 1999; Herring 1999). However, there are ways users can link the turns or refer to the utterances to maintain coherence. For instance, in chat it is typical to address a person with their nick or copy a part of the line which is being commented, and thus make the reference clearer. We have seen and will see several examples on the first type of addressing.

In the article *First Things First: Internet Relay Chat Openings* Rintel, Mulholland and Pittam (2001) studied the structure of IRC openings. The automatic system announcements were included, too, and I shall soon give examples on the structure according to their categorisation. The researchers report that users have created varied ways how IRCers may begin conversations in chat societies. There nicks, familiarity within the society and choice of words play often a significant part. (Rintel, Mulholland and Pittam 2001.)

Rintel et al. (2001) compare IRC openings with telephone openings. The starting point is an Automated Joining Event (AJE) given by the server system, which is a similar kind of a signal as telephone's ringing tone. In AJE announcement the user's nick is introduced to all users for the first time. In comparison, with mobile phones one can see only the number or the caller's name in case it has been saved there in advance. On the other hand, thanks to caller's voice, we get more information on the phone, for example about sex and age, whereas in chat a user's nick does not really give any true information about him. The researchers do not give an unambiguous explanation whether the Automated Joining Event is considered as an opening or not; rather, they suggest that it depends on the IRC society and how the other users react to them. (Ibid.)

Rintel, Mulholland and Pittam (2001) categorise how an IRC conversation can be initiated in dyadic interaction. The six channel entry phase progressions are,

- 1) Automated Joining Event (AJE), which is produced by the server, cf. telephone ringing tone
- 2) Joining Initial Behaviour (JIB), i.e. the newly-joined user sends a greeting turn
- 3) Response to a Joining Initial Behaviour (JIB-R), i.e. the newly-joined user receives a response from an existing channel member
- 4) Joining Initial Reaction (JIR), i.e. an existing channel member sends a greeting turn
- 5) Response to Joining Initial Reaction (JIR-R), i.e. a newly-joined member receives a response from an existing channel member
- 6) Addressing the turn to another user (Addr.)

The progressions 1-3 often invite a greeting from an existing channel member. The progressions 4-6 differ from them, because when using those

opening methods they tend to provoke further discussion, whereas the first ones do not do so. I shall soon illustrate the openings with examples taken from the data and discuss an additional progression to the Rintel's et al. (2001) category.

To begin with, Automated Joining Event (AJE) is announced every time a user joins a channel. The only case in the data where a newly-joined user was responded directly was in the previous extract (4): Ranthor, an existing user greets a newly\_joined user Sav\_\_, before Sav\_\_ himself has sent anything. So, in a sense AJE can be an opening, for example with a provocative nick, although this was not the case here.

In order to describe what an AJE looks like I have marked one as an opening in the following example (line 1). The initiatives or opening lines have been marked with the corresponding progression abbreviation and an arrow. In example (5) we see elah's opening greeting (JIB, line 3), and he gets a response from Ranthor (JIB-Response, line 4).

(5)

**IRCnet #london March 24, 2010**

```

1 AJE→      18:27 -!- elah [~agnesmiro@121.54.32.107] has joined
              #london
2           18:28 -!- iMojo is now known as imojo
3 JIB→      18:30 < elah> hi
4 JIB-R→    18:32 <@Ranthor> heya elah

```

In example (6) Ranthor has been some time on the channel without sending anything, but Cosmic\_Love makes a remark which Ranthor comments in his opening line (JIR, line 4). Ranthor sends no hellos or greetings but gets down to the point:



(6)

**IRCnet #london March 27, 2010**

1           09:47 -!- Cosmic\_Love [~eresto@ppp-9-180.15-151.iol.it]  
has joined #london  
2 JIB→     09:47 < Cosmic\_Love> hello  
3           09:48 < Cosmic\_Love> i need to learn english  
4 JIR→     09:57 < Ranthor`> then go to school  
5           09:57 < Ranthor`> and listen to your english teacher  
6           09:58 < Cosmic\_Love> .)  
7           09:58 -!- ranthor is now known as Ranthor  
8           09:58 < Ranthor`> Cosmic\_Love: where are you from?  
9           09:58 < Cosmic\_Love> i'm from Bologna

Ranthor's comment invites a follow-up (JIR, progression 4 in Rintel's et al. classification), and in fact it is he himself who goes on. Cosmic\_Love responds with an emoticon, and then chat goes on more or less within the same topic.

Like the fourth also the fifth progression (JIR-R) to begin a conversation provokes a reaction. In example (7) the user does almost the same as in the fourth, Joining Initial Reaction, but there is something new there now: a third user with his opening line (line 21).

(7)

**IRCnet #london March 20, 2010**

(lines 10-17 edited)

18           09:59 < Cosmic\_Love> i'm eterosexual  
19           09:59 < Cosmic\_Love> you too?  
20           10:00 < Ranthor`> what does it mean?  
21           JIB-R/ADDR→ 10:00 <+Dlade> Ranthor`: Add an h at  
the start. ;)  
22           10:01 < Cosmic\_Love> thanks professor  
23           10:01 < Cosmic\_Love> :)  
24           10:01 < Ranthor`> Dlade: lol I did, but still don't know  
what it means, does it mean gayness?

Another existing user Dlade joins the conversation and with her opening line he responds to Ranthor's question (JIR-Reaction), which in turn provokes more discussion. The interaction is not dyadic anymore, and the six-fold division is not accurate anymore. Dlade does address his opening line to Ranthor (progression 6, line 21) who has been chatting with Cosmic\_Love for a moment already; in any case, addressing would not be necessary at all when joining a conversation, although Dlade decided to do so in the very extract. Of course we can say that although Dlade is an existing user, in a sense he joins the conversation as *a new interactant*. He also gets a response from the other two IRCers.

The variables found in the data mostly follow Rintel's et al. (2001) division in dyadic interaction. However, a third existing user can join the conversation at any point with his initiative turn. Therefore, the progressions should be developed further, because IRC is typically a multi-user chat forum and not dyadic.

There is another question which puzzles the IRC communication: why are some openings used and responded more often than others? If a ringing telephone is supposed to be equal to the chat's Automated Joining Event (AJE), then why don't the users 'pick up the phone' and answer the call more often? Most likely it is the chat's anonymity which lets users ignore the less familiar ones and accept to be ignored themselves, too. I attempt to decipher that by studying the linguistic content and actions in the utterances more closely.

### 3.2.1 Actions in initiative adjacency pairs

There were altogether 42 initiative turns with response, and here I strive to

analyse and interpret their actions. We can get a rough idea how the actions in initiative turns were divided in the data (Table 5). Some of the adjacency pairs could belong to more than one category, but here only the primary action interpreted is mentioned. Thus, each initiative action was counted only once according to my best judgement. Moreover, Hutchby and Wooffit (1998: 16) argue the function of the first-pair part is not always possible to interpret without the relation to its second-pair part (also Sacks et al. 1974: 729). Because of the small data the initiative adjacency pairs, both first-pair and second-pair parts, are reported together in this chapter.

