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In Inter Cultural Communication (EMICC)

Semiotics of cultures

The Notion of “Chatting”

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Introduction

Before starting we will briefly present ourselves, the authors of this essay:

The authors are currently studying together in the four month program of European Master in Inter Cultural Communication in Brussels, since September 2004. Viviana Meschitti is Italian but she has studied Mass Communication and New Media for three years at the University of Lugano in Switzerland. Emmy Ramsay is Finnish and has studied Linguistic and Multimedia Communication for three years at the University of Florence in Italy; she is currently enrolled at the University of Jyväskylä.

In this essay we are going to analyse the cultural form that is interaction in a virtual environment, in our case the Internet. In order to gather information we have frequently attended international chat rooms, most of all Yahoo chat and examined previous studies on the subject.

Chatting online is a form of collective real time discussion in a fictive space; it allows people from all over the world to meet in a kind of cyberspace and talk to each other as in face-to-face conversation. This form of culture has increased enormously in the 90's. Draelants reports that in a research made in 2001 56% of a sample of 524 students between 11 to 19 years declared that they regularly use internet to communicate. The standard that is mostly used for creating chat rooms is the IRC (Internet Relay Chat), which was created in 1998 by Finnish Jarkko Oikarinen; it allows the users to interact in private conversation and in group discussion.

We are going to investigate online chatting: we will start with a brief history of the internet and chatting by giving some historical notions about Arpanet, that was a kind of prototypic network, how it evolved to internet and later to the World Wide Web.

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We will examine the phenomenon of chatting through four different definitions of culture. We will explain the characteristics of our social actor, which is constituted of a group of people who frequently use chat rooms in order to interact with others. People who occasionally use this medium are not a part of the social actor, because they do not have the culture specific knowledge of the group.

We present also two national situations: that of Finland and that of Italy. A comparison is difficult to do because of the lack of formal information and documentation on Finnish chatters and because the cultural form is a global culture more than national. We would probably not find many differences between Finnish and Italian chatters. To conclude we are going to present some intercultural notions of chatting.

1. The history of internet and chatting

1.1 From Arpanet to Internet

The ancestor of internet is Arpanet. The US Ministry of Defence started to research the possibility of connecting computers to form a network in 1957. The project occupied a couple of hundred top scientists. In 1966 the head of the research group published a plan for Arpanet, a computer system network. The research work of three different groups (MIT, The National Physics Laboratory UK and RAND Corporation) was finally combined and in 1969 the UCLA and Stanford computers were connected successfully. The number of host computers grew quickly and in 1971, 23 computers were connected to the Arpanet.

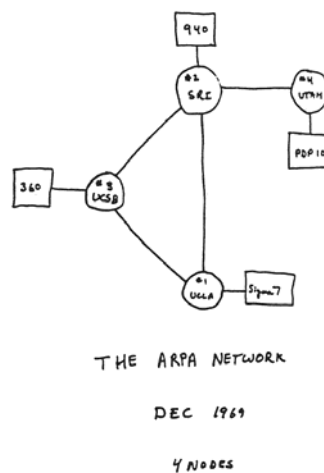
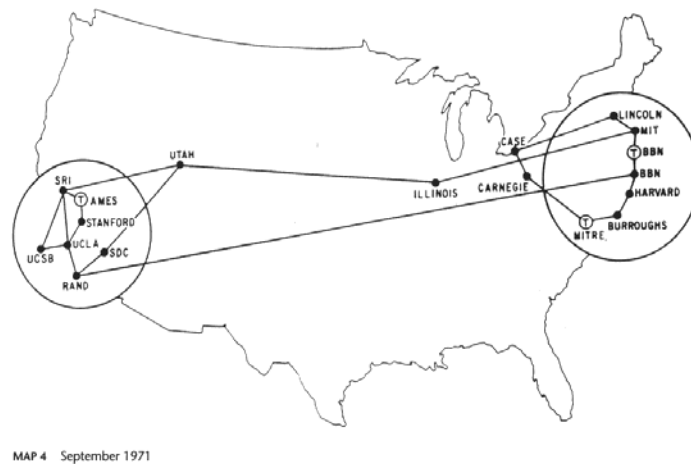


FIGURE 6.2 Drawing of 4 Node Network
(Courtesy of Alex McKenzie)

Arpanet in 1969

(<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/ivh/chap2.htm#The%20Creation%20of%20ARPANET>)

