TYPING YOUR WAY TO TECHNICAL IDENTITY: INTERPRETING PARTICIPATORY IDEOLOGIES ONLINE

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Abstract

Informal, online environments facilitate creative self-expression through typographic and orthographic stylistics. Yet, ideologies of writing may be invoked to discourage written forms that are purportedly difficult to read. This paper analyzes how members of an online, text-based, gaming community negotiate appropriate, written communications as expressions of technical identity. These encounters may reify communities of technologists who are associated with using or avoiding forms such as abbreviations, capital letters, and "leet speak." Amid the technologizing of the word, the paper argues that those who do not conform to assumed norms may be indexed as less technical than those who do. By examining troubled encounters, the paper explores how metapragmatic negotiations affect creativity and technical identity performance online. The paper argues that contrary to discourses that online interactants pay little attention to written stylistics, the present participants closely attended to subtle and small forms. Further, it discusses how ideologies may be idiosyncratically applied to assist in forming asymmetrical, technical identities. Finally, it argues that technical affiliations are just as important to study as other variables such as gender, ethnicity, age, and class that have traditionally received attention in analyses of ideologies of writing and New Literacy Studies.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication; Language ideology; Technical identities; Literacy; Writing; Conversational trouble; Online participation.

1. Introduction

Explorations of ideologies of writing analyze how people use written forms to establish authority or influence interpretations of cultural meaning. Ideology is productively defined as "a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations of production in society" (Eagleton 1991: 18). Invoking written ideologies helps people organize into cultural groups and determine appropriate access to resources, such as communicative rights and privileges (Blommaert 2004). Scholars have traced how individuals in institutions such as the state (Messick 1992), museums (Noy 2008), and schools (Mahiri 2004) organize writing practices to reinforce particular interpretations of cultural values.

Scholars in New Literacy Studies are similarly concerned with how ideologies of writing influence interpretive processes and access to resources. The term "literacies"

never neutrally denotes the acquisition of cognitive skills such as merely reading and writing. Rather, literacies reflect and help constitute particular ideologies (Street 1984). They are now seen to be multiple (Gee 1996; Jenkins et al. 2006) and involve a range of expressive forms and social contexts (Heath 1983). Literacies are "more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals" (Barton and Hamilton 2000: 8).

Literacies involve displaying socially-acceptable yet ever-changing participatory and communicative skills that are important in an increasingly technically-savvy and media-saturated world (Jenkins et al. 2006; Ito et al. 2010). Jenkins et al. (2006: 3) describe a category of media production environments called "participatory cultures," which offer important non-institutionalized spaces for peers to develop traditional and new literacies. Jenkins (2009: 16) defines participatory cultures as those which "lower the barriers to participation but also create strong social incentives to produce and share what one produces with others." Examples include online gaming environments, such as those described below, in which individuals rather than governments or educators negotiate appropriate participatory parameters.

Participatory sites encourage creative exploration between peers. Yet, such sites may exhibit ideologies of communicative practices (Lange 2003, 2006, 2007). For example, people in online spaces may chastise fellow participants if they do not use appropriate written forms to communicate online (Humphreys 2008). Communicative complications may emerge from what Taylor (2006: 329) calls "coveillance" in which "there is lateral observation between community members" regarding appropriate online behavior. Rather than focus on the actions of representatives of powerful institutions, the present article analyzes how peers try to regulate each other's behavior by critiquing written forms of self-expression. It contributes to New Literacy Studies by analyzing how people regulate written language in order to reify asymmetrical technical identities.

A common folk rhetoric is that criticisms of writing are dispensed to ensure readability, essentially echoing Grice's (1999) maxim of "manner." Ideologies are often naturalized and justified by invoking practical considerations (Woolard 1998: 6). Yet, what is considered "readable" varies culturally. This article will argue that peer-to-peer criticisms have less to do with promoting readability than with imagining communities of technologists who purportedly share similar communicative values. Criticizing others about how they use writing not only attempts to establish the criticizer as a legitimate member of a dispersed, imagined community (Anderson 1983), but also helps create and reify that community. Criticisms are levied in part to establish a sense of "us" versus "them" that often results from invoking language ideologies interactionally (Schieffelin and Doucet 1998: 286). Although interactions are not admitted as evidence in Anderson's (1983) classic work, the data suggest that it is partly through social encounters that an imagined community is proposed and reified. Members must work hard to form imagined communities (Silverstein 2000), given that not all possible members may agree on what constitutes acceptable participatory practices (see also Frekko, this volume).