**Table 5. The number of initiative first-pair and second-pair parts according to their actions.**

<u>Initiative adjacency pair</u>	<u>1<sup>st</sup> pair part</u>	<u>2<sup>nd</sup> pair part</u>
Greeting - Greeting	16	8
Question - Answer	8	3
Assessment - Agreement/Disagreement	8	2
Insult - Reaction	5	1
Request - Compliance/Denial	4	1
Calling attention - Reaction	1	1
In total	42	16

The most frequent way to initiate chat was to greet the other users. There were altogether 16 Greeting – Greeting pairs (of which 13 in IRCnet and only 3 in DALnet). One example was already seen in excerpt (6). There were as many Question – Answer and Assessment – Agreement/Disagreement pairs both, 8 of each. We can see two examples in the following extract. There is an example of an insult/assessment (line 2) with two reactions (lines 4 and 5), and then two assessments (lines 7 and 9) with reactions in the same conversational sequence. Arrows are used to point the initiative first parts.

(8)

**DALnet #london March 24, 2010**

```

1          _____03[21:10] *
           came_in_ur_mouth (~came_in_u@c-98-213-97-
           92.hsd1.il.comcast.net) has joined #london
2→        [21:10] <came_in_ur_mouth> Snogs is an idit
3         [21:10] <came_in_ur_mouth> Snogs is an idiot
4         [21:10] <@Snogs> came_in_ur_mouth: Special branch...
           You let me catch you following me begging for help,
           because you won't get it.
5→        [21:10] <@Hairy^Enchilada> That's nice
6         [21:10] <@Snogs> came_in_ur_mouth: 1.
           Idiot,dumb,moron.
7→        [21:10] <@Perturbed^Parrot> big man - insulting bots....
8         [21:10] <@Snogs> Bots !! Bots !! Bots !! Nothing more
           thant that!
9         [21:11] <@Hairy^Enchilada> Fuckwits bots and sex
           offenders, the future of irc!
10        [21:11] <came_in_ur_mouth> you got it!

```

As soon as `came_in_ur_mouth` joins the channel he insults or assesses (and auto-corrects his spelling) another user, `Snogs`, who in turn addresses his reply to the offender and answers something that is not too clear (lines 2-4). `Hairy^Enchilada` makes his opening line and comments the chat and its users (lines 5 and 9). Also `Perturbed^Parrot` assesses the insult (line 7) and implies that `Snogs` is a bot and not a real user. The sequence ends with the offender's critical remark on *the future of irc*. In the continuing sequence not shown here the topic changes slightly, but it keeps including abusive language.

In example (9) a new user<sup>4</sup> joins in (lines 1-2). It seems likely that he knows `Snogs` somehow or from somewhere, as he begins with insulting him.

---

<sup>4</sup> He is a new user allegedly. Considering the `poosy_juice`'s style in the extract 8, he may have been kicked out by `Snogs` already before this when the documentation was not on yet.

(9)

# DALnet #london March 24, 2010

1 \_\_\_\_\_03[21:39] \* poosy\_juice  
(~poosy\_jui@c-98-213-97-92.hsd1.il.comcast.net) has  
joined #london  
2→ [21:39] <poosy\_juice> Snogs you suck ass  
3 \_\_\_\_\_03[21:40] \* poosy\_juice was  
kicked by Snogs (Banned)  
4 [21:40] <@Snogs> poosy\_juice: I think i got big think dick  
and ill give it in to ur ass.  
5 [21:40] <@Hairy^Enchilada> ...  
6 [21:40] <@Snogs> I doubt there are instinctively a lot of  
action.

Snogs' reaction is harsh: he kicks the insulter out of the channel (line 3). What is curious here is the fact that immediately after banning poosy\_juice from the channel, he then sends an addressed message, which is kind of a counter offence. The curious thing is that poosy\_juice cannot read it anymore, but the other users can. It seems that Snogs does that to defend himself and to degrade poosy\_juice in the eyes of the others in the channel. He also seems to enjoy his verbal talent there, and he is using or possibly showing off the power he has as a channel operator.

Question and answer adjacency pairs in openings can have peculiar features in IRC. Although there were so called ordinary questions, such as ‘Anyone from London?’ or ‘where r u at Parrot?’ there were also extraordinary ones, as we can see in the following extract.

(10)

# DALnet #london March 30, 2010

```

1          _____03[20:02] * rraj
      (~faizalb16@82.118.191.158) has joined #london
2→      [20:02] <rraj> name?
3→      [20:04] <Black_Warrior> name of that?
4      [20:04] <@Snogs> My name is snogs anyway.
5          _____03[20:05] * Snogs sets mode:
      +l 19
6          _____03[20:05] * rraj

```

(~faizalb16@82.118.191.158) has left #london

Here rraj pops out his question omitting greetings and other introductions (line 2), and he gets a clarifying question from Black\_Warrior. No real answer is delivered there, at least not in public, and three minutes later rraj leaves the channel. Lines 2-4 clearly belong together forming a minimal conversational sequence. However, they do not form a communicatively satisfactory sequence.

### 3.2.2 Paralinguistic 'turns'

Some initiatives on IRC cause problems when trying to classify them. Such are for instance emoticons, phonetic descriptions of a sound and acronyms, when a user sends only that and nothing else. As such, they would not qualify as turn units in CA. Minimal responses that signal active attention on IRC are scarce: for instance, a receiver is usually unable to supply the minimal verbal responses like 'uh huh', 'mm', etc. (Werry 1996: 52). However, attempts are made to communicate non-verbally on IRC. Here we have some examples:

(11)

#### **DALnet #london April 5, 2010**

- 1 [19:37] <mcaturbia> hehehe
- 2 [19:37] <mcaturbia> byewoman
- 3 [19:37] <@Snogs> :-)
- 4 [19:37] <mcaturbia> with
- 5 [19:37] <mcaturbia> :)))
- Lines 6-11 edited
- 12 [19:38] <mcaturbia> sllepinpiil
- 13 [19:38] <@Snogs> Ah eh unffffffff unfffffffffffffffffffff.
- 14 [19:38] <mcaturbia> hehehehe

In CA laughter or smile would not be considered turns, as for instance there is no linguistic input, but should they not be counted in as turns in IRC?

Even if there was only an emoticon or a sound description but not a real word as in lines 1, 3, 5, 13 and 14? They clearly occupy a line and convey quasi-information to the other users within the specific affordances of IRC systems. In the present study they are considered as turns but excluded as initiative adjacency pairs due to their unclear function in that position. That is why they are presented in this sub-chapter. Table 6 shows the total number of these exceptional, non-verbal cases as single turns.

**Table 6. Extra-linguistic turns in channel #london on the DALnet and IRCnet.**

	DALnet	IRCnet	Total
Emoticons	12	23	35
Phonetic discourse markers	10	5	15
Abbreviations	3	5	8
Other	2	6	8
Total	27	39	66

In total, there were 35 turns in the data with a mere emoticon, 15 discourse markers or phonetic sound descriptions and 8 acronyms. Acronyms are typical to chat and text message environments in general, such as LOL ('laughing out loud'). The phonetic representations described most often laughter, amazement or admiration ('hehehe', 'oooh', 'wow'). Two turns occupied only punctuation marks: three dots and three exclamation marks ('...', '!!!'). Asterisks with actions described in them would belong to this ambiguous group of turns, too. Let us see an example on the use of asterisks and graphics combined:

(12)

**IRCnet #london April 5, 2010**

- 1 01:00 < nic> \o/
- 2 01:00 \* nic dances :D-<
- 3 01:00 \* nic dances :D|-<
- 4 01:00 \* nic dances :D/-<

In the first line nic seems to express joy typing a graphic illustration which describes a person with her hands up. After that in the three consecutive turns he sends asterisks that are typically used to describe an action with words, here dancing, but he also uses typographical symbols ingeniously to sketch dancing. Tilt your head to the left and you will see the dancer's wide smile more clearly.

