Instant Messaging: Functions of a New Communicative Tool

*Anthropology 427*
*Doing Things With Words*

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Instant Messenger: The Future of Communication

Language is an integral part of human culture. There are many aspects that make up communication, but humans are unique in that we have an organized spoken language, which allows us to communicate on a deeper, more personal level. As we move further into the electronic age, we rely more and more on technology. In the language realm, this technology has taken us from face-to-face communication and letter writing, to inventions such as the telephone, the cell phone, online chat rooms, and finally, one of the newest and fastest growing forms of communication, Instant Messenger. Looking at how quickly IM has spread, we must ask how well it stacks up next to these other forms of communication that we have at our disposal. Results from an online survey we conducted indicate that Instant Messenger holds a strong second, right behind face-to-face communication, as the mode of interaction used most often: 35% of the respondents marked face-to-face communication as the form they used most, while 33% chose Instant Messenger. In addition, 63% of respondents reported using Instant Messenger five or more times a day. What is the significance of this new form of communicating, in which two people can hold a conversation without even opening their mouths? We believe it rests in how instant messaging affects actual, face-to-face contact.

Communication is constantly changing, and it is important for us to understand this change in order to apply it to our lives and our relationships. In our Capitalist society, there is a tremendous emphasis on rushing, getting things done (right now); we never slow down. As a result of this, it has become easier, i.e. more time-efficient, to utilize technology. We have those nifty self-checkout lines at the grocery store, and we can make plans with a friend in two seconds over Instant Messenger. However, the cost of modern conveniences such as these is the loss of personal contact with others. Nowadays, because of the wonders of technology, it is increasingly possible to filter all human interaction through a computer; one almost never has to come into contact with another person. By studying the changes in language that are a result of Instant Messenger, we may be able to have a better idea of how human communication is changing as a whole. The pages that follow reflect upon some of the elemental features of instant-message-based communication. Although IM has at times been celebrated as a symbol of communicative limitlessness, we have found the matter to be considerably more complex. Users, after all, are restricted by the nature of the medium and the expectations of fellow users—IM too appears to have its own etiquette and a set of regulatory patterns. Ultimately, then, we must ask: Does instant messaging expand the boundaries of interpersonal communication or does it merely reconfigure existing boundaries that have always shaped the human experience?

Investigation into the new phenomenon of Instant Messenger is a relevant topic in the study of language because it deals with all of the same aspects that are pertinent to spoken language. One might think of Instant Messenger as a new communicative tool because it blends two previously disparate elements of language: it is written communication with no time delay. We can relate instant messaging to Roman Jakobson’s functions of communication - the ideas of referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic functions that are examined in his “Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics” (Jakobson 1960: 350-77) - and find that, although it seems as if Instant Messaging is starkly different from face-to-face, spoken conversations, each of these communicative functions can be found in typed dialogue. Jakobson maintains, “any verbal behavior is goal-directed, but the aims are different and the conformity of the means used to the effect aimed at is a problem that evermore preoccupies inquirers into the diverse kinds of verbal communication” (Jakobson 1960: 351). Instant messenger, though unspoken, is a form of verbal communication.
Furthermore, the idea of language as an expression of identity is a central element in the discussion of Instant Messenger. The examination of personal identity through language as researched by Penelope Eckert, Stanton Wortham, and Robin Lakoff has been extremely telling with regards to psychological studies of identity. Adding the example of Instant Messenger to our previous understanding will only augment our knowledge on this topic. More specifically, we can learn about identity development in young people. This is due largely in part to the population of IM users, who are mostly adolescents and young adults. As Eckert notes, “Language plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of social groups in general, hence of adolescent peer groups. Much of this is accomplished in talk itself in a variety of ways…” (Eckert 2003: 113). An Instant Messenger identity can also be expressed through font, color, away message, use of emoticons, and countless other aspects. Along with the afore-mentioned ties to language, another central linguistic subject in relation to IM is nonverbal communication. One could argue that the whole idea of IM is non-verbal - though it does contrast with the concept of nonverbal communication that we see in, for example, Adam Kendon’s article entitled “Gesture” (Kendon 1997; 109-28). Additionally, Instant Messenger is a convenient tool that can ease potentially awkward face-to-face interactions while allowing the expression of personal identity, as well as help to facilitate and foster relationships of both long and short distance. The ever-evolving mechanism of language addresses the way communication can potentially change, as well as its implications on personal relationships.

The venue where we have chosen to conduct this preliminary study on IM is the University of Notre Dame. It is appropriate to study this topic on a site such as Notre Dame because on a campus setting, one finds the next generation of citizens who will be inventing and utilizing new technologies. Furthermore, Notre Dame has a large population of Instant Messenger users that will provide us with a broad pool from which we are able to collect and analyze data. If we are to study the future of communication, it is appropriate to use the future members of society as the subjects of our research.

The University of Notre Dame is a private Catholic institution located in South Bend, Indiana, approximately 100 miles east of Chicago. Currently, 8332 undergraduate students are enrolled (fall semester 2004). Of the entire undergraduate population, approximately 76% live on campus in 27 single sex residence halls -14 male and 13 female (53% of the population is male, 47% female). The majority of students live on campus during their first three years at the university. The residence halls are designed to encourage students to stay in the same dorm for the duration of their on-campus life. Since there are no fraternities or sororities, the social life tends to center around dorm life. Every residence hall has a rector, one or two assistant rectors, and four to nine resident assistants. The rector is the hall’s supervisor, and is in charge of dealing with any issues that may arise for the students living in their specific dorm. Assistant rectors are second in command and are graduate students at the university. Finally, the resident assistants are junior or senior undergraduates that also live in the dorm. They are responsible for helping the new students to adjust and carrying out the rectors’ orders.

Because Notre Dame has students from 106 countries – not to mention students from all 50 states - it considers itself an international university. Regarding ethnicity, the student body is relatively homogenous, and breaks down as such:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>78.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asian 5.4%  
Nonresident Alien 3.8%  
Black 3.7%  
Native American .7%

These five categories consist of only 23% of the entire student population, but are representative of the entire undergraduate body. The campus can also be considered homogenous because 83.8% of the students are Catholic. However, as mentioned earlier, students do not only come from Indiana. A mere 8.7% of the students are from in state. Geographic distribution from the freshman class of 2002 is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US territories</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This also includes students from 50 foreign countries. The distribution shows how widespread the university’s population is; Notre Dame has students distributed not only throughout the country, but throughout the world. Again, although this breakdown is from one class, it is fairly representative of the entire student body.

This study was a collaborative project conducted by the members of a linguistic anthropology class at the University of Notre Dame. Taught by Professor Susan Blum, “Doing Things with Words” is a course intended to foster questions about the functions of language, and in turn have students examine possible answers to those questions through analysis of and discussion about an array of issues. During the course of the semester, we examined such topics as: persuasive speech, greetings, gossip, flattery, silence, politeness, sincerity, identity, humor; and nonverbal communication. We then designed a group research project on the functions of Instant Messenger, a topic we believe to be extremely relevant to linguistic anthropology today. Each member of the class chose a different aspect of Instant Messaging to research. We compiled all of our research into one paper. The topics we discussed in class became the basis for our research. Methods we used include personal interviews, analysis of actual Instant Messenger conversations, and an online survey.

We created the online survey through Online Survey Creator, a service founded by business people, designed to provide a comprehensive full-featured, easy to use survey system (http://www.onlinesurveycreator.com/). We then emailed the survey to the rector of each hall, as well as to each class president, requesting that they send the survey through their email list-servs. In this way, we hoped to distribute the survey to the entire Notre Dame student body. From the results of our survey, however, we infer that it was only distributed by the Freshman and Senior, because there is a significantly higher number of survey responses from these classes. Furthermore, of the few rectors that actually distributed the survey, most of these were rectors of women’s dorms - as we deduced from the discrepancy of 549 female responses and only 87 male responses.
It is important to note that the researchers conducting this study also distributed the survey through their personal email contacts, as well as advertising the survey’s web link on their Instant Messenger Away Messages. Because of this, contacts of the researchers who do not necessarily attend the University of Notre Dame also had access to the survey. Therefore, though this study is primarily based on the Instant Messenger trends of the student population at Notre Dame, about 2% of the survey responses come from non-Notre Dame students. However, the percentage is so small that we did not think it was significant enough to skew our results.

Internet history, Nature of communication: In The Beginning...

In 1977 a small group of California-based computer scientists working for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) loaded equipment into their van and headed for a Bay Area freeway. Minutes later an on-board computer had accurately transmitted messages from the van’s remote, and continuously moving, location to a receiver computer. The accomplishment was compounded by the fact that the signal traveled over ninety-four thousand miles via radio, satellite, and landlines and it did so without the loss of even one unit of information (Diamond and Bates 1995: 39).

Internet historians like Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates seem eager to downplay the notion that the Internet “began” at any one moment or with any single feat. “No apple,” they write, “fell on a cyber Isaac Newton. Nor did any visionary set out to build a new communications medium” (Diamond and Bates 1995: 35). Nevertheless, DARPA’s accomplishment was impressive, especially when set against the backdrop of the work that was being done just three decades earlier. During World War II, the United States looked to computer technology to provide a tactical upper hand against the Axis Powers—specifically, German U-boats—and by 1944 Harvard engineers had assembled the world’s most powerful calculating device. Designed to factor ballistics tables for the Navy, the so-called Harvard Mark I was a hulking thirty-five ton, fifty-foot machine and was comprised of 750,000 separate parts (Diamond and Bates 1995: 35).