The present article is concerned with how interlocutors criticize their peers' typographies, or forms of written representation, as well as orthographies, or the way that sounds are represented through writing. The article investigates self-expressive complications that arise when online interlocutors are criticized and their writing is coded as violating norms. Yet not everyone may perceive these so-called norms as

standardized or necessary to enforce. The article will trace how these complications are linked to technical identity moves in which ideologies of online, written expression may be invoked to establish a relational hierarchy between an interlocutor and his or her criticizer.

2. Idiosyncratic interpretations

New Literacy Studies scholars argue that people participate in everyday "distinct discourse communities" which are comprised of "groups of people held together by their characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting and using written language" (Barton and Hamilton 2000: 11). A particular communicative form's adequacy may be evaluated according to the contextual domain or discourse community in which it is used. For example, communicative practices online may differ from those used in educational institutions. Forms such as the symbolically onomatopoeic "heh" and "haha," or the abbreviation "lol" (which stands for "laugh out loud) are often recognized as appropriate ways to indicate mirth online (Cherny 1999; Tagliamonte and Denis 2008). However, they are not acceptable in academic writing and are the targets of moral panics about how young people's technologized interaction poses a threat "to standard varieties and conventional communication practices more generally" (Thurlow 2003: 3).

However, the concept of a "discourse community" potentially ignores the internal contradictions that may exist within such a group, or even within the same contextual field of interaction, such as chat in an online game. Analogous criticisms have been levied at the highly contested term of "speech community" (Hudson 1996). Bucholtz (1999: 207) argues that the term is problematic because of its "emphasis on consensus as the organizing principle of community," its focus on central rather than marginalized members, and its static view of identity. Even within a group which supposedly shares characteristic ways of using and valuing writing, it is possible to observe inconsistent interpretations of usage.

Scholars recognize that ideologies of language can be "internally contradictory" (Woolard 1998). However, the present focus is not on an ideology's internal contradictions, but on idiosyncratic interpretations of particular ideologies. Invoking a particular ideology is often accomplished in idiosyncratic ways to serve local, interactional purposes of establishing asymmetrical cultural hierarchies. For example, use of the acronym "lol" might be ratified in the same social space as a normative method of expressing mirth by one individual, while being criticized by other participants as indexing technically-unsophisticated forms of communication.

Online participation has been heavily influenced by certain legacy practices. Such practices are outlined in works on cyber manners or "netiquette." A frequently cited example is the dispreferred practice of using all capital letters, except in moderation, to express emphasis (Angell and Heslop 1994: 11-12; Rose 1994: 30; Shea 1994: 61; Mandel and Van der Leun 1996: 97). Yet, some participants in the present study invoked the first part of this norm while ignoring the second in ways that, whether intentional or not, situated the criticizer as having higher technical status than the criticized. By embracing legacy norms in strategic ways, one could perform a technical identity that aligned with early Internet elites.

Contestations about legacy norms (or rather idiosyncratic interpretations of them) suggest that technical affiliations are often just as strongly felt and are sometimes even more salient in particular encounters than are traditional identity variables—such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class—that receive attention in studies of ideologies of writing and New Literacy Studies. Yet it is important to study technologized spaces, and how normative practices may dilute participatory possibilities in informal media spaces which otherwise offer possibilities for self-expression and creativity.

3. Fieldsite description and methods

The analysis draws on a two-year ethnographic study of a text-based, online game called a MUD (multi-user dungeon or multi-user dimension). I will refer to the fieldsite as MiningMUD (a pseudonym). The analysis combines information from interviews, participation, and sequential analysis of interaction collected in more than 400 logs, each representing anywhere from a few minutes to several hours of game play. In MUDs, as in their precursor genre, tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons* games, participants explored player-created fantasy worlds and accomplished quests, battled automated and human opponents, and accumulated online tokens of wealth. At the time of the research (1999-2001), MUDs were not well known to the general population in the United States. They did not approach the global popularity of their successor genre, graphical MMORPGs (massively multi-player, online role-playing games) such as *World of Warcraft* (Mortensen 2006), which are played across various demographic groups (Humphreys 2008).