To sum up some figures in the data, there were 650 lines or turns altogether sent by users and 66 of them consisted only in non-verbal expressions. Therefore, about 10 per cent of the 'text' used in chat was something else but textual communication. In face-to-face conversational mode non-verbal cues can provide more than 90 percent of the meaning that is exchanged in the interaction (see e.g. Bovee and Thill 2000; De Vito 2000). Then, what is the real relation between verbal and non-verbal meaning exchange in text-based means of communication? It is difficult or maybe impossible to determine, but it is evident that all these extra-linguistic user-originated expressions and turns play a significant part in communicating in IRC. Consequently, they cannot be ignored in the present study, either.

### 3.3 Adjacency pairs

In face-to-face conversation a turn can be given to the next speaker by producing the first part of an adjacency pair (Sacks et al. 1974: 716). Simply producing the first part is not always enough to give the turn, however, but the current speaker may also need to address the next speaker by addressing



them or using a gaze, for example (ibid.). The addressing method was commonly used to allocate turns in my data, as well. As to turn-taking system, it will be discussed in chapter 3.4.

In extract (13), which is actually the example (1) but here without automatic system lines, Ranthor and Spider\_VL exchange two sets of Question - Answer adjacency pairs.

(13)

**DALnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 16:52 <@Ranthor> sup Spider\_VL
- 2 16:52 <+Spider\_VL> same shit different day :)
- 3 16:52 <+Spider\_VL> you?
- 4 16:55 <@Ranthor> Spider\_VL I am good thanks

Although Ranthor addresses his words to Spider\_VL, addressing seems unnecessary to pass the turn in a situation where only two participants are speaking; Ranthor understands from the context that Spider\_VL expects him to answer the question "[How are] you?" (line 1), even though Spider\_VL does not address Ranthor. As Young (2008: 46) points out, failure to produce the second part of an adjacency pair in face-to-face conversation is often sanctioned. Yet, in IRC conversation it is fairly common that first parts of adjacency pairs are left unanswered. Depending on the situation, failure to produce the second part of an adjacency pair can be either sanctioned or not.

It seems that especially greetings can be left without a response (i.e. another greeting) without any sanctions. Such is the case in example (14).

(14)

**DALnet #london March 30, 2010**

- 1 03:29 -!- Hrell|R [~leyndarma@dsl-149-5-126.hive.is] has joined #london
- 2 03:29 <Hrell|R> Hello
- 3 03:31 -!- Hrell|R [~leyndarma@dsl-149-5-126.hive.is] has quit [""]

Hrell|R joins the channel, posts a greeting and waits a couple of minutes for anyone or someone to respond, for example by posting him a greeting back. As no one responds, Hrell|R quits the channel. Hrell|R could have repeated his greeting or posted something else in order to get a response, but he chooses not to.

In example (15), Ranthor and koookie take turns producing Question - Answer adjacency pairs.

(15)

**DALnet #london March 29, 2010**

- 1 15:42 <@Ranthor> koookie: what kind of tea do you drink usually?
- 2 15:43 <+koookie> black tea with different kinds of flavourings
- 3 15:43 <+koookie> persian earl grey was pretty nice
- 4 15:44 -!- uk\_guy [~xc@ip91350698.speed.planet.nl] has quit [Ping timeout]
- 5 15:44 -!- Ranthor is now known as ranthor
- 6 15:45 <+koookie> what about you? got any tips on what to try?
- 7 15:46 -!- uk\_guy [~xc@ip91350698.speed.planet.nl] has joined #london
- 8 15:52 -!- uk\_guy [~xc@ip91350698.speed.planet.nl] has quit [""]
- 9 16:04 -!- ranthor is now known as Ranthor

Ranthor never answers koookie's question in line 6. This, however, produces no reaction from koookie. Silence is typically avoided in face-to-face conversation, or it can soon feel uncomfortable. Yet, in IRC conversation, silence is tolerated more, because the participants are aware that the medium they are using is not completely synchronous, and because they cannot see the other participants. As already discussed in Chronology and silence in

chapter 2.2.2, the users are unable to determine the moment when their messages are received by the other participants. Moreover, users often do multiple tasks at the same time, so a few lines' conversation sequence can take a surprisingly long time, and it does not seem to bother the IRCers at all. Naturally great variations can be seen in different channels.

Sometimes failure to produce the second part of an adjacency pair can be sanctioned even in IRC. This can be seen in the following example, which shows the ending of Dlade's and Hammond's conversation.

(16)

**IRCnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 15:09 <+Dlade> But at least the weather is nice here. =)
- 2 15:10 < Hammond> in London?
- 3 15:10 < Hammond> in Poland its sunny :)
- 4 15:11 < Hammond> U from London?
- 5 15:17 < Hammond> hmm..?
- 6 15:20 < Hammond> U dont have time or dont like people from  
poland?
- 7 15:21 < Hammond> ok, bye

In example (16) the lacking second part of the question-answer adjacency pair is sanctioned with a series of follow-up questions from Hammond. Dlade and Hammond are having a discussion, which ends when Dlade does not answer Hammond's question. Hammond reacts to this sudden silence by asking more questions and stating possible reasons for Dlade's silence, thus giving a verbal sanction. Rintel and Pittam (1997: 525) claim that the experienced IRC users seem to be more accustomed to the suddenly ending chats than the inexperienced ones. Although I cannot draw any definite conclusions because of the relatively brief time spent on channels #london, there is nothing that would oppose Rintel and Pittam's claim.

### 3.4 Turn-taking in IRC

Here I will estimate the commonness of each of the three turn-taking methods presented by Sacks et al. (1974) and give examples of typical turn-taking situations. After looking at the way turns are allocated, I will pay attention to disrupted turn adjacency, which has been seen as a problem in regards to understanding conversation sequences in IRC. Moreover, a brief review will be given to openings and closings in IRC conversation. Openings and closings form common adjacency pair sequences, but they seem to function differently in IRC as in face-to-face (F2F) conversation. The interactional structure is easily altered in chat.

As a brief introduction to the analysis that follows, let us take a look at the turn-taking components in face-to-face conversation, which seem also valid in IRC conversation. According to Young (2008: 47), *next speaker self-selects* (NSSS) is a typical way to allocate turns in an informal conversation, whereas *current speaker selects* (CSS) is often used in more formal situations. The most common method of turn-taking in the data was NSSS, which is not too surprising since IRC conversations are usually informal in style. That was the case in the channels studied. The third component is *current speaker continues* (CSC). All three ways of allocating turns can be found in chat, as I shall set forth in the following sub-chapters.