With the advent of the Cold War, the US sought to solve the dilemma of a nuclear attack; after such devastation, how could the United States of America survive as a functioning national entity? Contingency plans ultimately dictated that all activity would have to be taken underground or into fortressed mountainous regions. While the challenges of basic survival could be theoretically met, there existed no reliable method and no infrastructure for communication among communities of survivors. By this time computer scientists had devised a method for transmitting information over landlines—much in the vein of telegraph and telephone technology. This method was risky, however, because signals could reach their destination only if an uninterrupted circuit physically connected one computer to another and only if the entire circuit remained intact and in working order. Under this system, if any one portion of the infrastructure were to undergo damage—a certainty in nuclear attack—all hope for signal transmission would be lost and the infrastructure would be as useless as a string of Christmas lights with a bad bulb.

The Pentagon asked RAND [“Research and Development”, a government-sponsored technologies corporation] to analyze how the military could communicate (by voice telephone as well as data hook-ups) after a nuclear war […] RAND’s solution, developed by Paul Baran on an Air Force contract, was a network that could route around damage
and continue to communicate. In such a system, Baran wrote, “there would be no obvious central command and control point, but all surviving points would be able to reestablish contact in the event of an attack on any one point” through a “redundancy of connectivity” (Diamond and Bates 1995: 36).

Paul Baran’s hunch about the effectiveness of his hypothetical infrastructure was validated by DARPA’s roving transmission in 1977. Of course, the breakthrough was militarily significant. Post-nuclear communication appeared possible and, more practically, computer-based signals could be sent and received from remote points on the battlefield. Following this, a new communicative venue began to unfold that would soon prove itself to be just as useful in offices and living rooms as it was in war zones.

**Digital Analogue: The Internet as Catalyst and Symbol of a New Communicative Era**

Computer scientist Paul Baran’s work gives us the opportunity to consider more than the mere developmental history of what we now know as the Internet. The success of the Internet—that is, the willingness of modern-day societies to experiment with, adopt, and eventually adapt to a new way of doing things—is proof enough that his ideas about a “redundancy of connectivity” have impacted our world in very real ways. But what exactly are the implications of such a concept?

Let us consider once again a strand of Christmas lights, where there is no redundancy of connectivity. For each bulb in the strand there are only two possible states: connected (on) or disconnected (off). In most basic models, the electrical current, which illuminates the bulbs, will travel only as far as it is able to. This means that the “signal” will stop either when it reaches the final bulb or when there is an obstruction in the circuit. The power source is, of course, an electrical outlet and it always exists at the beginning of the circuit. A strand of lights is furthermore designed to have a beginning and an end. Since electrical power, which does the work, can only originate at the beginning where female and male electrical components are joined, we must conclude that force moves in only one direction.

The analogy is, of course, simple, but it offers us a preliminary frame of reference for thinking and talking about communication, particularly that which takes place in an electronic medium. In many ways, human communicative interaction appears to be a highly regulated enterprise, as is evidenced in the work of theorists like Maurice Bloch, Robin Lakoff, Deborah Tannen, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, as well as many others (see Bloch 1975; Lakoff 1982; Tannen 2001; Brown and Levinson 1978). While the relevance of improvisation and individuality as fundamental human characteristics is never ignored, these writers have found evidence of non-redundant connectivity—that is, regulated, linear and unidirectional activity—across all cultures and in all aspects of daily life. This appears to be the case with gender roles,
turn taking, persuasive discourse, intonation, socio-economic ordering, cultural variation, narrative poly-vocality and coding, among many other communicative gestures.

This means that there are implicit rules about everything we do, from how we order food at restaurants to how we interact with strangers in an elevator to how we indicate that we are asking a question versus making a statement. In this sense, communication is very much like an electronic circuit that ultimately follows a pre-determined path. Just as our strand of Christmas lights is activated and given direction at its origin, human communication is activated and directed by the nature of the encounter. When the path is not followed to its completion it is often the case that the system breaks down or the nature of the communicative act changes. This is why it is unseemly, for example, for one to talk loudly on a cellular phone in an otherwise quiet church.

The Internet, however, represents a literal and figurative alternative to this aspect of communication, thanks to its application of the principals of redundant connectivity. It should be noted here that redundant does not aim to indicate a “repeated” or “replicated” connection, but rather a multi-dimensional one. As a whole, the Internet works because it has no point of origin, no source (of either energy or information), and consequently no direction. Redundant connectivity means, then, that a single unit is connected to many other units in many different ways. The first tier of access points is in turn connected to even more access points, more “routes”, and more ways of doing things so that a unit’s ability to access other units grows exponentially, as does its functional repertoire for doing so. In two dimensions, such a framework might look like this:
It seems that our simple strand of Christmas lights has undergone a rather striking change, one that in many ways mirrors the communicative revolution that has had such a major impact on our world over the last 25 years. Now, more than ever, it is necessary for us to think about fluidity, improvisation and co-optation in the realm of communication. Just as “source” and “direction” are no longer tied to a particular circuit, so too we see that anti-structural (or counter-structural) gestures are increasingly potent forces that demand serious consideration. A hyper-extension of the possibilities afforded to us by redundant connectivity (albeit an idealistic extension) might suggest that even typically indisputable concepts like Truth, Authority, and Reality can be reorganized to suit the needs of a given situation. Some theorists (particularly from post-modern and sub-cultural schools of thought) will assert that humans by their nature have always been capable of appropriating Reality. While this is in many ways quite true, anti-structural moments have never been so easily accessed or so easily constructed.

A striking example of this can be found in the “Wiki” family of Internet databases, which went “online” in 2003 and has since grown impressively. “Wikipedia” describes itself as, “a multilingual ‘copyleft’ encyclopedia designed to be read and edited by anyone. It is collaboratively edited and maintained by its thousands of users.” Anyone with a computer has the encyclopedic authority to write an article for Wikipedia, or to change an existing one. Wikipedia is exceptionally representative of how so-called “users” have co-opted the construction and distribution of information, but it is certainly not the only example and by no means the most widespread.

**IM: The Message, the Messenger, and a New Liminality**

The very first e-mail messages were sent through telegram style pathways near the end of 1972, but the eventual unfolding of hardware and software modeled on the principal of redundant connectivity brought about a somewhat unexpected development. College students at various universities discovered that e-mail-like messages could be “posted” on individual pieces of online real estate and before long the “bulletin board” craze was booming (Diamond and Bates 1995: 39). Bulletin boards are very much like websites, but with two major differences. Technology at the time only allowed a user to connect his or her computer to one other “host” computer at any given moment. So, for example, if the user planned to visit first the “Science Fiction Lovers” bulletin board and second the “Rock n’ Roll” bulletin board, that user would have to connect and disconnect from each board separately. The other feature that made bulletin boards different from many of today’s websites was the complete dependence on the user community. Virtual bulletin boards were very much like their real-world counterparts in that each is void of content without contributions from the outside.

Near the end of the 1980s, companies like America Online (AOL), Prodigy, and CompuServe developed software that functioned as a, “very sophisticated bulletin board,” allowing people to explore various regions of “online” space without having to disconnect and reconnect at each move (Tyson “How Instant Messaging Works”). According to Internet historian Jeff Tyson, AOL contributed most to the pioneering of what came to be known as the “online community”. Perhaps most attractive to users was AOL’s updating of bulletin board technology, which now allowed users to interact in real time. In 1996, independent programmers developed ICQ (“I Seek You”), the first technology that allowed chat-room-like interaction to take place on a one-to-one basis. AOL soon followed suit and before long the Instant Message craze had ignited.
Eulynn Shiu and Amanda Lenhart report that today 53 million Americans use instant messaging technology and 24% exchange IMs more than e-mail (Shiu and Lenhart 2004: 1). In a Pew-sponsored piece entitled “How Americans Use Instant Messaging” they note:

[...] IM usage varies widely across different age groups. Instant messengers utilize IM not only as a way to expand and remain connected their social circle, but also as a form of self-expression, through use of customized away messages, profiles and buddy icons. Instant messengers [sic] use the expressive tools of IM more frequently than the protective tools that allow them to block unwanted communications (Shiu and Lenhart 2004: abstract posted online at http://www.pewinternet.org).

There are three particular points from Shiu and Lenhart’s preliminary statement that merit further consideration. First, their observation that IM usage allows for the expansion and maintenance of social activity suggests that usage is in itself something of a social activity. Second, their reference to the abundance of expressive tools (emoticons, sounds with characteristic meanings, pictures, font manipulation, and personalized “skins”) indicates that IM usage adds one or more dimensions to the written medium – and that by doing so it transcends the written medium. The experience of using IM is radically different from the experience of writing a letter or an e-mail. The matter is complicated, however, because the traditional alternative to written communication—spoken communication—is equally inadequate as a classification. There is no mechanism for indicating intonation, volume, pitch or pronunciation that can match the expressiveness of the human voice. The IM medium is equally inhibiting when it comes to non-spoken gestures (facial expressions, hand and body movements, and signings like ‘thumbs up’), which have proven themselves to be immensely important in the communication of meaning. Third, Shiu and Lenhart’s use of the phrase “Instant messagers” (as opposed to “instant messengers”) is most likely deliberate; it is the result of an inadequacy of vocabulary and further evidence that IM is expanding the boundaries set by traditional styles of communication.

So where does IM fit along the continuum of communicative strategies? There is actually no clear answer. Instant messaging represents a new liminality in communication because it resides inside the cracks that separate and permeate written and oral forms of communication. Many features of instant-message-based communication—particularly its “real-time” capabilities—allow users to approximate face-to-face encounters with surprising accuracy. Nevertheless IM is an intrinsically visual medium, something that is antithetical to our traditional conception of oral (and aural) communication. As a result, users and analysts alike are searching for ways to say and do things inside the liminal universe of IM.

Perhaps the “betwixt and between” nature of IM communication is best exemplified by a consideration of how IM users talk about IM activity. The lexicon of IM terminology is in a state of constant flux. For example, no single pre-existing word seems to be an adequate signifier of IM activity. Each of the following words is evoked by IM users with some degree of regularity to describe “the act of engaging in instant message-based communication” and each comes with its accuracies and inaccuracies: chatting (with); typing (to, that); writing (to, that); talking (to); speaking (to); saying (to, that).