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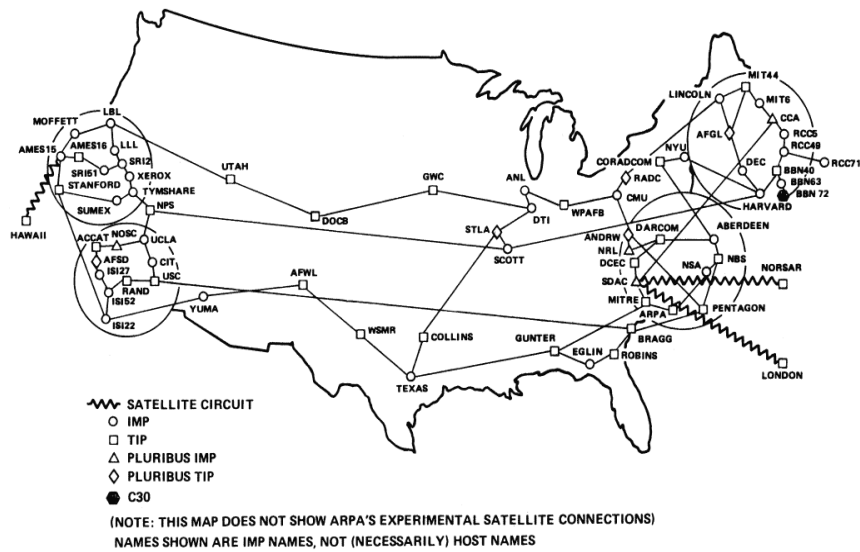


Arpanet in 1971

(<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/ivh/chap2.htm#The%20Creation%20of%20ARPANET>)

In 1972 the Arpanet was made public at the First International Congress of Computers and Communication. In the same year scientists managed to create direct person to person communication between computers, this was the birth of e-mail. In 1982 the TCP/IP standard (transmission control protocol/internet protocol) is adopted by Arpanet, this is how Arpanet becomes Internet.

ARPANET GEOGRAPHIC MAP, OCTOBER 1980



Arpanet in 1980

(<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/ivh/chap2.htm#The%20Creation%20of%20ARPANET>)

1.2 The World Wide Web

In 1991 the World Wide Web, which is “a network of sites that can be searched and retrieved by a special protocol known as a Hypertext Transfer protocol (HTTP)”

(<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/ivh/chap2.htm#The%20Creation%20of%20ARPANET>) was released to the public. The growth of this system was fairly slow, and in 1992, there were only 50 web sites in the world. With the creation of the HTML (Hypertext Mark-up Language) that allows the links to be hidden behind text and activated by a click of the mouse and to improve considerably the graphics of web pages and the evolution of PCs the popularity of the web started to grow with a fast rate. The range of users expanded from scholars and companies to private persons and families. “In 1994 there were 3, 2 mln hosts and 3,000 web-sites. Twelve months later the number of hosts had doubled and the number of web-sites had climbed to 25,000. By the end of the next year the number of host computers had doubled again, and the number of web-sites had

increased by more than ten-fold.”

(<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/ivh/chap2.htm>)

1.3 The birth of computer mediated communication

Almost as soon as the connecting of computers was realized, the scientists started to research the possibility of “multi-user human communication”. At the beginning this was only possible by the interlocutors being at the same computer. The next step was taken when people could chat from one room to another in the same building. The first chat program designed for Arpanet in 1973 was called Planet. The first multi-user chat program was the EMISARI (Emergency Management Information Systems and Reference Index) created in 1971 by Murray Turoff for the US Office of Emergency Preparedness.

“The EMISARI chat functionality was called the Party Line, and was originally developed to replace telephone conferences which might have 30 participants, but where no-one could effectively respond and take part in a meaningful discussion. Party Line had a range of useful features familiar to users of modern chat systems, such as the ability to list the current participants, and the invocation of an alert when someone joined or left the group”
(http://www.livinginternet.com/r/ri_emisari.htm)

“Back in 1971 we considered the 'chat' function as the minor accomplishment compared to what else we were doing. Today, in terms of usage it is probably the most popular group communication mode on the net!” (Murray Turoff, Personal Communication, September 2000. Extracted from http://www.livinginternet.com/r/ri_emisari.htm)

The most common chat program was created by a Finnish graduate student in 1988; it is called IRC (Internet Relay Chat). Beside the IRC, one of the most used ways of chatting now a day is the web chat.

2. Four definitions of culture

To begin to analyse the culture of our social actors we will follow the four definition of culture we have studied in our lessons. **Culture can be seen as a reference frame of knowledge and values**; chatters have a specific knowledge, as computer skills and ability to type quickly, and knowledge of the “chat environment” (how to behave in chat rooms, what type of language to use; how to express feelings...)