Many MiningMUD participants were high-school or university students who were interested in computer technologies. Adult participants often worked in technical companies such as computer or network firms. The MUD's theme oriented around science fiction, which is a popular genre among many technologists. In MiningMUD, players lived and worked in a dystopic, outer-space, corporatized mining colony.

According to administrators, MiningMUD—which was free to play and open to the public—had about 400 registered users, although only about 100 were regular members. The MUD was run by a small core of administrators and coders (people who manipulated the software that ran the world), who were largely from the United States. Most (82%) of the characters in the MUD were male-presenting. It is possible that some of the male-presenting characters were female offline, and some female-presenting characters were male. However, at the time of the research, studies argued that people tended to adopt online personae (even in games), that corresponded to their offline sex (Herring 2001; Curtis 1992).

Similar to other MUDs, MiningMUD offered numerous ways for participants to accomplish action and communicate. By typing in special commands at a prompt, people could move about the world—all described through text—and accomplish actions such as going to different rooms. In addition to chatting, people could use an "emote" command to simulate actions such as smiling, waving, or other movements. At a prompt, for instance, I could type the words "emote smiles" which would yield the text phrase, "[Veronica][1] smiles" for everyone to see.

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[1] Veronica is a pseudonym for my character's name.

The MUD had several chat lines that served different communicative purposes. The analysis draws on public, MUD-wide chat lines, rather than private messages. Although chat topics were eclectic, they often involved technology, including debates about which products to use, or how to fix computer problems. I also observed participants networking for jobs in technical companies. The game served as a social space in which participants learned about technology and about how to express the self in socially-acceptable ways within technical milieus (Lange 2006, 2011).

After obtaining permission from the head of the MUD, I participated and contributed to the community by playing the game (as a female cyborg character), chatting, and maintaining a job (serving drinks in the pub). Players were made aware that I was an anthropologist logging interaction. They were provided with contact information to learn more about the research. Recording play was a standard practice for many players, who used logs to examine events that occurred when they stepped away from the keyboard. I used a popular MUD client program to record and time-stamp logs. However, I was advised to use a three second buffer to ensure the program's smooth functioning. The program would not add a new time stamp until three seconds had passed from the prior stamp.

MiningMUD participants generally sought to create a friendly and helpful environment for newcomers and children. The group had specific norms and cultural preferences about how one should interact on chat lines; violations could receive informal and formal sanctions. For example, players were instructed to avoid profanity and withhold providing solutions to quests. An offender would receive an automated warning. Further violations could result in having chat privileges revoked. Frequent violations could lead to banishment by an administrator, a fact which belies the assumption that people can speak freely in all milieus online. As one administrator told me in an interview, "They won't necessarily always treat [administrators] nice but they're gonna avoid being assholes because there's always consequences." The focus of the present discussion is not on administrator sanctions (although that was always operating in the background), but rather on peer-to-peer negotiations of what constituted appropriate written communication. Negotiations over adequate written self-expression offer rich opportunities for studying participatory literacies in technologized environments.

4. Performing technical affiliation in written form

Technology discussions on the MUD's chat lines often exhibited a performative character. I define performing technical affiliation as using words or deeds to display alliance to ideas, values, and practices that are often assumed to be associated with particular technically-oriented groups (Lange 2003, 2011). A performance can be as simple as expressing a preference for a particular computer over another, or displaying interest in cultural artifacts—such as science fiction films—that are popular in computer geek cultures. Performances may be invoked over the content or form of talk. When people critique others about the appropriateness of written forms, they attempt to display an identity as being a more legitimate member of an imagined technical community than the person requiring correction.

Drawing from Goffman (1959), this model argues that performances are part of everyday, interactive self-presentation. Performances include any activity occurring in a particular occasion that aims to influence other people's impressions of that person (Goffman 1959: 2). Individuals intentionally try to "give" signs to others that help manage their social identities, but people also "give off" unintentional signs that others might use to make their own assessments about a person's identity (Goffman 1959: 2). For example, a person who uses certain forms of written expression may try to appear technical, but because their choices are associated in some participants' minds with non-technical groups, their technical identity performance might not "work"; they might receive criticism from more technically-oriented interlocutors. Interactive performances could sometimes fail or remain contested. Performances of technical identity through critique of communicative forms both influence and are motivated by ideologies of writing.