Let us imagine that Michael enters his dorm room and finds his roommate, Tom, using an instant messenger program. If Michael asks Tom, “Hey Tom, what are you doing?” Tom has a number of options: He could say, I’m typing to Sarah, but that sounds extremely formal and the
word *typing* does not capture the real-time nature of the interaction. He could say, *I'm writing to Sarah*, but Michael could easily interpret the word *writing* to mean that Tom is writing an e-mail. He could say, *I'm chatting with Sarah*, but Tom might be concerned about the age, gender, and content connotations associated with the word *chat*. It is perhaps these connotations that have caused the term to fall out of use. He could say, *I’m talking to Sarah, I’m speaking to Sarah*, or *I’m saying (something) to Sarah*, but these words would traditionally suggest that a) Sarah is in the near vicinity and b) Tom is using his voice to communicate. Of course, Michael will easily understand what Tom is really trying to say, but it is nevertheless revealing that IM users have to appropriate and manipulate existing communicative frameworks just to talk about using IM.

By reflecting on the nuances and interpersonal implications of IM technology, we have a unique opportunity to consider the nature of language and of communication. Are these notions changing in response to changes in our communicative repertoire or are our strategies ultimately influenced by elemental human characteristics? We will see in the pages following that IM is a new communicative tool that is expanding rapidly, but also showing signs of regulation - so much so that IM conversations occasionally resemble the string of Christmas lights more often than the redundantly connected web of possibility. Just what does it mean to use IM?

**Multi-Tasking using Instant Messenger**

Since the Notre Dame campus is wired for high-speed Internet access and a majority of students have a personal computer, instant messaging provides an easy means for communication. One of the main attractions of using IM to communicate is that it is easy to carry on more than one conversation at a time about completely different subjects, while watching television and doing homework. The ease with which IMing lends itself to multi-tasking is essential for a busy college student who wants to keep in touch with friends, family, and co-workers. In face-to-face conversations, it is very difficult, or nearly impossible, to have multiple conversations going on at the same time with several different people. However IM allowed more than 82% of our subjects surveyed to have more than one IM conversation window open at a time.

Being able to carry on multiple conversations is not the only benefit to using IM as opposed to e-mail, cell phones, or face-to-face communication. As our survey shows, only about 3% of our respondents do not participate in some sort of multi-tasking while using IM (an overwhelming 91% do multi-task while on IM; 3% do not use IM). In addition to IMing, our respondents report doing the following activities: listening to music and doing homework on the computer (84% each), talking on the phone and talking to someone in person (45% each), and watching TV (43%). When asked if they find multi-tasking easy while using IM, 27% of our respondents said “yes” and 45% said “sometimes.”

As noted in the PEW Internet & American Life Project’s study on How Americans use Instant Messaging, “32% of IM users say they do something else on their computer such as browsing the web or playing games virtually every time they are instant messaging and another 29% are occasionally doing something else while they are IM-ing.” Thus, it seems that our results are commensurate with PEW’s. Our results also seem to be similar in that PEW found “20% of IM users say they do something else not computer related, such as talk on the phone or watch television virtually every time they are instant messaging, and another 30% say they do other things offline at least some of the time they are IM-ing” (PEW: 2004). In terms of
numbers of Generation “Y”ers (of which college students are a part) our results differ slightly from PEW; we found that 79% of our respondents (all Generation “Y”ers) multi-task while using IM, whereas PEW’s research cites only 49%.

Identity Formation and Creation of the Self: Screen Names, Profiles and Buddy Lists

To participate in the online world of instant messaging, the first thing an individual must do is create a name for him or herself—or begin crafting an identity. This is the same process by which a person begins to participate in the actual interpersonal world. In our society, babies are named soon after they are born. This name is not only a referential signifier, but it is an element of and influence on the formation of the person’s identity. Names give individuals a sense of self and of belonging. A name is no less significant in the world of instant messaging. The online identifier is called a screen name. The screen name is particular to one user. In many respects this signifier can be more meaningful than a given name because the individual can choose this name for him or herself at the moment of online conception. Also, unlike given names, users may create as many screen names or aliases as they wish. Even more, an individual may assume a different personality under each alias. This is more complex than a person who lives under different aliases in the actual world, because in the virtual world one is not bound by space or physical appearance.

Choosing a name for oneself is significant in the formation of an online identity because it is the first step in the formation of that identity. The individual no longer operates under the identity conferred upon him by parents, family or friends. The individual chooses who they will be at any moment online. Screen names are often as important to a user as a given name. Screen names are a way for users to create and appropriate their own identity. Unlike a given name, a screen name is created by the individual and is particular to that individual. The practice and ritual of naming is important in instant messenger. To give a being a name is to exercise authority, influence or responsibility for that being. When users choose a screen name, they are taking authority over their own self-identification. If another person does not wish to recognize that user by their screen name, they are effectively choosing not to communicate with that user. Unlike in the actual interpersonal world, in the world of instant messaging one individual must recognize the uniqueness of another individual in order to communicate with that person.

Most of the people we interviewed used all or part of their given names or initials in their screen names. This may show that although individuals are responsible for creating their own identity in the instant messaging world, they are still heavily reliant on their identities formed in the actual world. While most people devised their own screen names, some people were given screen names by family or friends. This shows a willingness for people to continue to be defined by the ideas of others. Some screen names were relics of old inside jokes among friends. Many people, particularly females, used descriptions of their physical attributes and birth dates as a part of their screen name. Countless students used “ND” in a part of their name, and several others also employed either all or part of the names of their hometowns, high schools, or ethnic groups. What we found to be common to all screen names is the idea of self-referencing through group identification. Most people did not come up with a screen name comprised of elements that were not associated with the external formation of their identity. Users choose screen names based on what they believe describes them beyond their arbitrary given names. This is a part of the function W. B. Swann Jr. calls “self-verification.” Following Swann, in Arkin’s essay, he claims that children fashion a coherent self-conception and then seek to stabilize that self-conception. In adulthood, if they have a confident self-image, they will also seek to verify this
self-conception. Basically, individuals present themselves in a way that is designed to reaffirm their own private self-conception (Zelen, 1988: 17). Screen names are a way for users to create a sense of individuality within a medium of communication that is far removed from the physicality of live, interpersonal communication. What we mean is that, on instant messenger, two individuals are communicating with one another without the assistance of body language or visual perception. Getting a feel for the personality of an individual via instant messenger is difficult. A screen name is a way for one user to get a more accurate perception of another user, at least so far as that user wishes to be perceived.

Another way of crafting an online identity is the formation of a user profile. While many people use away messages to let people know where they are, profiles let people know who you are. According to John Dewey, there is “an intimate and reciprocal relationship between the ability to use language and the ability to develop a self” (Fuhrer, 2004: 19). This applies specifically in the case of a profile because users have a limited amount of space to express themselves and give an accurate presentation of how they wish to be interpreted by others. Many users list personal contact information such as telephone numbers, cell phone numbers, addresses and email addresses. Some people use profiles in lieu of away messages when a particular message needs to be communicated for a long period of time, and when a user does not want to use away message space. In their profiles, users often provide links to personal websites or other websites that are of interest to them and their peers. Many people provide links to their online diaries as well. Profiles are a way that users allow other users to become familiar with them without their actual presence or direct communication. While users are free to place anything in their profiles that they wish, providing it fits within the allotted text space, there is some information users will certainly not place in a profile. The profile is an expression of the self, but it is still limited by social norms and functions of public communication. This idea is expressed in Arkin’s essay when he discusses two types of personal control, primary and secondary. According to Arkin, “primary control is an attempt to bring the environment into line with one’s wishes.” He goes on to say that, “In the case of self-presentation, direct attempts to influence others’ impressions of oneself clearly constitute instances of primary control. Approval is sought, disapproval avoided, certain inferences about oneself promoted and others deflected, solely to pave the way toward smooth social relations and the social rewards others are able to provide” (Zelen, 1988: 11). The profile is a practice of making oneself socially desirable.

The function of a profile is to allow other users to become familiar with a particular user. Profiles may be a form of what Robert Arkin calls self-presentation. According to Arkin, self-presentation “refers to the process of establishing an identity through the appearance one presents to others” (Zelen, 1988: 8). Following Arkin’s essay, the creation and maintenance of a profile is also a part of management of one’s public persona and of impression management (Zelen, 1988: 7-8). This leads to the question of why it is important for some people to carefully develop an online identity - as opposed to just establishing one by creating a screen name. Profiles allow a person to instantly develop an online personality. People can become familiar with you without ever actually messaging with you online. This is especially true depending on the depth of the profile. Some people on give a one-line profile that never changes. Other people list all their contact information and change the other content of the profile constantly—referencing everything from personal stories to inspirational quotes to Bible verses to links to online quizzes. Some people even save lists of their buddies in their profile. This is to let other users know with whom they are messaging, and to allow other users to add more buddies to their list. All of these practices can be considered specific modes of self-presentation. However, these practices may
also be a mode of creating a favorable view of the self. Often, practices that look like self-presentation are “devoted to the process of establishing a stable and favorable self-view.” In accordance with Arkin’s argument, profiles may also be a form of interpretive control designed to “sustain a feeling of [personal] efficacy” (Zelen, 1988:7).