This culture is specially a culture of the relation: in chats many superficial discussions are proliferating because it is more important to be “connected” with others than to construct real relationships. We have to remember that communication is composed by two levels: the content, i.e. the informative part; and the relationship, i.e. the communicative part of communication. This aspect is very important in chat rooms: the content is not that rich and deep, but the important thing is to interact, this can mean for example the simple activation of the phatic channels with the help of everyday expressions of greeting, questioning, etc. (Draelants, 2004, p.60)

If we consider **culture as a problem solving resource**, good abilities and knowledge of the “chat cultures” make the interaction among chatters easy and successful; an inadequate knowledge of the specific language and behaviours means the exclusion from the group. Through a shared language and behaviour the chatters can feel a special feeling of belonging and constitute a community.

Culture as a symbolic capital can be better understood if we refer to the notion of social capital: chatters, with their experience and their activity, can build a network of relationships from which they can profit; the big opportunity of chatting is to create this type of capital, and you can obtain this only if you Improve continuously your knowledge of the chatters’ practices.

The social capital can be defined as the "sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Monge and Contractor, p. 143).

Web chatters can build a large network of friends and acquaintances that is difficult to create without the possibility of the web. Chat rooms give you the opportunity to create a real "capital" constituted by all the different people you know, and if you know many people you can have some advantages.

Chatters can profit from these relationships, they can always have someone to speak to and express their feelings and their problems, and they can make every sort of questions and be helped if they look for certain information, or, more, they could know new countries and other people.

Chatters can know a very big number of people from all over the world, with this kind of network of knowledge everyday life can be easier and enjoyable; but it is also time taking and hard to maintain this network!

Finally, **culture is a historical form**: the history of this communication means is very recent. Chatting is a very new phenomenon, and this field can evolve quickly, because the new technologies in general are a very changeable field. The history of chat-rooms is connected to the evolution of the possibilities of the communication and information technologies

3. The main characters of the social actor

Our social actor is constituted of the people that use the chat rooms to interact with other people systematically. A social actor is constituted of a group of individuals with a series of common characteristics; the group is brought together by common history, objects, activities, knowledge, language, values and territory (Peter Stockinger, Signs, culture and communication 2004). We have decided to delimitate our social actor to people who systematically use this communication mean, whereas there can be people who occasionally enter into chat rooms or forums. In our opinion these people cannot be considered to have the culture specific knowledge that characterizes our social actor, because their experience of the cultural form is not sufficient. Our social actor is a group that probably only a few persons engage in for all their lives, chatting is a very time taking activity and we think that people do it actively for particular periods of their lives, e.g. when their marriage is in crisis, when they are in school, when they are retired. From now on we are going to call our social actor “web chatters”.

3.1. Common territory

The web chatters have a common territory, which is the virtual space of the World Wide Web, and in specific the various chat rooms and forums. It is not a physical space, but a potentially infinite cyber space, that can be accessed by an undefined number of people. This characteristic is one of the most important features of our cultural form; as Draelants writes, the basic aim of chat rooms is to create a common, shared virtual place where to meet other people (Draelants, 2001). To enter the territory one has to have disposal to a computer, which is connected to the Internet and some basic computer abilities.

3.2. Common knowledge

The knowledge common to all web chatters is not only composed by practical abilities to use the computer but also informal know how on how to navigate in

the virtual jungle. The chatters know exactly where to find the kind of company that they are looking for.

There is also a common knowledge of interaction rules that govern the chat rooms. You have to know some basic rules of behaviour, following the “netiquette”, for example: it is not necessary to greet all the chatters in the room, do not send advertising if this is not required, maintain the respect for the group, respect the names of the other chatters, etc.

The choice of a pseudonym or nickname is also important; this is the easiest way to show your identity. It might be for example the first indicator of sex and nationality and it can contain a lot of information, here are some examples of nicknames that we have found on Yahoo chat: *sidmuslim*, *sweet_southern_belle_17*, *Ultra_Toilet_Duck*, *wesley_bruce49*, *Hot Body Chick*. It is better not to change the nickname every time and not to use the nickname of another chatter.