4.1. *Indexing undesirable use of capital letters*

In example 1, taken from the public, "real life" channel, capital letters are marked as both unacceptably associated with non-technical participants, and as appropriately indexing emphasis in online game chat.

(1)
1   [Sebastian] I love PwerPuffs!
2   21:31:30
3   [MiningMUD] Doris enters the game.
4   21:31:39
5   [James] Yeah, they're a riot
6   21:31:45
7   [Jason] Aww..
8   Jason didn't make that connection.
9   21:31:55
10   [Allie] What about the redhead? :P
11   21:32:06
12   [James] And she's my favorite of the three
13   [James] Buttercup?
14   21:32:23
15   [James] Blossom
16   21:32:33
17   [Jason] Blossom
18   [Non-relevant text omitted]
19   21:32:45
20   [James] She's like the leader
21   Jason likes Mojo-Jojo.
22   21:32:53
23   [James] yeah! He rocks.
24   21:33:00
25   [Sebastian] Mojo jojo!

26   [Van] ya talking about powerpuff girls?
27   21:33:05
28   Jason snickers.
29   [Chris] Dexter's Lab is THE BEST.;)
30   21:33:14
31   Jason cheers Chris!
32   21:33:23
33   [Chris] Ach! Caps lock, now I look like an AOLer.;)
34   21:33:30
35   Chris kicks his caps lock key.;)
36   21:33:38
37   [Allie] Blossom is the leader
38   21:33:57
39   [Sebastian] Mojo jojo says that you shall obay Mojo Jojo! And
40   the one who you obay is Mojo Jojo! because Mojo Jojo is the one you shall
41   obay!
42   [Allie] She's not LIKE the leader, she IS ;)
43   21:34:05
44   James grins at Sebastian
45   Sebastian grins.
46   21:34:26

In example 1, interlocutors converse about animated television shows. In line 29, Chris[2] says that the show *Dexter's Lab* is "THE BEST.;)". Chris, an 18-year old male, was not an administrator during this interaction. However, he later became one during the research period. He expressed many strong opinions about technologies and politics. Here, Chris performs technical affiliation to specific cultural material, which is an animated show about a boy genius who conducts secret experiments. His use of capital letters may initially be read as indexing emphasis, since he is calling superlative attention to a particular show amid a discussion of other television shows.

For many Internet users, using capital letters carries a communicative connotation analogous to inappropriate verbal "shouting," and therefore people who use it may be chastised. However, not all participants online reject this form. In line 31, Chris's assessment is "cheered" by Jason, who does not criticize nor even comment on Chris's use of capital letters. Jason, who was 24 at the time of our interview, was also a high-ranking member who later achieved coder status in the MUD.

In line 33, Chris criticizes his own use of capital letters, saying, "Ach! Caps lock, now I look like an AOLer.;)" and ends his entry with a "winking" emoticon, which signifies joking or teasing in online conversation. Chris refers to users of the America OnLine (AOL) service for accessing the Internet. Launched in the late 1980s, it became popular in the early 1990s (Swisher 1998). AOL participants, or "AOLers," were assumed to be Internet "newbies" or people who were not experienced in the communicative styles and traditions of online interaction. When joining more technically-oriented groups, AOLers reportedly often ignored their traditions and

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[2] All participants' pseudonyms were drawn from a random name generator.

cultural norms (Marsden 2009). These interactions caused conflict and gained AOL a poor reputation among legacy Internet participants (Marsden 2009).

Many technologists associate AOLers with communicative incompetence online. For example, according to the Urban Dictionary (n.d.a), the definition of "AOL speak" is, "A frightfully common way of speech that has no lower case letters, and no formal guidelines for grammar or spelling." Another Urban Dictionary (n.d.a) definition faults it for abbreviations such as "lol." In line 33, Chris opens with the interjection "Ach!" to indicate distaste for something that has happened, in this case, "Caps lock" which is an inadvertent lock of the "caps" key on his keyboard. This mistake resulted in Chris inadvertently typing "THE BEST" in capital letters in line 29.

Chris performs technical affiliation when he criticizes his own use of capital letters in this phrase and semiotically indexes it to the behavior of participants in a non-technical cultural group who do not respect the legacy practice of avoiding capital letters. Here, the roles of criticizer and criticized are collapsed, so that Chris publicly massages his identity to construct a favorable social self that is distinguished from non-technical participants.