The next issue would be whether or not profiles are intended to be personal or public expressions of identity. We think that the intent of the creators of instant messenger was that profiles would be a way for users to get to know one another. Thus said, profiles have become increasingly private expressions of identity as they are filled with inside jokes, innuendos and personal reflections. Links to online diaries are often given in profiles. These online diaries can be seen as an extension of the profile. They give an even more intimate understanding of the user. Here, we are reminded of Dewey’s assertion that individuals understand themselves in light of their understanding of their social context. They understand themselves in light of the evaluations of others (Fuhrer, 2004: 19). Therefore, while profiles may be more personal now than in the past, this just means that people are seeking more intimate approval from outsiders for their own self-conception. In this way, profiles may be the most powerful form of self-presentation in this form of communication, because “[g]enuine self-presentation [is] designed to foster an inference in the minds of a target audience” (Zelen, 1988: 6). These kinds of in-depth profiles create more than an inference. They give a very complete overview of the user. In this way, profiles cross the boundaries between the private self and the public persona. Anyone with your screen name has full access to any information you make available in your profile. Profiles allow users to express what they may not be able to express in other forms of communication. Or more practically, they can allow a user to communicate an idea to more people than those with whom they is in close contact with every day. Technologically speaking, the profile may also be seen as an extension of the personal webpage.

So far, the focus has been on internal aspects of the self with respect to IM behavior. It is important to take a look at an external aspect of this form of communication—the buddy list. The buddy list is just that. Buddy lists are a way to organize users with whom you communicate. It is a list that allows a user to keep track of all the people with whom he/she chats or tracks. Tracking is a non-academic term used to refer to keeping someone on your buddy list for the purpose of checking their away messages and profiles, without ever directly communicating with that person. With the buddy list, a user may keep a list of up to two-hundred users. The buddy list also allows the user to organize the entire list into sub-lists. These sub-lists may have any name that the user chooses—friends, enemies, class of 2001, north quad people, etc. We interviewed one person who actually has his buddy list organized according to Indian social castes. He is not Indian and to us this gives a stark view of how he imagines people and relationships. Although most buddy lists are not this startling in their categories, many people have other interesting sub-lists. Several males have sub-lists denoting those females they consider ‘nice girls’ and ‘other girls.’ We will refrain from repeating the actual name of the sub-list to which the other girls are assigned. Although this function overview does not cover every aspect of the buddy list, it does provide a good idea of how the list works to link IM users.

The external aspect of the buddy list rests in acquiring other users to put on your buddy list. The process of getting a name to put on a buddy list can be a complicated one. This is in due in part to the fact that instant messenger is still a relatively new form of communication, and thus the etiquette associated with it has not completely been established. In some ways, asking for a person’s screen name is like asking for a telephone number—more specifically for a cell phone number. Asking a stranger or someone you do not know well for their screen name is
inappropriate. There are also circumstances when asking for a cell phone number is more appropriate than asking for a screen name. It is often inappropriate to give a third party access to a person’s screen name, just as it would be inappropriate to give out that person’s phone number. Depending on the person, instant messenger may be a more intimate form of communication than using a cell phone. This is because of the information instantly available on the profile and away message. This aspect of availability is directly related to the maintenance of the public persona and the private self. If one individual calls another on a cell phone, the person can simply choose not to answer the phone. The caller has no idea where the person is or if they are available. With instant messenger this form of avoidance is not so easy. At all times, any user with your screen name can see if you are available or away.

Depending on the information posted on the away message or profile, that user also knows where you are at any given moment. So, depending on the users you allow to have your screen name, one may choose to limit or censor the information available in the away message or profile. There are ways to avert this invasion of one’s privacy. The buddy list comes equipped with various ways of hiding a user or limiting the knowledge of other users to that person’s availability. When a user is on your buddy list, that person may be identified as available, away or idle. Idle means that they may be available to chat but that their attention has been diverted and they have not used their computer, to chat or otherwise, for a certain period of time. When that person returns to their computer users who have that person on their buddy list are notified. Some users choose an option that allows them to never go idle. This means that other users never know when they are away from their computer or when they simply ignore messages. This option makes it appear that a user is always available.

Another option many users employ is blocking. To block a user is to configure your buddy list so that to a certain user it appears that you are always offline. However, if users suspects that you have blocked them, they may simply create another screen name to check and see if you are actually offline. Another option that many users find helpful is the eye. The eye is a function that allows users to disappear, but still be online. Users are listed as offline, but they may still communicate with other users if they themselves initiate the conversation. Only the users with whom the person initiates conversation will be aware that they are online. While this may sound similar to blocking, it is more extreme because no user can know if you are online unless you initiate conversation. With the eye feature, even if someone creates a new screen name to check your status, you will appear to be offline. These last few features allow the user to maintain a certain level of control while not comprising the projection of the personal and public selves.

Away Messages and Greetings/Closings

Away messages, a feature of instant messaging that allows users to post a brief message of their choice that other people on their buddy list can view, are greatly changing the way college students communicate. “Away messages were originally designed to enable AIM [AOL Instant Messenger] users who were still logged on to their computers but not physically sitting at their machines to alert possible interlocutors not to expect immediate replies to instant messages” (Baron 2003: 3), but away messages have become a means of communication that allow people to find out information about other users without actually initiating conversation and speaking with them. This idea could mean either that the amount of communication between students is decreasing because they do not need to speak to someone to find out what they are doing, or it could be seen as helping to increase communication because students have an easier
way of contacting fellow students. Away messages also allow students to be accessible at anytime, and depending on what information they choose to include in their away message, their whereabouts can be known as well.

College students have become increasingly concerned with being constantly and instantly available for interpersonal communication. In an online survey we conducted, of the 706 students that responded, 70% of students said that they put up away messages so other people would know where they were, and 48% said they used them so other people could reach them. These statistics further support the idea that even though students may not be at their computers, they are still “there” because their away message is able to speak for them:

“Away messages in IM enable users to establish a continuing sense of social ‘presence’. That is, the away message function of instant messaging enables those posting messages to be physically mobile (even when not using a mobile communication device) because the user’s social presence is maintained in his or her physical absence from the computer” (Baron 2003: 1).

By posting an away message, students are able to convey to other users where they are, when they will be back, how they can be reached, and any other pertinent information. Regardless of if students are even at their computers, someone can leave them an instant message that they will be able to read as soon as they return. This is different from another means of communication that allows us to be in constant contact: the cell phone. With a cell phone, the user has the option to not answer the phone and talk to the person, but with away messages, anyone can leave a message and be sure that the recipient receives it. Many students put up away messages so they can “use it to switch communication media by posting a phone number where they can be reached” (Shiu 2004: 18), thus furthering their amount of continual accessibility.

Another important trait of away messages is that many students use them to express something personal about themselves: “…many users of AIM see the away message function as a useful venue for presenting how they define themselves (either in general or at the moment) and how they wish others to perceive them” (Baron 2003: 8). Many students responded to our survey by stating that they put up away messages so others would know their thoughts, feelings, or emotions at that moment. This idea of being able to put up a notice of how one is feeling is a major step forward in communication. Often, relaying one’s feelings to another person, or other people, may be a troubling experience. But with the advent of away messages, IM users are more at ease with being open about their feelings and permitting others to know what their emotions are at any given moment, because they are able to hide behind their computers.

“Away messaging… has become something of an obsession on college campuses, providing communication, entertainment, procrastination and social life all rolled into one” (Cohen 2003: 1). On the Notre Dame campus, away messages seem to largely be used for the purpose of making social plans and maintaining connections with social groups. An important feature of campus life is spending time with one’s friends, and away messages make it easier to know where people are and how you can reach them. In this sense, it seems that away messages have helped to enhance the way people communicate. While they may have limited the amount of face-to-face interactions, and actual spoken conversations, they have at the same time managed
to increase people’s social activities and contact with others. One college student expresses what they believe the ideal away message would convey: “Away messages can be indicative of your mood, your state of mind, and what you’re doing at the time. The best ones can do all 3” (Baron 2003: 9).

Another feature of Instant Messenger that is changing the way people communicate is how students use greetings and closings when having conversations online. Often, students do not use traditional greetings or closings in their conversations. This is significant because such a lack of greetings and closings rarely, if ever, occurs in spoken conversations. Greetings are described as, “establishing the conditions for social encounters” (Duranti 2001: 208), but their absence on Instant Messenger does not seem to pose a problem for most students. Closings are more prevalent than greetings on Instant Messenger simply because it seems rude to stop talking to a person without having some sort of explanation or way of letting them know that the conversation is over. However, they are not always used, and when they are, people often seem to feel the need to give a specific reason for why they can no longer talk. The changes in how greetings and closings are used in instant message conversations show how technology is varying the ways we communicate. In essence, it is allowing for the dismissal of one of the functions of language, phatic communication, as outlined by Roman Jakobson. Jakobson, stated that we use phatic communication for expressions and phrases that are less emphatic than what they actually mean. So perhaps Instant Messenger is more efficient in its use of language because it dismisses things such as greetings that are used more out of formality than actually necessity (Jakobson: 1960).

One aspect of Instant Messenger that affects what type of greeting is used in a conversation is the presence of an away message. It is very common for students to send an instant message that solely responds to what a person has written in their away message. Students feel as though this is a very normal and acceptable way of ‘greeting’ a person, and they do not need to have an official, “Hello, how are you?” to start a conversation. In fact, 52% of students who responded to the survey said that they put up an away message to get a reaction from other people who might be reading their away message, thus expecting that the greetings they received would simply comment on what they themselves had already written. Greetings on Instant Messenger are not seen as essential or important for beginning a conversation, but if students were to adapt this strategy for spoken communication, they might be viewed as rude and abrupt for not using an official greeting.

Closings on Instant Messenger, when they are used, are often similar to closings used in spoken conversation, and usually include more information than a spoken conversation. Students typically give a reason for why they cannot continue the conversation, such as they are leaving the room or need to do homework, and then they not only say something to the effect of, “I will talk to you later,” but they also include a version of the phrase “goodbye.” These types of closings are so elaborate because students do not want the other person to think that they are trying to be rude, or that they do not want to talk with them. In this way, Instant Messenger actually enhances our communicative nature because students are giving more information and using better manners than they might in a spoken conversation.