Markham has written a book about her own experience in the virtual space and she tells that in the beginning entering the chat rooms was like entering a new strange world:

“To even begin to understand what was happening online, or to communicate with other users, I had to learn how to move, see, and talk. Until I learned these basic rules, I was paralyzed in the dark, isolated from that world as much as I would be if I were a mind without a body on the planet Earth [...]” (Markham 1998, p. 23)

In her research Markam frequented chat rooms and MUDs (Multi User Dungeon) for a certain period of time. The confusion, that every first timer experiences can be understood by looking at just a fragment of a chat room conversation.

logging einie2 into chat...

maxeen_enum_96: *beemin* 🗣️ *ty alaas*
PersianGuy: yes i said it was my birthday many days ago
jojo: lol
aknativewoman02: hi room
jerusalem_03_04 left the room.
The_new_aladen: hi danaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
king_of_vip_jo85: *brooooooooooooo* 🗣️ *sho malak ?*
PersianGuy: 🗣️
The_new_aladen: cool nancy
petite_shoushou: *pers scroll up =)*
The_new_aladen: kinggggggggggggggggg hi
palestine_girl20: *oh pers* 🗣️ *old guy.. happy birthday anyway*
n8ivesistagirl left the room.
GuNs ... (guns_maker) joined the room.
kaycem20 left the room.
maxeen_enum_96: *well we missed it.....it's ok to celebrate today* 🗣️
palestine_girl20: *how old r u know papa pers?*

3.3. Common language

The chatters share a common language, which is not accessible to people who are not used to interact online. Their language is characterized by a frequent use of acronyms and symbols to manifest non-verbal communication signs. This is inevitable; whereas the computer-mediated communication has some serious restrictions compared to face-to-face communication; both the visual and vocal effects that help to transmit the more subtle meanings are excluded from the conversation (<http://www.media-culture.org.au/0008/partners.html>). It is possible to combine numbers with words (ex: 4ever = forever), and some sounds, as “ch”, are substitute by a “k” (this happens in French and in Italian).

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Acronyms are used in order to write quickly. In chat rooms it is important to give quick answers, and to be able to write a phrase in a few seconds; this is why being able to use the keyboard is very important. Internet communication is all about writing as quickly as possible, the quicker one is, and the more one becomes “attractive” in the eyes of other chatters. Not writing quickly enough can also be a first element of exclusion.

Orthographic errors are very common and do not constitute a problem, the chatter does not have time to write a correct text on any language level: lexical, syntactical and so on. The only rule is to make oneself understood. Most chatters know very well the meaning of a lot of acronyms, we will give some examples of acronyms used in chat rooms:

Acronym	Explication
AFAICT	As far as I can tell
IMNSHO	In my not so humble opinion
F2F	Face to face
BBIAF	Be back in a few minutes
CUL	See you later
JAM	Just a minute
NHOH	Never heard of him/her
ROTFL	Rolls on the floor laughing
THX	Thanks
UOK?	Are you ok?
IYSWIM	If you see what I mean
UBD	User brain damage
YHM	You have mail
WYSIWYG	What you see is what you get
THXE6	Thanks a million
RUTHERE?	Are you there?
OMG	Oh my God!

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(adapted from <http://www.mondochat.it/acronimi.htm>)

In a chat room all the frames regarding space and time fall, and there is no context as in face to face conversations. Consequently it is more difficult to convey meaning to the situations, and the chatters cannot base their inferences on the normal frames of references used in everyday life.

The lack of context and of background gives a strategic role to the written signs. Because of the impossibility to convey meanings through the non verbal or the Para verbal factors, the chatters tend to express their emotions through some written signs, the "emoticons" or "smileys", the combinations can be easily understood by other chatters.

:) Midget smiley.

:] Gleep...a friendly midget smiley who will gladly be your friend.

=) Variation on a theme...

:} What should we call these? (what?)

:) Happy.

:> What?

:@ What?

:D Laughter.

:I Hmm...

:(Sad.

:[Real Downer.

:< What?

:{ What?

:O Yelling.

:C What?

:Q What?

:,(Crying.

[] Hugs and ...

:* Kisses.

|I Asleep.

^o Snoring.

from: <http://members.aol.com/bearpage/smileys.htm>

The language used in chat rooms is a hybrid language, in the sense that it aims on reproducing the oral colloquial language in written form; this is the main factor that gives the chatter's language its special characters (Draelands, 2004).

3.4. Common needs

The social actor's common need is to meet other people in an environment that is not face threatening because it is potentially anonymous and people can create their own identity. The web chatters can discuss every topic and express opinions without compromising their reputation, marriage, work place etc.