The organization of turn-taking in talk-in-interaction is systematic; the selection of who will take the next turn depends on the sequence of conversational actions, the nature of the communicative event, and the power of the participants in relation to the others (Young 2008: 49). When thinking about turn-taking on IRC, the turn-taking system is, in fact, more open, as there is no real overlapping and the utterances appear on the dialogue window in the order they have been sent. Moreover, as in ordinary conversational interaction a single participant talks and the other participants

do not, on IRC all the participants may be typing their lines simultaneously. Ultimately it is the system that separates the turns of which difference may be anything from milliseconds to hours in IRC conversation.

We must keep in mind that the participants cannot see each others in IRC, and thus eye contact is excluded when selecting the next or future speaker. For this reason, addressing a participant by their nickname was frequently used in selecting the future speaker in multi-party conversation, although the addressee is not the first to send a message. In situations where only two participants were speaking, producing the first part of an adjacency pair or just sending any utterance was enough in most cases to pass the turn to the other speaker. Nevertheless, the floor is fundamentally open for everyone in the channel all the time, unless the channel operator or a censorship bot decides otherwise.

### 3.4.1 CSS - Current speaker selects future speaker

We can say that IRC as a system and its users have created different styles and markers for turn-taking. Basically, however, there are the three methods as Sacks et al. (1974) and Young (2008) presented. In example (17) we can see two kinds of turn-taking.

(17)

#### **IRCnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 15:25 <@Ranthor> Sav\_\_: is the first thing in italia to getting taught to say "I am italian"?
- 2 15:25 <+koookie> "Hi! I have blonde hair!"
- 3 15:25 <+koookie> "Hi! 1+2=3!"
- 4 15:25 <+koookie> that's silly!
- 5 15:26 <@Ranthor> koookie: it can be a good greeting :p a blonde girl would all the time help to chat with somebody
- 6 15:26 <Sav\_\_> i'm here for to learn english

Ranthor addresses and, in fact, selects the future speaker with his question in line 1 (CSS). However, Sav\_\_'s answer does not follow it immediately, but another IRCer has his commentaries sent first (lines 2-4). Even more: Ranthor discusses the issue with koookie before Sav\_\_ finally responds (line 6) or to be more precise: he explains himself. Moreover, when studying the extract (17) more closely, the turns taken by the other IRCer, koookie, give us the other two examples in accordance with the model Sacks et al. present in the *Conversation Analysis* (1974). First, he self-selects and sends his message although no-one had addressed him any message (line 2). Second, he continues keeping the turn and ends it with a conclusive remark 'that's silly!' Respectively, Next Speaker Self-Selects (NSSS) and Current Speaker Continues (CSC).

### 3.4.2 NSSS - Next speaker self-selects

Example (18) models another typical turn-taking form in IRC. This type of chatting is often casual by its nature, and it is, of course, very common in our data as well as in QS-CMC in general.

(18)

**IRCnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 09:59 <Cosmic\_Love> i'm eterosexual
- 2 09:59 <Cosmic\_Love> you too?
- 3 10:00 <Ranthor`> what does it mean?
- 4 10:00 <+Dlade> Ranthor`: Add an h at the start. ;)
- 5 10:01 <Cosmic\_Love> thanks professor

As in F2F communication, it is very common to drop a line in IRC without any previously addressed questions or commentaries. We could describe it as small talk or sending something 'on the air' and thus keeping the channel and interaction in movement. These lines are often followed by a number of other remarks and possibly by some focused questions. Yet this is not always the case, because silence is tolerated quite differently in IRC from that in face-

to-face communication, as was discussed before.

### 3.4.3 CSC - Current speaker continues

Numerous examples of current speaker continuing were found from our data. In face-to-face conversation, the current speaker may (but does not need to) continue if no other speaker takes (or is given) the next turn (Sacks et al. 1974: 704). This kind of CSC was frequently present in the data. In the next extract (19) Dlade first answers Annaa's question and then elaborates on the subject, and finally asks Annaa a question and thus passes her the turn.

(19)

**DALnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 22:51 < Annaa> working tomorrow?
- 2 22:51 <+Dlade> No, bank holiday.
- 3 22:52 <+Dlade> Probably going on a little day trip somewhere, but it's not quite decided yet.
- 4 22:53 <+Dlade> You?
- 5 22:55 < Annaa> no i'm off till thursday

Dlade's decision to continue taking a turn might be well driven by his effort to keep the conversation going (lines 3 and 4). However, it seems that in IRC a current speaker may continue their turn even in situations where other speakers choose to contribute to the conversation immediately. In the example (20) Hairy^Enchilada posts a line six times in one minute.

(20)

**DALnet #london March 30, 2010**

- 1 [22:09] <@Snogs> Me english teacher laughed at me when i was going to fart...or if im going to be slick but u aint.
- 2 [22:09] <@Hairy^Enchilada> STREEEEEEET
- 3 [22:09] <@Hairy^Enchilada> SO STREEEEEEET
- 4 [22:09] <@Hairy^Enchilada> I AM STRRREEEEEEEEEEET.
- 5 [22:09] <@Snogs> It's all a lot thinner! Get on top of it.
- 6 [22:09] <@Hairy^Enchilada> I got cider too and I can afford it.

- 7 [22:09] <@Hairy^Enchilada> OOOH!
- 8 [22:09] <@Hairy^Enchilada> IETS DO IT Charlotte13UK LETS DO  
ITTTTTTT
- 9 [22:09] <Charlotte13UK> phuck ewe

Within that one minute two other participants take a turn. This suggests that Hairy^Enchilada continues taking the turn because no-one else chooses to do so, or regardless of the other users' turns; in fact he too is ignored, despite his shouting, until line 9. Consequently, it is possible that in IRC the hierarchy of turn-taking is not similar to that of face-to-face conversation. The conversation in example (20) may look like a dialogue at first glance, but it is more like a mixture of a dialogue and monologue. On the grounds of the Hairy^Enchilada's style he could be an intoxicated user who shouts and makes indecent proposals to Charlotte13. He gets a swift denial from her. This is just speculation, of course.

Also the following example shows the ease in which disrupted turn adjacency is often handled in IRC conversation:

(21)

**IRCnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 01:01 <+Ania^R> Nobody in London is Englsih :p
- 2 01:01 < MaRyUcCiA> ah..
- 3 01:01 < unitrvl> 50%
- 4 01:01 < unitrvl> it depends where
- 5 01:01 < MaRyUcCiA> Ania^R do you live there too?
- 6 01:01 < unitrvl> in some areas you have a lot of English
- 7 01:01 <+Ania^R> MaRyUcCiA, fuck no ;D
- 8 01:01 < unitrvl> In some areas less
- 9 01:01 < MaRyUcCiA> ahahaha
- 10 01:02 < unitrvl> the majority of the foreigners are  
somalians/ pakis/indians/polish/italians/nijirian/australians/new  
zealanders

In example (21) unitrvl's comments can be read as a CSC event, while Ania^R and MaRyUcCiA seem to be talking to each other: they both address



each other and seem to react to each other's turns. Meanwhile, unitrvl's turns are unaffected by the turns of the other participants (except for the topic of the discussion, which is initiated by Ania^R). Ania^R's and MaRyUcCiA's exchange is mixed with the turns taken by unitrvl, which causes disrupted turn adjacency, that is, related turns (for example question-answer) are not always adjacent to each other. Interestingly, none of the active participants seems confused by the disrupted turn adjacency. This suggests that IRC participants do not worry about the sequential order or disorder of turns when following the discussions. Naturally one needs a little time to practise chat literacy in the beginning.