As with greetings, closings are expected in spoken conversation. It is rude to hang up a telephone without saying goodbye, or to walk away from a person before an official ending to the
conversation has been stated. However, due to the impersonal and informal nature of Instant Messenger, it is more acceptable not to use closings because there is not as much of a direct connection with the person one is talking to. Generally, in very brief conversations, no closing is necessary. If, for example, a person asks a question and the other person answers it, and then the response, “thanks,” is given, most people acknowledge that the conversation was not intended to last for a long time, and that it has already come to a conclusion.

Overall, the ways in which greetings and closings are used on Instant Messenger are significant to communication because they are used in different ways with this technological venue than they would be in spoken conversation. While the lack of greetings or closings on Instant Messenger can be viewed as a deterioration of language, it can also be seen as a development in more intimate social relationships because people do not require a formal greeting to talk to someone, and a conversation can just end on its own, rather than have a reason for ending. However, when conversations do have a greeting or closing, it shows that students still recognize that greetings and closings are a part of language, but that they do not always need to be used, particularly in venues like Instant Messenger.

**Turn-Taking**

Understanding the role of turn-taking in IM conversations is an important part of understanding the function of Instant Messenger as a whole. It is intriguing to think that entire conversations can be held without the participants ever seeing each other or hearing each other’s voices. It is interesting that the typical cues we use that provide the rules for a successful conversation are absent in IM, yet conversations are equally, if not more, successful. How is spoken turn-taking similar to electronically transmitted turn-taking? How do they differ? What does this mean in terms of the evolution of communication?

Turn-taking in spoken language has been the topic of a myriad of linguistic anthropological studies in the past few decades. In spoken language, it refers to the instance in which a person is speaking. In this instance, that individual has the “floor” and it is his or her turn to talk. As humans, we have an intricate system of turn-taking that is centered on both verbal and nonverbal cues that let us know when it is our turn and when it is another person’s turn. We tend to take turn-taking very seriously, and respect another’s turn when he or she is speaking. As Wennerstrom and Siegel assert, “In casual conversation, it is evident that participants are sensitive to minute linguistic details that influence their turn-taking behavior” (Wennerstrom and Siegel 2003: 78). Clearly, this is a way of organizing face-to-face communication by designating a speaker (the one taking the turn) and a listener. If we did not have this system and people voiced what they wanted when they wanted, the world would be a frustrating jumble of noise in which no one would understand anyone else.

In their studies, Wennerstrom and Siegel found that voice intonation was the most important cue in the indication of turns. However, when people are ‘instant messaging,’ there is no way to tell what sort of intonation the turn-taker uses since the participants cannot hear each other. They simply read what the other person has entered and respond accordingly. For example, because we have “rules” for turn-taking already intact in our spoken conversation, a normal conversation might proceed as follows⁴:

C(f): But like the first six months I was riding →/ (2.1) to work / at 7:20 / in the morning ↓(.1)
M(f): Oh god! /
(Wennerstrom and Siegel 2003: 78)

As seen here, the second speaker knows exactly when to respond to the first, with minimal gap between the two exchanges, and no overlap. Although overlap does often occur in everyday conversation, there is always some measure of repair and one person always takes the floor and thus, the turn. In instant messenger conversations, since there are no aural cues and existing conventions for spoken language do not apply, it is often unclear for an IM participant to distinguish the end of another participant’s turn and the subsequent designation of his or her own turn (not including questions asked outright). Because of this, there is much self-selecting of turns, which results in an order of comments that may not make sense, because as one person is entering one idea, the other person, unaware of what the first is typing, can simultaneously enter another idea. This results in a record of thoughts that seems to be out of order. Here is one example of this:

V (4:40:06 AM): you have a test?
V (4:40:10 AM): all nighter?
A (4:40:12 AM): two actually
V (4:40:20 AM): or woke up early
V (4:40:24 AM): what on>?
A (4:40:27 AM): haha, come on v
A (4:40:39 AM): stress and abnormal psych for tomorrow

In this conversation, between two friends, (A) answers the original question while (V) proceeds to ask another question of the same nature. Immediately after, he asks a third question, in response to the answer (A) gave to the first question. Even the explanation of this example is confusing; by simply reading the conversation in order, it is hard to understand just what is going on. This happens all the time on Instant Messenger; the absence of cues denoting turn-taking allows participants to choose when they want to enter an idea into the conversation, and it is often at the same time as the other person participating. The interesting thing about this is that it is perfectly acceptable for this to happen on IM. In spoken conversation, if two people spoke at the same time, and continued to speak, it would be an overlap disaster and neither would understand what the other had said. However, on Instant Messenger, each thought that is expressed is instantly displayed in writing in front of both participants; therefore, they have access to every thought entered into the conversation and can refer back to a line if they want to see it again or need to respond to it.

Another trend in turn-taking on IM is the splitting up of a thought while entering it into the type box. When people speak face-to-face, they generally express a whole thought, whether it involves saying a whole sentence or a series of sentences. However, on IM, it is not uncommon to see one idea split up into two or three different turns. Take this excerpt, for example:

E: i got rehearsal tonight
E: and TONS of work
F: i did that last night too
F: but official halloween is a big deal
F: and im totes winning some costume contests
If (F) were engaged in a face-to-face conversation, he probably would have expressed his idea all in one sentence. However, over IM, the thought was expressed in three turns. What is the reason for the mid-sentence separation? There are many possibilities. For one, it could be adding punctuation or intonation that is not already present - although (F) uses no conventional punctuation in his exchanges. In our culture, it is acceptable to use punctuation in written works; it acts as cues that organize the writer’s ideas into a coherent work for the reader (much like intonation serves as a cue for turn-taking in spoken language). On instant messenger, formal punctuation is often ignored. Dividing “i did that last night too” and “but official halloween is a big deal” is perhaps an alternate way to punctuate the turn; the gap between the two parts can act as a comma, or even a period. This discussion of turn-taking makes us slightly alter our idea of a ‘turn’. On instant messenger, a ‘turn’ can refer to what is expressed each time something is typed and the <Enter> key is pressed. Even though (F) essentially expresses one idea, he does so by entering the idea in pieces, thus taking three turns.

A different explanation for the division within a thought could relate to the point above; a participant of IM does not really know when the other participant will enter a thought. Therefore, users may split their sentences into pieces, letting the other person know that they have something to say, which would mitigate the chances of being overlapped and perhaps trumped by the other person’s thought. Dividing a thought into multiple turns is a way of maintaining the floor during a turn - it is a cue. A third, more situation-specific reason for the separation of an idea is to add dramatic or comic effect to a conversation. Without the help of intonation, it is often difficult to know when a person is joking around, being sarcastic, etc. By expressing part of an idea and then finishing it in a different turn, the gap can be a dramatic pause that augments whatever tone the person typing is trying to convey. Here is an example of this, from a conversation between two high school friends that currently live far apart:

S (12:22:02 PM): ill be home dec 18
B (12:22:12 PM): oh yay i'll be back the 17
S (12:22:12 PM): but im leaving the 20th for san francisco

In this instance, entering in the first part of the thought but not the second not only gives the other person a chance to respond, but also provides a certain irony to what S says next, which is apparent in (B)’s response:

B (12:22:15 PM): WHAT
B (12:22:20 PM): biznatch

This brings us to a third intriguing aspect of turn-taking on Instant Messenger: the rate of turn-taking. In ordinary conversation, the verbal and nonverbal cues we give allow the listener to respond in the appropriate amount of time—quickly enough that there is not awkward silence, and slowly enough that there is avoidance of unnecessary or confusing overlap. As we saw in the very first example, there is a 0.1 second pause between the end of (C)’s sentence and the start of (M)’s response. In this last example, however, there is a 10 second delay between (S)’s first turn (“ill be home dec 18”) and (B)’s response (as well as (S)’s next turn, which comes at the same time). There is only a three second delay between (S)’s “but im leaving the 20th for san francisco” and (B)’s “WHAT”, showing her evident surprise. However, while three seconds
seems like a short reaction time, if the same conversation had taken place face-to-face, three
seconds would have been cause to check and see if person (B) was still paying attention. On
Instant Messenger, there is much more time between turns. There are various reasons to account
for this. First, one must consider the time it takes to type an idea. Next, it is important to
consider the time it takes for the message to travel across cyberspace. Furthermore, since neither
participant is actually in the other’s presence, there is less of a commitment to engage in the
conversation. For example, in this excerpt, two people are discussing a dinner party:

K (9:15:47 PM): motha humper, i dont think i can go, we started doing winter workouts
and they are at strange times:-)
K (9:21:24 PM): but as long as its cool with u i will just send u a message or give u a call
tomorrow and bring the cash over at some point tomorrow
R (9:34:20 PM): thats cool
R (9:34:28 PM): see you later
K (9:34:34 PM): alright, byebye

As is seen here, six minutes and twenty-three seconds pass between the first two turns. An even
longer lapse, twelve minutes and fifty-six seconds, passes before (R) responds. However, this is
acceptable on IM. As discussed in the multi-tasking section of this study, it is common to find
students doing many different things while talking on IM - whether it be studying, talking to
other people (on IM, phone, or face-to-face), or watching television. There is very little
commitment to be present in an IM conversation, but the meaning or message of the
conversation is still understood.