The possibility of being anonymous permits a better control of the situation, and also the possibility to present oneself as a different person. In fact, many people in chat rooms present themselves not as they are in reality, but as someone else, with the characteristics of the "ideal self". This peculiarity gives a great power of attraction to chatting; people can hide their real identity, and they can behave as they want, they can share their feelings without problems, and they can plunge themselves in a new, "better" identity. (Draelands, 2004)

Another possibility the chat rooms give is the ubiquity, i.e. to be present in different discussions at the same moment, because the presence of an interlocutor is not given by his physical presence, but simply by his name. In this way the self can "multiply" (Draelants, p. 10), and increase its faculty of interaction and socialization; we do not know if this practice is really effective, in the sense that it

would improve the possibility to socialize and to behave with unknown people. Draelants reports that some psychoanalysts affirm that this "multiplication" of the self and the anonymity take the chatter to a dimension where there are no limits, and this does not permit to create a real, coherent identity. (Draelants, 2004)

3.5. The absence of a physical body

It is interesting that in this kind of interaction only your mind is involved in the creation of relationships, the real physical body is in some way totally excluded from the context. Of course one can create a completely new, virtual body while the perception of one's interaction partner relies only on the description that is transmitted through written text. Markham asks herself if at this point the body is still important:

“Certainly the body is a host for the mind, but online I have a self where my body is not. If I can “exist” and “be” with “others” in a (non) place that is comprised only of information – a complex string of on/of switches – which is “real”? The place out here with my physical body? Or the place in there, in my mind?” (Markham,1998 p.18)

This fact comports also an uncertainty about the conversation partner, one can never know if the person is who and what he claims to be:

“Although cyberspace is nothing more or less than a network of computer systems passing digitized strings of information back and forth through copper or fiber-optic cables, people who connect to this network often feel a sense of presence when they are online. Even in purely text-based online contexts, people establish and maintain intimate friendships, romantic relationships, and stable communities.” (Markham,1998, p.17, italics in original)

4. Differences inside the social actor

The social actor has these basic characteristics in common but inside it there can be some differences between individuals. “A social actor by itself may be internally differentiated in groups, members...[...]” (Stockinger: Sign, sign systems and culture, 2004) We present some features that may differ from one person to another inside the social actor.

The chatter’s identity is connected to the type of chat room that he prefers. The variety of chat rooms is almost endless and they have different characteristics: they can have a moderator, a precise topic, they can be connected to specific groups, they can be created during a specific event or a seminar, they can give the opportunity to use avatars, etc. In case of a chat room that has a precise topic, the moderator controls that the chatters keep to that topic, he erases all statements that are not coherent with the conversation. For example in Yahoo chat there are 19 main categories like Business & Finance, Computers & Internet, Movies, Regional, Romance, Teen, etc. As for the space of the discussion, it can be open to all or open only to a specific group; the conversations can involve many people in playful, friendly discussions or in more private relationships or their aim can be cyber flirt, etc...

It is not possible; however, to draw clear lines between different types of chat rooms. They present many characteristics that coexist and mix together.

4.2. Identities of the chatter

In everyday practice, people use chats for different purposes, and have different ways of interpreting this mean. We present four categories of chatters from Draelants, 2004.

Some people like to assume new identities in chat rooms, Draelants sustains that this can be a problem because he thinks that people suppose that others present

themselves without manipulating their real identity; but if a person lies, it is probable that he will be contradictory and therefore it will be difficult to maintain contact with other interlocutors. (Draelants, 2004)

Our opinion is however that every person that uses a chat, knows that the possibilities of chatting with a person who is inventing himself a new identity are very high and it is in a way acceptable; the whole point with chatting is that you can be anonymous. There are no direct ways of controlling if a person is lying; therefore the question of identity is a typical problem of chat rooms; only a “real life” meeting can prove the identity of the interlocutors. There are people who like to break the rules and norms of the net, the so called “netiquette”, they create problems to chat rooms, insult people, write a lot of meaningless messages, etc... It seems that usually, it is at the beginning of the chat room experience that many people tend to assume this behaviour; this might be a way to learn to know how chats work and to begin to interact virtually.

In general, people who behave like this, see chatting as a play, in which one can have fun and laugh and where there are no limits. However, it is possible that this kind of chatters evolve towards more serious purposes.

Another way of conceiving chat rooms is to use them as a place for meeting people from other countries or other cultures; in this case there is often a clear line between real life and virtual life. This type of web chatters just want to speak with different people, but do not have the intention of establishing deeper or closer relationships, and do not like to have private conversations.

There are people who use chat rooms as a way of searching a partner and establishing romantic relationships, in this case the purpose is to have a real life contact. Consequently private conversations are preferred. Chat rooms created for searching a partner are very successful, probably because of the possibility of being anonymous and hiding ones appearance.