### 3.5 Opening and closing stages

Opening and closing a conversation is done in multiple ways in IRC conversations. Rintel and Pittam (1997: 525) report that opening and closing a conversation on IRC vary a lot, and they also claim that the use of opening and closing stages differs according to the user's level of experience as IRCers. This seems to be the case in this data as well. The #london participants in IRCnet saluted and typed goodbyes clearly more often than the users in DALnet. However, this cannot be generalised, but within these channels this was the case with the documented data. Most probably it depends on the users whether they know each others, on the topic and style, for instance.

When a new participant enters the channel, they sometimes greet the other participants and more often so if they happen to know them. That is how it goes in real life, too. Werry (1996: 52) states that although high degree of addressing is imperative on IRC, expressions of greeting and farewell are usually directed to all people on a channel. Thus they are not prefaced by any reference to a specific user's nickname. Occasional visitors may type for instance 'hello' as an opening statement, but they are not always answered,

as discussed in chapter 3.3 and seen in excerpt (14). In that case it is quite usual that they, quite understandably, leave the channel after a moment. As to the closing stages in the data, they were often short or absent altogether. Users often just quit the channel without sending anything. Yet, one exception will be shown soon in extract (23).

IRC system offers a special slot to the closing stage as a closing remark, and some users utilize it every now and then. This slot is indicated by an asterisk or square brackets which automatically appear in the parting message. In example (22) ra8\_m leaves the channel without posting a parting message while Ozlo posts one: 'I'm quit, thanks' (line 4).

(22)

**IRCnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 13:54 -!- ra8\_m [~ra8mobile@212.183.140.18] has left #london []
- 2 14:08 -!- Hammond [~kasikmani@public-gprs33990.centertel.pl] has quit
- 3 [Connection reset by peer]
- 4 14:09 -!- Ozlo [reyes@got.revdns.jp] has left #london [I'm quit,thanks]
- 5 14:09 -!- mode/#london [+l 57] by aljaazera

An IRC channel can have dozens of participants, who are not actively discussing, so it makes sense that not all participants go through a lengthy goodbye when they leave the channel. Thus, many users simply leave the channel and the only sign of them leaving is the parting message announced by the server. Some users, however, may have long closing stages, as can be seen in the following example.

(23)

**IRCnet #london March 27, 2010**

```

1  17:51 <@Ranthor> Hello viorel_45
2  17:55 < viorel_45> sorry,ranthor....i am ok,thank u
3  17:58 < viorel_45> bye,london
4  17:58 <@Ranthor> viorel_45: good thanks, why are you sorry?
5  17:58 <@Ranthor> take care
6  17:58 < viorel_45> bye ranthor
7  17:59 <@Ranthor> bye
8  17:59 < viorel_45> oh..i am ok....
9  17:59 < viorel_45> i was talking with other man...that is
    why....perhaps u waited for me
10 18:00 < viorel_45> unfortunately,i have to turn off now
11 18:00 < viorel_45> ok....see u ,ranthor:)
12 18:00 -!- viorel_45 [viorel_45@79.112.127.108] has left #london []
13 18:00 <@Ranthor> lol bye

```

In example (23) viorel\_45 spends at least four turns for saying goodbye to #London and to ranthor, with whom she has not been even really chatting. Because of the limited size of the data, I cannot state the following with any definite certainty, but it would seem that long closing stages are common especially among those who are less accustomed to using IRC. On an IRC channel, users can have operator rights (marked with @ in front of the nickname) or voice rights (marked with '+' in front of a nickname). The participants who have either right are usually frequent, experienced or popular participants on the channel. In this data, such participants were less likely to use long closing stages (or any, for that matter) than those who had no aforementioned rights.

### 3.6 Asynchronicity of conversation

IRC is a quasi-synchronous medium which may occasionally cause situations where timing one's turns becomes difficult and can result in situations where the addressed participant is no longer present for conversation. Werry (1996: 51) states that overlapping or interruptions are impossible on IRC. The turns, including actions, kicks and bans, are displayed in chronological order as the chat system gets or gives them. Ranthor's last post in the previous example

(23), 'lol bye', was posted after viorel\_45 had left the channel. It is very likely that the comment was intended to be read by viorel\_45 but the amused utterance was posted a moment too late: viorel\_45 had already left #london.

However, there were a few incidences in the data where a participant most probably deliberately posted a comment addressed to a person who was no longer on the channel and thus was unable to receive it. A situation like this can be seen in the following example in which Ranthor` sends his post to Cosmic\_Love a minute after the latter has quit his chat session in this room.

(24)

**DALnet #london March 25, 2010**

- 1 10:03 < Cosmic\_Love> see you later
- 2 10:03 < Cosmic\_Love> byeeee
- 3 10:04 -!- Cosmic\_Love [~eresto@ppp-9-180.15-151.iol.it] has quit [""]
- 4 10:05 < Ranthor`> cosmic\_love I hope you have a good one, and study hardly for your english in Bologna, Italy

It is quite possible that the few situations where people were addressed after leaving the channel (and thus being unable to receive the actual message) were on one hand meant to be seen as part of the already-ended dialogue, but on the other hand designed to be received only by the still present, idle participants. Channel #london in IRCnet had approximately 15 to 20 users and in DALnet about eight on the channel most of the time, but the majority of conversations were between only two or three participants at a time. This means that most of the participants were idle 'readers' who did not take part in the actual conversation but were potentially following it. Some of them may have been bots, too. They will be discussed in chapter 3.8.

### 3.7 Kicking and banning

A peculiar feature in IRC communication is that the medium allows its users perform some actions not too familiar in face-to-face communication. For

instance, it is fairly common to prevent someone joining the channel, possibly due to earlier misbehaviour, or kicking an IRCer out because of abusive language, as is seen in example (25). The channel operators have the rights and power to perform that.

(25)

**DALnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 [21:39] <poosy\_juice> Snogs you suck ass
- 2 [21:40] \* poosy\_juice was kicked by Snogs (Banned␣)
- 3 [21:40] <@Snogs> poosy\_juice: I think i got big think dick and ill give it in to ur ass.
- 4 [21:40] <@Hairy^Enchilada> ...
- 5 [21:40] <@Snogs> I doubt there are instinctively a lot of action.
- 6 [21:40] \* Eyeofthetiger\_\_ (~rooms@cpc1-haye15-0-0-cust352.haye.cable.virginmedia.com) has joined #london
- 7 [21:40] \* ChanServ sets mode: +b \*!\*rooms\*@\*
- 8 [21:40] \* Eyeofthetiger\_\_ was kicked by ChanServ (User has been banned from the channel␣)

The system and the channel operator have the rights and the power to kick out or ban other users, as is seen in the lines 2 and 8 in the extract 25. In face-to-face conversation there is no such similarly efficient way of excluding another person from a conversation as kicking or banning on IRC, where the action takes place instantly.

With some reservations, those actions could be interpreted as turns in IRC and, in fact, joining a channel, too. The reason to that is that they hold a line within the IRC text board in textual mode. Thus they inform all the channel's IRCers whether one is allowed to stay on the channel or not, meaning whether they can to take part in the communication or follow it or not. In F2F conversation and Conversation Analysis those actions would not qualify as turns due to lack of conversation, or to be more precise, due to lack of spoken utterances.