What, then, does all of this mean in the grand scheme of things, or the evolution of
communication? Communication is constantly altering and transforming, which is clearly
evident in the new Instant Messenger phenomenon. What we can learn about communication by
studying IM turn-taking is that, in many ways, IM is an extension of spoken language. We find
that the conventional cues that are so important in spoken conversation are revamped in the
Instant Message world. While there is often an ambiguous line denoting the end of one person’s
turn and the beginning of another’s, IM users have adapted to this indistinctness by, for example,
breaking up their long, involved thoughts into smaller pieces, and creating a new way to hold the
floor in a digital speech event. Instant messengers also use these pauses to add virtual intonation
to their silent memos. Instant Messenger simply takes the rules of our spoken language and
connects them to the digital age. At the same time, Instant Messaging is allowing the world to
explore a novel form of communication that eases up on some of languages stricter conventions
and gives interlocutors a new kind of freedom of speech. With IM, “speakers” are not limited by
other speakers; an idea a person wants to express does not have to be suppressed or forgotten in a
conversation because it is someone else’s turn to talk; everything both participants want to be
expressed can be expressed, without confusion or the feeling that one is being interrupted or
overlapped. If there is confusion, it is easily sorted out by immediate access to the written record
of the conversation.

These conclusions drawn from turn-taking on Instant Messenger put this form of
communication in a very positive light. In this analysis of the rate of turn-taking, there is no
mention of the long time between turns. This aspect of Instant Messenger dialogue, while
liberating for the IM participant in many ways, causes these conversations to be very lengthy as
well, and this is time that is mostly spent sitting at a computer, staring at a screen. It is not
active; in fact, it limits most other activity. An interesting topic for future research about IM would be the relationship between people’s use of Instant Messenger and how it affects their live interactions with other people, as well as how it affects face-to-face interactions. Instant Messenger raises numerous issues, as many new technological products do. Because of this, it would be beneficial to conduct further study on this innovative communicative tool.

**Humor**

Humor is one way of communicating over IM that can be very confusing. Instant Messenger conversations are typed and often do not contain much, if any, punctuation. Since the communication is informal, the attitude of the speaker can easily be misinterpreted. By not explicitly alerting the recipient of one’s attitude, conversations can easily become ambiguous. Humor is a wonderful example of this because in face-to-face conversations, humor is easier to identify than when instant messaging. In observing several informal IM interactions, we came to the conclusion that it is extremely difficult to recognize the jokes that are being made. There are ways to clarify humor on IM, but we found that these methods were almost never utilized. In our analysis, we compared humor in three separate forms: a monologue, jokes, and instant messenger. We then compared the difference between Instant Message and face-to-face humor.

Humor is not easily defined. It can be found in different places and can refer to completely different topics. It can be found in jokes, comedy routines, music, and everyday conversation, and can refer to a myriad of different topics. People know when things are funny and when they are not, although it is impossible to actually define what constitutes comedy. Michael Wolf explains, “What I would like to suggest is that humor is one such strategy that we employ in order to highlight someone’s deviation from the norm” (Wolf 2002: 4). He goes on to further explain the concepts of the “we” who laugh at jokes, and the “them” at whom we laugh. From this definition, we have to conclude that humor originates in commentary that both deviates from the norm and makes fun of either someone or some group. Wierzbicki and Young claim, “Humor derives from experiencing a sudden incongruity which is then made congruous” (Wierzbicki 1978: 82). This explanation is similar to Wolf’s definition; in both cases there is a deviation from a person’s initial perceptions.

The first example of humor is from the late night television show *Saturday Night Live*. This is the monologue given by Norm MacDonald at the beginning of the program when, as the host, he was on the stage alone and recited this speech in comedic form:

When the people here asked me to do the show, I've got to say, I felt kind of weird. I don't know if you remember this, but I used to actually be on this show. I used to do the "Weekend Update" news routine, you remember that? That's where I did the make-believe news jokes. That was me, you know? So then, a year and a half ago, I had sort of a disagreement with the management at NBC. I wanted to keep my job. Right? And they felt the exact opposite. They fired me because they said that I wasn't funny. Now, with most jobs, I could have had a hell of a lawsuit on my hands for that, but see, this is a comedy show. So, they got me. But, now, this is the weird part, it's only a year and a half later, and now, they ask me to host the show. So I wondered, “How did I go from being not funny enough to be even allowed in the building, to being so funny that I'm now hosting the show? How did I suddenly get so goddamn funny?!?” It was inexplicable to me, because, let's face it, a year and a half is not enough time for a dude to learn how to be funny! Then it occurred to me, “I haven't gotten funnier, the show has gotten really
bad!” So, yeah, I'm funny compared to, you know, what you'll see later. Okay, so let's recap, the bad news is: I'm still not funny. The good news is: The show blows! Alright, folks, we've got a great show for you tonight! Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggie Dogg and Eminem are here. We'll be right back!

This speech was considered humorous by many because Norm MacDonald is making fun of himself and making fun of the television show that he is hosting. He is also indirectly making fun of the audience because they are watching the very show that he is making fun of. Mocking on these multiple levels comes across as humorous because the speaker is deviating from what the viewer would expect to hear in a monologue. The observers are not supposed to actually believe what he is saying because it is extremely contradictory to his role as a comedian. Humor of this kind is easy to comprehend and often found entertaining. Placing yourself in this position makes humor easily defined and understood.

The next example of humor is a common joke that can be told by any person.

**Question:** What did the termite say when he walked into the bar?
**Answer:** Is the bartender here? (Is the bar tender here?)

Jokes like these juxtapose the ambiguity of spoken language with written language. This particular joke makes a reference to the bartender because he is the one who serves the drinks. It also refers to the commonly known fact that termites eat wood. Also, termites clearly do not talk and they obviously do not walk into bars. By personifying the insect, the situation becomes inherently funny and the comments the insect makes help to enhance the humor. Jokes that use puns are funny because they also play with the listener’s initial perceptions. These jokes deliberately lead a person in one direction, only to redirect the listener at the last minute. This deviation from the norm is where humor in these situations originates.

The final examples of humor comes from instant messaging conversations:

```
M: do you have a game tomorrow?
K: yeah
M: against who?
K: michigan
K: i hate them
M: ngp
K: hahaha damn straight
K: its more like ngj
M: huh?
M: no goal jack
M: i know toph is pulling your weight
K: for real
```

This conversation took place between two friends about (K)’s soccer game. An outsider reading it would not be very amused because the jokes are not obvious. “Ngp” stands for “no goal patrol” and it was the soccer teams motto for the season. (M) was making fun of the motto and he renamed it “ngj” for “no goal jack” for himself. The interlocutors then commented about
how their other friend was picking up (K)’s slack. This is also an inside joke because (K) always claims that he is the best player.

This is a simple quote from a movie that was made randomly in an IM conversation:

L: happy the gold jackets yours shooter’s gonna choke
L: shootahh

It is funny if the reader understands what movie it references, and if they can possibly picture the scene. Also, by the second comment it was clear “shootahh” was spelled that way because of its pronunciation in the movie. If someone reading this conversation did not know where the quote was from or did not know the person saying it, he or she would probably not find it humorous.

In both cases, we see that humor is not necessarily funny based on the content alone. Humor in these examples referred to previous experiences that the interlocutors had in common. It seems clear that the medium of Instant Message conversations does not lend itself to humor. Telling jokes and writing monologues on Instant Messenger are possible, but joking around in a typical conversation is difficult. Many times humor is expected - like when watching a comedy show or when someone is telling a joke. However, people do not always anticipate humor over IM, so they sometimes have a hard time picking up the subtleties of humorous commentary.

The difference between IM and face-to-face humor rests in the performance. Richard Bauman explains, “It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication” (Bauman 2001: 182). Performance in this sense relies solely on the delivery of the performer. Instant Message conversation does not convey this added intensity; by losing this mode of communication, online humor often becomes confusing.

Although IM communication is convenient and practical, it lacks some aspects of other types of communication. Part of its convenience derives from the fact that IM language is more casual. When having conversations, the majority of people rarely use punctuation. This is probably because people are trying to respond as quickly as possible, therefore ignoring certain courtesies that can clarify one’s attitude. Punctuation is often ignored so conversations consist of short thoughts and phrases. Another way to convey attitude is to use emoticons. Without these elements, IM conversations come across as less dynamic and more confusing. We conclude that humor over IM is much different from verbal and scripted humor. Joking depends on the situation and delivery, which is often lost in casual Instant Message conversations.

**Abbrevs: A Shorthand Revolution**

Although instant messaging is arguably one of the best methods of communication, it does come with a few drawbacks - one of those being a possible deterioration of today’s Standard English. One of the main reasons instant messaging is such a popular method of communication is because it is quick. With the comfort of IM, people do not have to leave their room, or even their chair, in order to have a question answered. Instead, they can easily look up another’s profile or away message, and after sending a message, instantly have a response. For some, it seems only natural to increase the speed of communication by neglecting the use of proper grammar within their conversations. In the online survey recently conducted by Anthropology 427: “Doing Things With Words”, 76% of the respondents reported using abbreviations in their IM conversations (although we must take into account that out of the
100%, 3% said they do not use IM). 40% of those questioned do not regularly use proper
capitalization and punctuation, compared to 11% who do, and 36% who only do sometimes. All
except two percent of the respondents were Notre Dame students. Presumably, at the university
level, the students have been taught the intricacies of proper grammar. When the students begin
using abbreviations, as well as neglecting proper capitalization and punctuation, it becomes
apparent how widespread and pervasive this misuse of language is. The use of abbreviations in
IM conversations themselves are not the problem; it is that abbreviations and improper grammar
have bled over into other aspects of daily life - aspects that do not benefit, and some of which are
damaged, by the use of poor grammar. To fully examine this issue, we must first consider a few
instances of how language has functioned in the past and compare them with how language is
used in today’s schools.