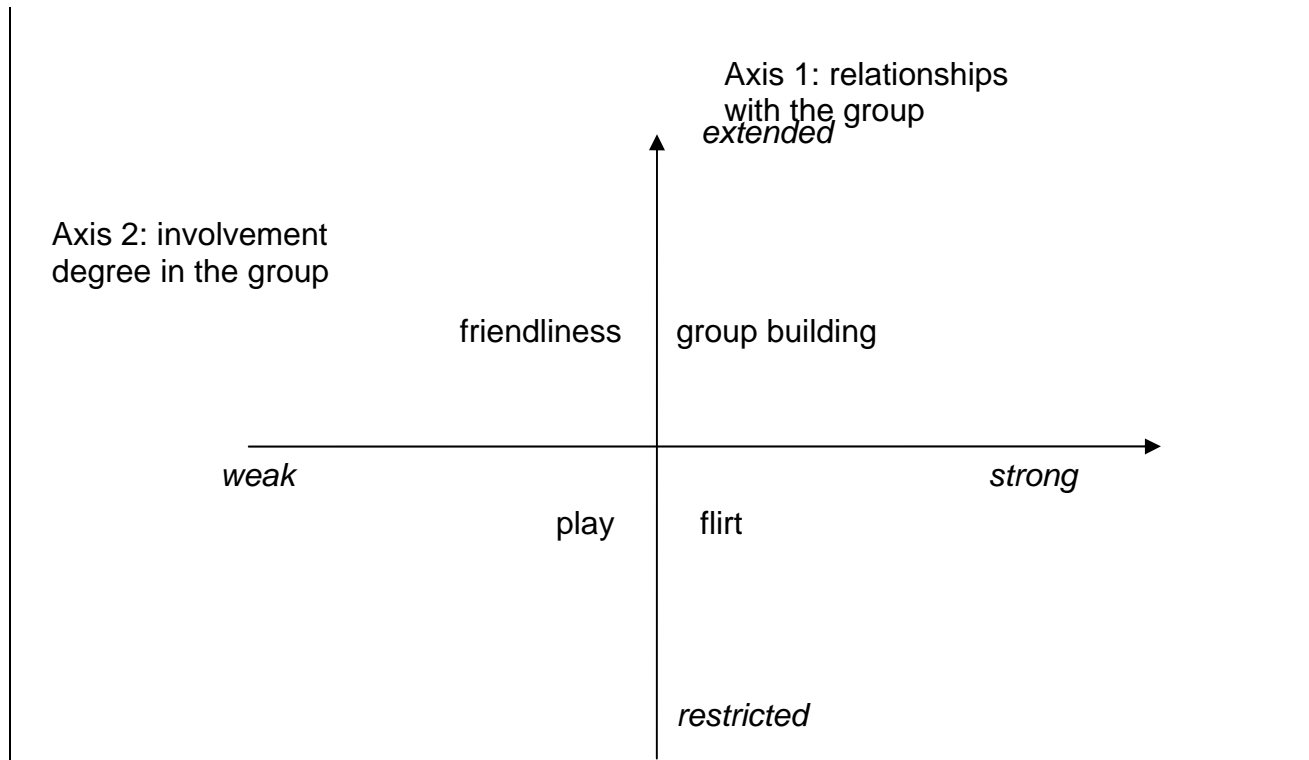
Finally, people use chat rooms to build close friendly relationships and form groups that can meet also in “real life”. This type of chatter likes to have a virtual identity that is coherent and that corresponds to his real identity. They can create solid and long term relationships that extend also outside the virtual reality.

We have said that web chatters’ identities can evolve with time; in general, it seems that after a certain period, people tend to attend chat rooms less frequently. The chatter often changes his use of the mean; he can for example pass from a “play” attitude to a more serious one, or he can look for real contacts and leave the chat. It is also possible that the group of web chatters becomes so solid that they exclude automatically everyone who tries to enter their group.

We think that Draelants has made a good attempt to classify web chatters, although it is often difficult to distinguish the different categories; in reality, these ideal profiles can mix and evolve, and other categories can emerge.

However the typologies presented by Draelants are very useful for summarizing the principal motivations and behaviours of the chatters. The following schema presents a clear overview of what we have said, on a two axis graphic. The first axis is related to the relationship of the individual with the group, this relationship may embrace a big number of people or only a few people involved in private conversations. The second axis is related to the grade of involvement in the relationship with the group; if this involvement is weak, the individual prefers to draw a clear line between the virtual life and the real life; if the involvement is stronger, the chatter is involved in long term relationships and wishes to have real contacts.

Classification of the typologies of web-chatters (Draelants, 2004, p. 43).