Another peculiarity is silence that has been marked in extract (25). The suspension mark sent by Hairy^Enchilada (line 4) takes clearly a turn, and it clearly expresses a meaningful silence; he prefers sending those dots (and only them) to not sending them and being quiet that way. He is probably wordless after Snogs's rather abusive and descriptive use of language (line 3).

### 3.8 IRC bot and bot speak

Not only people chat in IRC. There are also so called 'bots'. A bot generally refers to any automated program or client that does not have a person sitting behind it, not just a program that is called one. If a client is idle for several hours and is behaving like a bot, it is usually considered one. (Brinton, 1997)

An IRC bot is defined like this in Wikipedia:

An IRC bot is a set of scripts or an independent program that connects to Internet Relay Chat as a client, and so appears to other IRC users as another user. An IRC bot differs from a regular client in that instead of providing interactive access to IRC for a human user, it performs automated functions. (Wikipedia, May 2010)

The functions include for instance keeping the channel open and preventing malicious users from taking over the channel. They often perform many useful, administrative tasks, such as keeping log book and giving out information on demand. They have been and are programmed to host trivia games, too. Skilled users can create bots on their own.

Sometimes it may be difficult to track a bot through its language. There are also chatbots (chatterbot, chat bot) that are designed to simulate an intelligent conversation with human users. Many chatbots simply scan for keywords within the input and pull a pre-programmed action or a reply with the most matching keywords, or the most similar wording pattern, from a

textual database. In the following example we can see a frustrated user discussing the issue.

(26)

**DALnet #london April 5, 2010**

- 1 [20:03] <cyrus666> you are wrong pom bot
- 2 [20:03] <@Snogs> I know, but he's got enough vaporators going to be on the crummy wire hangers! That's the kind of bot is this bot.
- 3 [20:04] <cyrus666> what is a vaporator ?
- 4 [20:04] <cyrus666> nooooooooooooooooo
- 5 [20:04] <cyrus666> im talking to a bot
- 6 [20:05] <cyrus666> damn you english people sleeping bastards
- 7 [20:05] <@Snogs> Me english teacher laughed at by the name obi-wan since oh, before you were all sleeping.

User cyrus666 eventually assumes that he is having a conversation with a bot and not with a real person whose nick is Snogs (26). Most likely the IRCer spelled a trigger word in the first line (possibly the word “bot”), and the bot (under the nick Snogs) generated an automated response (line 2). The reply was immediate and it does not seem relevant at all. The somewhat irrational utterance or line could be called *bot speak*. The same happens a bit later in line 7, the trigger word or words being probably “english” or “you english” and “sleeping”.

Based on the two-and-a-half week follow-up study, I argue that Snogs is something that could be called a *semibot*. That would mean that some of his lines were sent by a bot and others by a real individual under the same nickname. Moreover, I argue that this *bot-speak* in the data can be told apart rather easily in most cases due to incoherent and irrelevant language and most often fairly lengthy, immediate responses. Yet in some cases we cannot be absolutely sure which is which. For instance, there could be a real user behind some, all or none of the lines in the following example (27).

(27)

**DALnet #london March 24, 2010**

- 1 [21:10] <came\_in\_ur\_mouth> Snogs is an idit
- 2 [21:10] <came\_in\_ur\_mouth> Snogs is an idiot
- 3 [21:10] <@Snogs> came\_in\_ur\_mouth: Special branch... You let me catch you following me begging for help, because you won't get it.
- 4 [21:10] <@Hairy^Enchilada> That's nice
- 5 [21:10] <@Snogs> came\_in\_ur\_mouth: 1. Idiot,dumb,moron.
- 6 [21:10] <@Perturbed^Parrot> big man - insulting bots....
- 7 [21:10] <@Snogs> Bots !! Bots !! Bots !! Nothing more thant that!
- 8 [21:11] <@Hairy^Enchilada> Fuckwits bots and sex offenders, the future of irc!
- 9 [21:11] <came\_in\_ur\_mouth> you got it!
- 10 [21:11] <@Snogs> Hi there anyone from any continent may have to wait a few jobs to do sex with the location of the force and become king of irc.

In extract (27) Hairy^Enchilada makes a funny commentary on the future of IRC, which is, in fact, quite confusing already. We do not always know whether we are talking to a real person or to a computer program. Whatever is the case, they do take a turn every now and then and even pass a seemingly relevant utterance there, too, and thus maintain a conversation with a human user.

### 3.9 Summary

The analysis revealed a remarkable number of system lines compared to them sent by channel users. The users' lines oscillated between 30 and 70 per cent of all lines sent, and there were noticeable differences between the two channels' servers. Surprisingly many participants were so called quiet users who had just logged on to #london but they never sent a line in public. What happens in private stays is not seen by the others. A relatively small group of regular IRCers in the channel proved to be very active, and there were a few who sent just a line or two before leaving the channel.



As to adjacency pairs, first-pair parts amounted more than two thirds of all initiative turns and second-pair parts as initiatives almost 25 per cent. Every tenth initiative opening did not receive any response from the other users. We discussed Rintel's et al. (2001) six progressions how IRC conversation is initiated and concluded that for other than dyadic chats the progressions should probably be slightly modified.

We also looked at the actions taken on IRC. Greeting as a first pair part was the most typical way of opening a chat. The next common actions involved question-answer and assessment-agreement/disagreement adjacency pairs. Several insult-reaction pairs took place in one of the chat rooms, too.

About 10 per cent of all users' turns consisted only in non-verbal communication, such as in emoticons and phonetic discourse markers. Especially smileys were used a lot alone but also as tone signals at the end of their utterances. Emoticons play a part in allocating turns to the other user as well as describing their users' intentions, tone in the messages or state of mind, for example.

I found out also that silence is indeed tolerated differently on IRC from silence in F2F interaction. Several examples showed that relatively long breaks did not necessarily cut the conversation. A conversational sequence may take seconds in RL but on IRC it may take minutes with equally many utterances. Log helps users to follow long conversations.

Turns are taken freely, and no-one really has a privilege in their order. In opening and closing stages general and brief greetings and farewells were favoured, and if there are several users chatting, they may be left out completely. Sometimes comments are sent even when the addressee has already left the chat room. We discussed also scripts that carry out automated functions, a.k.a. 'bots'. Their possible role in taking part in the

interaction seems intriguing. Also 'semi-bots' and 'botspeak' were talked about here.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

I have analysed the data and searched for answers to the following questions:

- (a) What kinds of actions are used to initiate talk?
- (b) What kinds of responses do those actions get?
- (c) What markers can be found in IRC turn-taking? And finally,
- (d) do disrupted sequences and adjacency pairs complicate interaction significantly?

To begin with, the results in the present study confirm that users have varied ways to initiate interaction in IRC. Rintel, Mulholland and Pittam (1999) reported that users have basically six progressions how to initiate chat: automated joining event, joining initial behaviour and response to initial behaviour; joining initial reaction and response to it, and finally: addressing the turn to another user. The server automatically announces every joining event, but there was only one case the announcement alone provoked a response from another user in the data.