In his article discussing online chatting, Steve Friess interviews both parents and
instructors regarding the recent changes in grammar usage. One parent interviewed claimed, “I
never thought I’d be encouraging my kids to talk on the telephone, but I realized that the constant
chatting on the Internet was destroying their ability to write properly”(Friess 2003: 1). In this
case, the parent is not worried about the use of abbreviations and the other aspects of grammar
when used online, but when used in the students’ scholarly writing. Unfortunately, a professor at
Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton confirms the father’s fears of how bad grammar can
influence schoolwork. Professor Cindy Glover maintains, “My students were trying to
communicate fairly academic, scholarly thoughts, but some of them didn’t seem to know it’s ‘y-
o-u’, not ‘u’...I wanted to teach them to communicate persuasively, but I couldn’t get past the
really horrific spelling and grammar”(Friess 2003: 1). Taking this into consideration, it is
apparent that the repeated use of poor grammar online can cause teenagers to use unacceptable
grammar in more formal situations; those using the abbreviations are not learning how to
communicate in other settings. David Samson, recent author of The Joy of Depression, supports
this theory. Samson received a piece of fan mail asking, “yo mr dave can u plz write me a funny
speech about any animal cause I need it for school.” Samson claims, “they seem to avoid every
rule I was ever taught about how to get a response from anybody, especially an adult”(Friess
2003: 1). Instead of realizing that a writer would appreciate the use of proper grammar, and
ignoring the fact that the request was a formal letter to an adult, the teenage fan chose to use the
same language that he or she would have used while talking online with a peer.

One strange aspect about abbreviations is the motivation behind them. In a questionnaire
distributed to a small group of Notre Dame students, eight students total, only one claimed to
avoid the use of abbreviations, and the others, when asked why they used abbreviations, all
responded with something similar to, “it is faster and requires less typing.” When asked whether
the abbreviations were really more time efficient, however, only a couple adamantly responded
that they were. Instead, most of the replies were somewhat weak and indecisive. One woman
replied, “They are probably not faster in IM conversations; they seem more useful in writing and
note-taking. But I guess it feels faster to use them, like I’m avoiding unnecessary work.”
Another interviewee stated, “In some cases, yes but most of the time it really does not matter.”
Both of these replies beg the question of why people use abbreviations if they do not fulfill a
timesaving function.

Additionally, with the new phenomenon of IM abbreviation use in face-to-face
conversation, one must wonder if it is more efficient to use abbreviations when speaking. All of
those who took the questionnaire responded that they do not use abbreviations when speaking
because, as one interviewee declared, “The purpose of it is to make conversations faster. It takes
just as much time to say the entire word or phrase as it does to say the abbreviations.”  (Later, after taking the questionnaire, many of the respondents commented that if they really wanted to save time, they would not have been on Instant Messenger to begin with.) Nonetheless, in the Anthropology survey previously mentioned, 27% of the respondents replied that they use abbreviations in verbal communication unrelated to IM. This 27%, however, may be a low estimate. After turning in her questionnaire, one interviewee amended, “You know, I think that I have used abbreviations in face-to-face conversations a few times before.” This hints that in some cases, people do not consciously think about using abbreviations, but in reality, they do.

The absence of correct punctuation and capitalization is a bit more difficult to navigate. In the online Anthropology survey, only 11% of the respondents said they use correct capitalization and punctuation. Next to the 40% that do not, and the 36% who only do sometimes, this is a very small percentage. Looking at the responses in the questionnaire might help to provide some idea of why this might be. The one respondent to the questionnaire who did not use abbreviations said that she always uses correct grammar, punctuation and capitalization because she is “a grammar/spelling-obsessed person.” Others, however, might deliberately never use capitalization, and their punctuation is questionable. One interviewee remarked, “I don’t worry too much about either [capitalization or punctuation]. I use capitalization and punctuation to make sure that what I’m saying makes sense.” For this particular young woman, it seems that the only reason to use proper grammar is to prevent any misunderstandings. Because IM is such an informal method of communication, some people do not feel the need to employ grammatically correct writing. There is not the same sense of formula found in instant messaging as there is in letters, notes, or even e-mails.

In some cases the lack of formality found in IM conversations can be more than unsettling; as it is shown to be for the parent and professor discussed previously, it can be outright offensive. Richard Bauman’s “Christ Respects No Man’s Person: The Plain Language and the Rhetoric of Impoliteness,” examines how Quakers use language, or more appropriately a lack of language, to help live a life solely devoted to honoring Christ. It is important to consider how the Quakers would respond to the way language is used today because it helps illuminate how much the function of language has changed during the past two to three hundred years. Of the Quakers, Bauman states, “[they] were distrustful of speaking, as a fleshly faculty. One consequence of this distrust was the impulse to limit worldly speaking as far as possible and thereby to reduce one’s susceptibility to being corrupted; hence the frequent injunction to “let your words be few”(Bauman 1983: 45). On one hand, the Quakers might approve of the use of today’s abbreviations because they reduce the amount of actual words written, and the less written the fewer lies, or falsehoods, told. However, considering the most frequently used abbreviations found in the Anthropology survey were lol, j/k, brb, and ttyl, one has to wonder if this reduction of words helps to contribute to the Quakers ideal of ultimate truth through plain speech. On the AOL Instant Messenger website, there is a dictionary of common acronyms.

Conversely, for some the use of abbreviation is not only inoffensive, but can foster a sense of community and familiarity. Looking at Monica Heller’s “Strategic ambiguity: code-switching in the management of conflict,” we can see how language works to convey one’s sense
of ease or intimacy. In her article, Heller claims, “Code-switching can be used to appeal to the shared understanding characteristic of co-membership, or to create distance by associating oneself, momentarily, with the out-group” (Heller 1988: 83). Although the term code-switching refers to the use of spoken language, it is applicable to IM because many do consider instant messaging a type of verbal communication. This statement takes on an added significance in light of the questionnaire. In it, one respondent commented, “I only use abbreviations that I know the other person will understand, so it really depends on who I am talking to. If I am talking to my mother, I hardly use any (even lol or brb), because she doesn’t really understand their meaning.” This apparent generation gap helps point to how abbreviations on IM really are a new kind of language. For some they are exclusionary, and for others the complete opposite – as Heller indicates. The previous respondent goes on to state, “With some people I use “wtf”… “rotfl”…or “lmao”, but I would never use them with just anyone because they aren’t so common and I never want to use an abbreviation if I’m not positive the other person will get it.” Since the respondent only uses abbreviations that she knows will be understood, much as a bilingual may only speak Spanish to those she knows also speak Spanish, she is able to form a unique bond with the other person. Here, the improper grammar does not necessarily contribute to the decline of Standard English in general, but it creates another realm in which abbreviations are an accepted language.

Looking again at the AOL Instant Messenger website helps to clarify how abbreviations can be considered a completely different language. The dictionary that the website features contains roughly eighty acronyms and their abbreviations. Here is a list of a few examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFAIK</td>
<td>As far as I know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASAP</td>
<td>As soon as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>Because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BFN</td>
<td>Bye for now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMG</td>
<td>Be my guest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFN</td>
<td>Ciao for now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CID</td>
<td>Consider it done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUL8R</td>
<td>See you later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DQMOT</td>
<td>Don’t quote me on this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAQ</td>
<td>For your information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMTA</td>
<td>Great minds think alike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPOV</td>
<td>In my point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOL</td>
<td>Laughing out loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIA</td>
<td>Thanks in advance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although a few of the examples listed are widely known, such as “ASAP” and “FAQ,” most of the abbreviations are only used within the context of IM. Both of the participants in a conversation would have to have had prior experience using abbreviations on IM to understand what the other person was trying to say. For both speakers, these abbreviations represent a new form of language. Acronyms like “CUL8R” are specifically for instant messenger. Even within IM, however, many users are not familiar with the lingo – as evidenced by one of the interviewees not being able to use certain abbreviations with her mother.

After looking at abbreviations and a few other aspects of improper grammar used on IM, the answer to whether today’s Standard English is truly being damaged becomes even more
indefinite. Teenagers and young adults are using abbreviations in situations where they should not, such as school, but those very abbreviations may also be helping them to create a co-
membership with other groups of people.

Communicative Repertoire and Effects of Instant Messaging

How the increased use of Instant Messenger affected other forms of communication, especially face-to-face relations encounters? Are people chatting on IM more frequently and for lengthier sessions than when they talk on the phone, write an email, or drop by a friend’s dorm room? Is an increased use of IM allowing people to stay in closer contact with family, friends and loved ones? Or might IM be a cause for concern—is it replacing interlocutors with computer screens? While there is not a multitude of research currently available on the topic of Instant Messaging, the preliminary research that has been conducted presents some interesting findings. In the section that follows we will present the findings of a few studies, results from our survey, as well as excerpts from an interview with a rector here on Notre Dame’s campus. It is our opinion that the information from these three sources indicates that IM has grown to become the largest form of communication among college students after face-to-face conversation, that IM is allowing college students to stay in better touch with support networks from home, and that much more research can be done to explore the complicated reality of how the increased use of IM is affecting face-to-face conversation.

It is first important to get a sense of how often Instant Messenger is used in comparison to other forms of communication; the forms in comparison we used in our survey were written correspondence, e-mail, telephone, cell phone, chat rooms, IM, and face-to-face conversation. To get a sense of the frequency of use of these different communication mediums, respondents to our survey were asked to rate which form they used most often, and about how many times a day they used each form. In response to the first question, IM just about tied face-to-face communication, with 35% saying they used face-to-face communication the most, and 33% saying that they used IM the most. The next closest form was cell phone, getting 20% of responses, while e-mail came in fourth, with only 9% of respondents indicating that they used it most often. Looking at the second question, “how many times a day do you use each form?”, 95% of our participants reported that they used face-to-face communication five or more times a day, as compared to the 63% that admitted to using IM five or more times a day. E-mail falls slightly behind IM, with 53% saying they used e-mail five or more times in a day, and cell phone received 34%. By looking at these numbers, we can gather from our survey that Instant Messenger has emerged as a highly used form of communication second only to face-to-face conversation. The fact that use of IM has grown to such heights is reason enough to explore some of the effects that this form of communication might be having, especially on college students.