5. The Italian case

In Italy the practice of chatting is more and more diffused among teen-agers. In general, Italy is always late in everything that concerns the new information technologies, and the use of Internet is not as diffused as in other European countries. Consequently, the offer is not very big, and it is often difficult to find a good variety of web sites that can be interesting for chatters.

5.1. The use of internet in Italy

In Italy in these latest years a big debate is grown on the use of Internet in the families and in the school. The government has not only tried to augment the use of Internet, (particularly in the school), but also the buingt of a pc in the families, giving some economic facilitation.

Today all Italian schools are connected to Internet, and many teen-agers use Internet also at home to chat with their friends; it seems that recently the number of chatters in Italy is augmented.

In the period between January and February 2002, the “Nielsen net ratings” association has made a comparative research in Italy, French, Germany, United Kingdom on a sample of 4800 children between 2 and 13 years; in the United Kingdom 54% are connected to Internet, in Germany 54%, in Italy 35% , in French 25%, but the children that usually navigate are between 10 and 13 years, even if between 2 and 6 years there is yet a percentage of the 20%. The trend is growing in all four countries, and the hours in which Internet is used concentrated during the evening, between 17 and 21 in the weekends. Then, for Italian teen-agers Internet is becoming the most important media; television is the second, and radio is the third. Internet is perceived as a very important mean to look for information, to interact with other people, and to play, but the adults perceived it also as dangerous, because of possible “encounters” with ambiguous web sites or (bad intentioned) people.

In Italy the most used web sites are the general ones virgilio.it, tiscali.it, iol.it; between the web sites for children we have Disney.it, magickinder.com, Barbie.com.

As the journalist Melissa Bertolotti writes, while in the US the web sites for children are proliferating, Italy is always late, and, even if the government has created some web sites, as webscuola.tin.it, to increase the use of Internet in the families, and some programs has been created to protect the children from dangerous web sites, Italian people are in generally not very well disposed to make the children and the teen-agers free to use internet. As we have said, the offer is not very big, and there is specially a lack of web sites able to join play and education.

5.2. Italian chatters

The chatters community in Italy is composed by teen-agers and young adults, and it is growing despite all the debates; we have particularly notice a good presence of forums in many generalists sites, and the most used forums are connected to sport, specially to football. In this latest type of forum there is a big involvement, many people put messages regularly and their language is very colloquial, often aggressive.

When you are looking for a chat room, many sites underline the possibility to find a partner, and it is impossible to enter in a chat room without seeing this type of “advertising”.

The language of chat rooms has similar characteristics that we have already described: for an outsider it is very difficult to understand, because it is full of acronyms and emoticons, and, if a person is not used to it, it is difficult to integrate emoticons with the overall comprehension of the text. This language wants to be as immediate as possible and imitate oral conversations, so many devices are founded to make the writing quicker; for example, it is typical to use “k” instead of “ch”, “d” instead of the determinative article “di”, “qcs” instead of the word “qualcosa” (“something”), “cmq” instead of “comunque” (“anyway”), “tvb” instead of “ti voglio bene” (“I like you”); people tend to use mathematic signs in the words to write quickly, as “xché” instead of “perché” (“because”), or “xò” instead of “però” (“but”). A big discussion is grown because both in sms and chat rooms people have substitute the (dittoing) “ch” with the simplest “k”; for many “purist” of the Italian language, this is really inadmissible, but the phenomenon is so diffused that many academics have began to ask if this cannot be an evolution of the language.

In general, the use of acronyms in Italy is reduced; we have mentioned the more important, but they are not so much as in English, and can be easily understood by everyone (<http://www.mondochat.it/acronimi.htm>); in English you can find fifty acronyms, and they are not so easy to learn, because often they can be only a

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normal abbreviation, or a contraction of the word, or the first letters of a phrase, or a mixture of phonetic signs.

6. Internet and chat use in Finland

Finland is one of the leading countries when it comes to information technology and innovation in the field of communication. In 1984 FUNET (The Finnish University and Research Network) was founded, it used the TCP/IP protocol, which was the fundament of internet. Nokia has played an enormous role in cellular phone technology and is the number one producer of cellular phones in the world. Some important names of information technology are Finnish, for example Linus Torvalds who has created the Unix-type operating system Linux and The inventor of IRC. (<http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=25850>)