I found out that first-pair parts with responses formed the dominant group in initiating chat: more than 70 per cent consisted of them, and the rest in the data were second-pair parts, meaning reactions and replies to what had been previously sent. Quite surprisingly almost 10 per cent of all openings received no real response, and most users who were ignored this way left the channel soon. This high figure implies how easy it is to leave the other users completely unnoticed when not dealing with them face to face. The anonymity and distance in IRC seems to make this a relatively standard procedure, whereas in an ordinary conversation that is not likely to happen.

The most typical way of initiating chat is to greet one or all the other users in

the chat room (channel). The other actions that were used most as initiative turns consisted of questions or assessments, which were found equally many of each in the data. What feels surprising is the fact that there were many insults as initiative first pairs, which is surely not too common in ordinary conversation with people you do not probably know at all.

Similarly to the first-pair parts, greeting-replies as second-pair parts outnumber clearly the other actions. However, in a few cases reactions to questions and assessments as initiative turns took place as well. The sample was far too small in order to draw further conclusions about the second pair parts.

The channels deal with innumerable themes like ordinary conversations do, and the topic or a possible theme seems to be often disregarded. For instance, the topic *London* was referred to in very few conversations and that was nothing less but the name of the channel! The topics left aside, the tone of the chats varied from very innocent to most coarse, or sincere to utterly violent especially in DALnet server's #london. Altogether the tone in DALnet was often masculine, aggressive or sexual or somehow online-game related (Star Wars); it was occasionally playful, flirtatious and a few times irrational with fairly long lines of irrelevant pieces of text, probably sent by a *bot*. In IRCnet, on the other hand, the tone in general was more close to 'normal' chatting; that would include regular small talk and clearer conversational sequences about ordinary, everyday subjects. It seems that an aggressive tone attracts similar behaviour and normal attracts normal, for instance, but at the end the users and especially the channel operator draw the line what the tone can be like in a chat room. The tone in IRC together with the users would certainly make an intriguing sociological topic for further studies.

The data reveals some intriguing issues when trying to answer the third research question: what markers we can find in turn allocation and turn

taking in IRC? To begin with, all three turn allocation techniques are in use in IRC as expected and in this data next speaker self-selects (NSSS) was used most (see e.g. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Young 2008). I argue that NSSS technique is more inherent to the system than in face to face interaction, although its uses may vary a lot between different chat rooms. I believe that is due to constant and not always too rational uses of interactional structure, where interaction does not work similarly as in f2f communication. Basically everyone in the chat room has the possibility to take a turn at any point. When a user types a line and presses *ENTER* and thus sends his utterance, we could say that the turn has been taken and passed then, too, to the others right there.

The most common way to ask a directed question or to make a commentary in IRC is addressing, and then the turn is clearly allocated to another user although, as stated before, anyone can come in between and disrupt the sequentiality. The program even facilitates copying addressee's nick. Obviously, if there are only two active IRCers, they do not have to use addressing, but it is still done probably because it makes chat more personal. Normally it is used more when there are several active users and possibly also several topics being discussed at the same time.

It seems that typing a full stop, question or exclamation mark states turn change quite clearly. Suspension points may imply that the user is sending more text as soon as possible. However, it may signify expressed silence, too, which carries extra weight if typed in that sense.

The other punctuation marks are hardly typed. As a rule, even the most common punctuation marks seem to be categorically omitted. Instead, emoticons predominate, and within this means of communication, they seem to work fine in describing actions, giving messages a nonverbal aspect and at the same time passing turn to the other "speaker" or "speakers". Obviously,

variations are seen between the IRC users, especially when talking about punctuation marks: some use them all the time, some do not at all. However, most if not all IRCers use or have used emoticons at some point of their messaging. Nonverbal information is seen significant in interacting with other users online. It would certainly make an interesting topic for sociological and discourse studies.

Non-verbal language in IRC forms a fascinating topic itself. Emoticons, other graphic symbols and discourse markers (such as 'hahaha') alone in a line occupied about 10 per cent of all lines sent by the users in the data, which is quite a lot in a text-based means of communication. Smileys, of course, were used a lot to finish the utterances and not alone, too. Together with asterisks and action descriptions in them the non-verbal lines convey often more than words; for instance, the tone changes drastically in a textual insult if there is a smiley after it. Thus the extra-linguistic markers may well determine the meaning of a message. As non-verbal elements are normally absent in online discourse, users in chat address that absence and try to give it a more face to face feel by expressing extra-linguistic cues in innovative ways (see e.g. Werry 1996; Gajadhar and Green 2003; Herring 2004).

I argue that the lines containing only non-verbal language should, in fact, be counted as turns in IRC because of their communicative and floor taking qualities. What is relevant, too, is the fact that emoticons were used especially in opening and closing stages in IRC, as probably in other CMC in general. Nevertheless, this study takes more after a case study than a comprehensive study, so further research has to be carried out in order make wider generalisations.

The fourth and last research question surrounded disrupted sequences and whether they complicate interaction significantly. My findings suggest that disrupted turn adjacency is frequent, but it rarely causes misunderstandings.

This might well be a sign of evolving conventions in IRC conversation. In IRC, any participant on a channel has more or less equal opportunities to take a turn and be 'heard', since the system allows no overlap of text, and it publishes all posts. Thus, multi-dimensional chronology is present in IRC all the time but especially if there are more than two users chatting at a time.

It is also worth remembering that a person's turn-taking can be limited through certain actions enabled by the system, such as bans and kicks from the channel. To sum up, disrupted adjacency pairs do not really seem to complicate communication drastically, although sometimes the channel operator can take actions to remove a disturbing IRCer from the chat room. That, of course, is one of the environmental differences between IRC and real life (RL) face to face interaction.

The interactive systems and practices in QS-CMC evolve all the time, but principally the primary functions are quickly learnt and developed while chatting online. Although the message window may appear confusing to a beginner user for a while, practise has shown that the IRC literacy is built up quite aptly. For instance, the system's substantial administrative lines or users' disrupted adjacency pairs seldom disturb the communication severely, even if a user has little or no experience in IRC. Basic 'computer literacy' and is required, of course. It is worth remembering that one of the greatest advantages in IRC is the log which is kept during the session and one can refer to it if and when needed during the session. This, too, affects to the fact that the structure of IRC with its specific features does not appear problematic at all for today's IRCers.

There was one more thing I would like to point out in the data: the great number of quiet users. They form almost 77 per cent of the total number of users, which is an astonishingly high percentage. That means that about only one out of four really took part in the conversation or sent at least one line,

while the other three 'listened' silently or were just there hanging around for a moment and sometimes longer. Some just had a quick look what was going on in the channel and then left, and never come back. In fact, only every fifth user of all had a conversation on average, when we leave out the ones whose turns were not responded. However, we cannot know whether some of the users were chatting privately while logged on to the channel. When compared to any group of people having an ordinary conversation, it is likely that most if not all in the "same room" say something or give some sign of life to the others. As demonstrated, in IRC it is not so. The question is: what do they do there, then? I do not have a definite answer but some assumptions which I shall discuss in the following and final chapter, Discussion.