As we have indicated, the questions and framework for our paper have been an outgrowth of the articles and theory we have discussed in class. Some of the first things we discussed were Jakobson’s six functions of language, and these six functions have continually crept up throughout the semester. In relation to the phatic function, Jakobson says, “The endeavor to start and sustain communication is typical of talking birds; thus the phatic function of language is the only one they share with human beings. It is also the first verbal function acquired by infants; they are prone to communicate before being able to send or receive informative information” (Jakobson 1960: 356). These two facts indicate that the phatic function of language is perhaps the most important of the six. Regardless of fact that we communicate messages through
language, the more important idea is that we are communicating; it is language for the sake of interacting, language to establish contact with another person and realize that we are not alone. This inherent aspect of language, its ability to let us connect with another person, has powerful implications on our well-being.

This idea of using language to connect with others has emerged in our research as a significant element of IM; by allowing users to instantly share information with a large number of people in a small amount of time, IM is helping users to better “stay in touch” with one another. For instance, Michael Snider provides a perfect example of how one can get updated on the lives of multiple family members at the exact same time, even when these people live thousands of miles apart. He shares in his article, “Last week, I had a video visit with my wife [over IM using the video-camera option]...I had a quick word with my brother, in Pickering, Ont., while wearing a microphone headset that was connected to the computer and a traditional typed conversation simultaneously with my aunt in Calgary and my father, who’s posted in Croatia” (Snider 2003: 1). In what may have lasted only 5 or 10 minutes, this man was able to get quick updates from four members of his family. Without IM, it would have taken much longer to either call them individually, wait for a response from an e-mail, or especially to write a letter and wait for it to be delivered. The instantaneous quality of IM interactions allow an IM user to feel as though he is up-to-date on what is going on in the lives of loved ones who may be a block, a town, or an ocean away. The fact that IM allows for multiple, simultaneous conversations gives users the opportunity to have a brief interaction with many different friends and loved ones at once, thereby increasing users’ ability to stay in touch with one another.

This increase in knowledge of what is going on in the lives of one’s family and friends has a greater impact on overall well-being than we might initially be aware of. In a study done on Internet usage and its relationship to depression in college freshmen, “Results indicate that increased e-mail and chat room/instant messaging (IM) hours are associated with decreased depressive symptoms” (Morgan & Cotton 2003: 133). While this decrease of depressive symptoms may also hinge on the nature of a student’s online interactions, or with whom the student is chatting, the study suggests that increased IM use is an effective enough way for college freshmen to feel connected to and supported by loved ones. In a sense, one might be able to parallel the type of frequent, brief interaction that occurs on IM to the quick communicative exchanges at home that happen while one is grabbing a quick a meal with family or friends, driving to or from school, chatting with friends in the hallway, or catching up with parents or siblings at the end of the day. IM, therefore, provides an easy way for friends and family to exchange big news of the day and facilitate a feeling of closeness, even when users aren’t physically close at all. Busy sons and daughters away at college no longer have to make four separate phone-calls to hear “I love you” from Mom and Dad, find out that their best friend from home just started dating someone, hear that their sister got her driver’s license successfully, and be informed that Grandma and Grandpa bought a house in Florida. It can happen all at once, instantly, in written form, over IM. This sense of being connected to loved ones back home, even when college may be a state or continent away, can provide helpful, additional support for college students as they make the difficult transition from life at home where they have a comfortable support network, to life at school where they have yet to make new friends.

It is precisely this transition, and whether or not Instant Messenger is helping or hindering it, which we feel provides one of IM’s greatest gray areas: is this increase in computer screen, typed communication negatively affecting students’ ability to meet and interact with their peers on campus? The answers, at this point, are still not much more than speculation.
Preliminary results of our survey indicate that there are in fact times when respondents would rather speak with someone on IM than in person, as 73% of our respondents marked yes for this question. 63% of participants reported that this was due to not knowing a person very well, while 41% and 37%, respectively, said the preference for talking to someone online versus in person correlated to an argument they were having with that person, or to the fact that they were interested in that person romantically. This would indicate that the isolated nature of IM, the fact that users can be rooms, miles, or countries apart, allows users to feel there is a certain protective barrier between themselves and the person with whom they are talking. In an interview with a rector here at Notre Dame, he refers to this barrier as “electronic distance.” He also provided anecdotal support for our survey results that indicate there are times people would rather talk on IM than in person, when he shared that he often hears that the young men in his hall use Instant Messenger as a medium to talk to roommates about problem issues in the room, or to talk to girlfriends when arguments emerge. He compares this “electronic distance” to the habit that people have of breaking eye contact when they begin to talk about something personal, adding that it “breaks the interpersonal tension.” In a very specific example, he explained that he knew of a young man who told his roommate that he is gay while they were on IM, both sitting at their desks in the same dorm room. In response to this anecdote, the rector replied, “Maybe that’s how it happened because neither one of them were ready for that conversation face to face.” This leads us to wonder whether the “electronic distance” characteristic of IM is positive or negative. Was the gay student unable to tell his roommate this personal information face-to-face because he has been conditioned away from comfortable face-to-face interaction through extended use of IM? Or, should the exact opposite approach be taken, and should we say that in this case IM must be lauded as a means of increasing communication, because if it were not for the option of IM, the gay roommate would not have been comfortable sharing this information face-to-face for quite some time? Using another example, if a person has a fight with his or her girlfriend or boyfriend over IM, how is the subject broached the next time they see one another in person? In other words, is IM a hindrance to communication because it replaces instances of face-to-face interaction, or is it a welcome addition to the communicative repertoire, as it is allowing people to share things over the computer screen that they may not have been able to share otherwise?

**Conclusions**

Our research has shown that Instant Messaging has changed the way we communicate. It allows for immediate interaction as well as constant accessibility for contact between people. The solitary nature of IM enables users to perform multiple tasks while carrying on multiple conversations something that is not possible with face-to-face conversations, and much more difficult when on the telephone. The presentational facet of IM gives users the opportunity to create an identity for themselves and express their personality. Features such as away messages provide users with the chance to continually know where other people are and what they are doing, as well as learn personal information about a user without actually engaging in conversation with them. Another result of away messages is that they have changed the way users enter into conversation by allowing people to bypass traditional customs of language, such as greetings. While it is clear that IM has led to changes in language and communication, we have discovered that there are both positive and negative aspects to these changes.

Some of the effects on language that we observed manifest themselves in various forms of communication. For instance, our research has shown there is concern that the informal
nature of Instant Messaging is leading to the deterioration of proper language. This can be seen particularly in the use of abbreviations, incorrect or absent capitalization, and the general use of improper grammar that is abundant in Instant Messaging conversations. Another part of language that is influenced by Instant Messaging is humor. While IM lacks facial expression, tone of voice, and gesture, all of which help to convey humor, it attempts to bridge that gap through the use of emoticons, thereby increasing the ability of written language to have the same expressive capabilities as verbal language.

Finally, our research has left us with a number of questions that further research will be able to explore. First, can Instant Messenger be considered just as valid as any other venue for communication? We have concluded that it is a valid form of communication because it provides another form for which all functions of language can be expressed. In addition, while we have found that IM is permitting college students to stay in better touch with family and friends from home, it begs the question: is it causing too much reliance on old support networks and preventing students from interacting with new social groups on their college campus? Some research points to the fact that students can use IM to communicate with friends at school just as often as friends at home, which indicates that it is actually increasing communication among new peers, while still allowing for students to stay in contact with old friends. Third, is our ability to have multiple conversations simultaneously on IM limiting our conversations to more superficial topics, and thereby preventing genuine, intimate exchanges? While more in-depth and invasive research could attempt to fully answer this question, we have found that it is possible to have intimate conversations on IM, but that they are more likely to occur between people who would have an intimate conversation through other venues of communication as well. Finally, is IM preventing face-to-face discussions on difficult subject matter, or is it providing an outlet for these topics that might otherwise never have been discussed? Results from our survey as well as anecdotal information and individual experience have shown that there are times when people prefer to broach certain topics on IM instead of in person. This suggests that Instant Messenger is allowing students to express thoughts and feelings that might otherwise have been ignored or unspoken.

It is evident that Instant Messenger will continue to be a prominent form of communication, especially among college students. IM allows students to communicate with each other in a way that parallels the fast paced nature of college life. At a time when young men and women are expanding their social circles and shaping their identities, Instant Messenger provides an easy way for students to be in constant contact with multiple people, as well as create and maintain a sense of self. For these reasons, and in light of the questions we have raised throughout our research and observations, it is clear that there are multiple facets of Instant Messenger that merit further investigation.
Works Cited


1 Transcription symbols. (Wennerstrom and Siegel: )
= immediate latch from one speaker to the next
a:::::: extended syllable
CAPS focused words
↑ high rise boundary
low rise boundary
→ plateau boundary
partial fall boundary
↓ low boundary
/ syntactic completion
- cut-off intonation and syntax
italics nonfinal adverbials
underline discourse marker
(.4) pause duration in seconds
(m or f) male or female speakers
((comment)) meta-comment on some facet of the conversation
_word overlapping speech

2 Even when someone directly asks a question to another person, it does not necessarily mean that the first is giving up their turn; it is acceptable in an IM conversation for the first person to ask a question, then proceed in expressing other thoughts, relevant to the topic or not, with the intention of still having the question answered, and for the conversation to continue as it was. This is seen in this excerpt:

T: not too much is new with me
T: still hanging out with dan
L: what are you being for halloween?
L: oh i met him, he seems really nice
T: ohhhh yeah, i forgot

Here, the next thing L says comes directly after the question she asked, and had nothing to do with the question, but was a response to T’s previous turn. However, it did not take away from the conversation, and T was still able to answer the question later in the conversation, which was the original intent.