The number of users of internet in relation to the population is one of the highest in the world. In Finland potentially every citizen has to have the possibility of connecting to internet without charge. Practically every school offers to its students the unlimited possibility to surf in internet and all libraries have to have a free internet connection. According to Tilastokeskus the possibility to use internet differs according to age, among the children and youth almost everyone has access to internet because of the fact that many new computers have been bought in families with children and the possibility of using the computer at school. The group that has less possibility to use the net are the retired. In the spring of 2002, 75% of men and women had had the possibility to use a computer. In the group of over 60 years old only a small group had used a computer and in the group of under 20 almost everyone had used a computer. (<http://www.stat.fi/tk/yr/tietoyhteiskunta/tietokonejaverkkoyhteys.html>)

There is not a lot of formal information available online about the use of chat rooms in Finland, which is strange because of the high numbers in the use of internet. My personal experience is that people do chat a lot, most of all adolescents, and in fact there are a lot of Finnish chat rooms. The traditional way of chatting online has had to give place to some new forms in Finland; among

these especially one that is very popular in Finland. It is called TV-chatting. In Finland we only have four national TV channels that offer programs from four o'clock in the afternoon to twelve o'clock in the night, so there is a lot of time during which no programs are shown. The two commercial TV channels: MTV3 and Nelonen have started to transmit a chat program during this spare time. One can take part in the chat by sending SMS messages from the cellular phone to a designated number. The messages then show up on the TV screen. A Finnish digital TV channel: Sub TV has gone a step further and offers the possibility of TV chat in connection to a program. While the program is running on the screen, one can send messages via SMS that show on the TV screen under window where the program is running.



For example, in the picture we can see a screen from a program called sixpak. It is a program where participants compete against each other. In the upper part of the screen the audience sees the name of the task that the contenders are performing and the next

task. There is a discussion space under the live picture and the audience can send messages there by SMS. The audience is given the possibility to influence what they are seeing. TV chatting is quite expensive, it costs 84 cents to send just one message. (<http://www.m-cult.net/mediumi/article.html?articleId=21&page=4>)

This kind of hybrid TV that mixes a computer image with the traditional TV is revolutionizing the way people conceive the television. This fifty year old medium seems to be at a turning point and it is bound to renew dramatically.

Another form of chatting that is very popular in Finland is the “mobile chat”. The first mobile chat was created in 1998 by Radiolinja, a Finnish network provider. It

is anonymous and the participants can send messages to other chatters, without their phone number showing in the receiver's phone. The consequences of this type of communication on the Finnish language are similar to those of other languages. In SMS chatting the fact that a message can fit only 160 characters has a big influence on the language. Sihvonon and Suominen comment that the cell phone generation has learned to squeeze in even vital messages and meanings in 160 characters. The text can contain a high amount of abbreviations and SMS jargon, this has helped increase the expressive force of the Finnish language used most of all by adolescents. But one can also argue that it influences the language negatively, making its lexicon poorer and more unvaried. (<http://www.yle.fi/teema/verkkoyhteys/juttu.php?id=309>)

7. The intercultural dimension in the name of chatting

7.1. Cultural and professional translation

The notion of cultural translation could be applied to chatting. The cultural translation can be seen as a practice of the interpretation of knowledge and values of the “other” from the point of view of the interpreter who refers to his own knowledge and values. This process presupposes an interest in the interpreted culture and it is mediated with respect to the cultural specificity of the interpreter. (Peter Stockinger, Sign, sign systems and culture 2004)

In the case of the chatters “the other” is a big group of people; those who do not usually enter the chat rooms and do not have the culture specific knowledge that is necessary for the interaction online.

If a researcher wanted to study the culture of web chatting more profoundly than we did, he would have to do a professional translation of the chatter’s culture and of its culture specific language and behaviour. “In ethnography or anthropology–researchers are forced to “translate” the activities, language(s) and cultural forms of an ethnies they are studying in their own (“native”, “academic”) language and culture.” (Peter Stockinger, Sign, sign systems and culture 2004)

If a person who is not a part of the chatter’s culture reads what the researcher writes about this form of culture, his perception of chatting and chatters is influenced by the way that the professional translation has been made. Based on this some stereotypes can be created.

7.2. The global dimension of chatting

Internet and chatting are both phenomena of globalization, they contribute to the process of globalization and at the same time are effects of it. Chatting brings together people from all over the world, it makes distances seem shorter. A person from Pakistan can talk easily in real time conversation with someone from Iceland and with costs that are very low compared with phone calls. This way a kind of

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global village is created, the citizens are those who take part in the culture of the chatters and the language is mostly a lingua franca, English. It has nothing to do with academic English but is a language that is created on the basis of English and adapted to the needs and the knowledge of the virtual community. Usually when people refer to the community of chatters, they mean a global community that has nothing to do with national borders of countries. Chatting is a very effective way of meeting people from all over the world and it contributes to the knowledge of young people about other cultures.

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