## 5 DISCUSSION

The adoption of the information technology clearly affects computer-assisted communication, and that takes place with work practises, as well. The conventions emerge, and the feasibility of chat at work and studies has arisen during the past years significantly. We have witnessed a growing number of arrangements and communication facilitated by chat at work. For instance, assemblies are organised, timetables agreed on and memos referred at work through brief chat sessions. Telephone or video conferences are not always the most feasible means of communication and meetings face-to-face can be impossible to arrange, although they still. Moreover, outside work and studies, IRC offers immense possibilities to communicate and or just kill time anonymously but in contact with other people. More and more people play online games or just chat with other people, and IRC based chats give a great possibility for it. As to research and development, ubiquitous computing makes technology more and more important for studies of interaction, as Herring (2004) and Arminen (2005) among others call.

The channels studied here do not have anything to do with work or studies, so let us leave the real content aside for a moment and concentrate on the participants and their actions in chat. As we have noticed greeting and closing statements vary a lot between the users, and so does taking part in the interaction in general. Chat rooms vary magnificently and so does the style of language and participation. IRC users seem to adapt roles, some more and some less interactive, and one can easily jump in or out of them for any reason.

As an analogy, let us think of a *pub*. There we probably meet a doorman, a bartender, regular customers, a few loud ones and those who do not talk that much if at all, but however, they are there. Maybe some new customers have

a peek at the pub tasting the atmosphere, some stay, some of them leave soon without saying a word, and some are not even let in. Socialising or just being in the same (cyber) space with others seems to be 'the thing', although chat is also used in online gaming related actions (e.g. *Star Wars* game was referred to a couple of times in the data). Nevertheless, a customer's behaviour and interaction with others may be active in one pub and passive in another. There are noisy, crowded pubs, quiet pubs, pubs with different styles and themes, smiles and perhaps some dancing; there may be private chats the other visitors do not know of, talks behind backs, and so on. Something very similar seems to occur with the participants on different IRC channels, with the exception that no beer is bought, money used or voices heard, of course, because it is a virtual community and not a real one.

In this picture the bots, besides being 'bartenders' at request, management and doormen together with the channel operators, they could be the pub's slot machines. They can offer an IRC user company and drop a rational or irrational line every now and then. In this 'IRC and pub' analogy bots can really have a role in interaction and turn-taking process, because their utterances and actions interrupt human conversation; sometimes bots seem to do that even in such a suave way that a human user does not even notice that they are having a chat with a bot.

The idea of chatting with a bot and not knowing it feels science fiction. It is like in Ridley Scott's famous film<sup>5</sup> *Blade Runner* (1982) where Deckard could engage a Replicant Mark 1 in conversation to find out his true nature: is it a person or a replicant. Artificially intelligent bots have been carrying out various and even challenging tasks for quite some time already, but talking to one as if it were a human appears still a bit remote, at least for the most of us.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick (1968).

Then again, why use IRC and not go to a bar instead and chat with people face to face? Feasibility, anonymity, not time-related: they are surely some of the main reasons that the users favour. Spoken interaction forms the most natural human communication, but new, expansive and often cost-effective means are developed all the time. QS-CMC sets a user almost free from time and geographical boundaries, assuming the internet connection has been provided; there are free IRC client programs, the interface is not too complicated, it takes little bandwidth and multi-tasking is feasible. Moreover, there are no commitments in chatting unless one really wants it, but IRC can certainly be a useful and fun tool, too. People often chat online in order to kill time, seek company and hang around with other users, for instance, and some shoot vulgar lines as people do in bars, but online all that is done virtually.

Obviously IRC-based applications may also have a significant role in studies and work life. As to system design, Herring (1999) made three wishes, and they deal with enhancing archiving capabilities, reducing incoherence with the help of feasible interface, and last, reducing the number of incoherent sequences by linking the connected turns. While doing this study I found out that Herring's first wish has come true quite well, because the logging possibilities astonish already now. Yet, unlike Herring (1999), I feel that the enhancements in archive system are not really necessary, since the text records or logs offer everything one really needs for it today. The bottom-line is that the users are the ones who develop the medium, but the basic idea of QS-CMC has changed very little. Something similar that happened to telephone can happen to IRC, too. For instance, without IRC I would not have found new, helpful friends from the other side of the world before moving there some 15 years ago. It is hard to think any other medium more feasible than IRC for that, is it not? I admit that a bulletin board proved useful, too.

CMC and chat, too, are widely used in academic studies and in various work environments, as in emergency dispatch centres and different control rooms. As to distance education where students and teachers may not meet at all, Green and Eves (2000) recommend an adjunct chat to build a social community but also to affect general retention and student achievement.

Ilkka Arminen (2005) underlines that in future institutional environments there will be few face-to-face interactions that are not somehow computationally mediated or enhanced. Thus, he argues, studies of institutional interaction must address these technologies. Arminen ponders whether Conversation Analysis can be systematically applied to new forms of interaction and cyber-agencies. He asks: can CA contribute to technological research and development for system design? Arminen's answer to both questions is affirmative although slightly reserved. He states,

*"CA is a potential research tool that may identify and specify these small but not necessarily insignificant changes in everyday communicative behaviour. In this way, CA may also play a role in building understanding of social change in the era of ubiquitous computing."* (Arminen 2005: 235)

Arminen (2005) calls for implementing CA work inside larger research and development programs. He underlines the innovative potential CA studies have in opening our eyes to details in the social environment we have not known existed. For example, noticing specific features of a communicative device or a potential use of a speech patterns in a context may lead to social innovations (Arminen 2005: 82). We could mention Twitter as one of those fairly recent and well-known innovations. Many more are tested and developed all the time.

Paul Dourish and Graham Button talk about "technomethodology", in which the ethnomethodological panorama would be implemented inside the whole

perspective of the research and development process (Dourish 2001). Another systematic approach could combine CA with outcome measurements, and that kind of study could deal with questions about relevance of interactional patterns in institutional practise (see Heritage 1999; Heritage et al. 2001).

Although CA has clearly matured since the seventies, there are challenges how to apply them in new institutional environments and how to adapt new principles of study design to modern knowledge demands. The challenges reflect the indefinite social changes that take place also in institutional realities. Globalization and the ever-increasing role of technology are directly relevant to studies of interaction. They also bring out different challenges for study design. (Arminen 2005: 228.)

The adoption of information technology affects work practises, and potential implications of the interface are constantly adopted. As Arminen (2005) suggests among many other researchers, computer-supported co-operative multi-party communication offers numerous intriguing research topics (see e.g. Hutchby 2001; Herring 2004; and Young 2008). In technological settings, CA studies may prove functional in understanding the *maintenance of intersubjectivity under demanding circumstances* and in improving the requirement specifications for technical systems; all that is gained only through contextual knowledge, Arminen (2005: 226) concludes.

The role of new technologies is indeed noticeable in enhancing person-to-person and multi-party communication. IRC is just one of them. Yet precisely IRC based chats have gained more and more room and importance for instance in leisure, studies and work. QS-CMC literacy is quickly acquired, and a lot of people use adjunct chat as a tool at work and studies. It is an innovation which about 20 years ago was only for 'geeks' but is now daily life and a practical means of communication, for instance, between a student

and a lecturer. Other asynchronous or quasi-synchronous CMC tools defend their places, and so does IRC. It is certainly not fading away to the cyberspace in the near future.

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