Chris's superlative stylistic of capital letters in "THE BEST" might be seen as an acceptable form of emphasis, and one that confirms to codified versions of so-called netiquette. Style manuals explicitly state that in certain cases all capital letters are legitimate forms. According to Shea (1994: 61), "All caps may be used, IN MODERATION, for emphasis." Similarly, Rose (1994: 30) argues that, "It's OK to capitalize a few words to highlight an important point."

Note that in line 42, Allie (who was not an administrator at the time of this conversation) uses capital letters to emphasize that the cartoon character "Blossom" from "The Powerpuff Girls" is not merely "LIKE" the leader (as James, the head of the MUD, suggests in line 20), but rather "IS" the leader. She uses capital letters apparently without fearing damage to her social status. Allie uses capital letters for emphasis and her stylistic goes unchastized by her interlocutors, including the founder of the MUD. Note also that Chris does not chastise Allie.

Chris's inconsistent labeling bolsters Goffman's point that not all words reproduced by a particular interlocutor consistently reflect the speaker's own "opinions, beliefs, and sentiments" (Goffman 1981: 145). Chris may not really object to capital letter use for emphasis (or may be reluctant to chastise someone else), but he used the occasion of his own caps-lock error to perform a technologized identity. That Allie's typographic choice goes unmarked while Chris's receives criticism (from himself) shows an idiosyncratic interpretive display of a written form that may be invoked for specific identity purposes.

In line 35, Chris "kicks his caps lock key" to metaphorically and jokingly punish it for "forcing" him to display a potentially misleading association between himself and AOLers who reportedly used capital letters to ill-effect. In the popular imagination, the stylistics of capital letters are often claimed to be unfortunate because they are "hard to read" (Angell and Heslop 1994: 11-12; Rose 1994: 30; Schocker 2009). Yet studies suggest that capital letters are not inherently more difficult to parse than lower case letters, thus refuting the idea that using them unduly taxes human perception and communication (Schocker 2009).

Chris's disassociation from AOLers through written stylistics attempts to reify an imagined community of technical participants online who are technically superior to

AOLers and others who are ignorant of online communicative norms. The move also indexically reifies AOLers *en masse* as ignorant of proper norms, whether or not all (or any) AOL participants solely or routinely use capital letters. This dynamic illustrates how everyday conversational practices contain bids to create social subjects within asymmetrical, socio-cultural hierarchical structures (Jacoby and Gonzales 1991; Goodwin 1990). Such bids do not guarantee the establishment of such hierarchies, but rather depend upon their uptake. When Allie types capital letters for emphasis, her input remains uncriticized and thus she appears to be a competent communicative participant. Similarly, Chris criticizes his own contribution to distance himself from those whom he labels as less technically literate than himself. Within the same "discourse domain," the same cultural group, and even the same encounter, a written form is idiosyncratically and ideologically interpreted in ways that situate the participants' relational subjectivity vis-à-vis technical groups.

4.2. *Adjudicating indexes of mirth*

Interlocutors may also argue about how to appropriately emphasize amusement online. In example 2, taken from the "real life" chat channel, a participant, Brian, uses capital letters to show increased emotion, and receives criticism. Brian's criticizer, Jack, attempts to portray Brian's behavior as "giving off" signals of questionable participatory competence.

(2)
1   [Brian] HEH, I like Ray's new title
2   Martin looks at his surroundings.
3   18:34:34
4   [Non-relevant text omitted]
5   18:34:47
6   [Jack] why do you always do heh in caps?
7   [Bert] heh
8   [Brian] because it implies that HEH is funnier then just a regular heh. :P
9   18:35:10
10 [Jack] no, it's just lame
11 [MiningMUD] Hans enters the game.
12 18:35:27
13 [Jack] funnier than a heh is lol
14 [Jacob] I still say this thing is...is amazing!
15 [Gil] Use false words.
16 [Gil] 'Krunk'
17 18:35:35
18 [Brian] fine..
19 [Gil] That's just krunkin' unbelievable!
20 18:35:47
21 [Non-relevant text omitted]
22 18:35:55
23 [Brian] heh, I like Ray's new title

24 [Jack] that's knuts!
25 [Gil] Krunkin' aye!
26 18:36:08
27 [Jack] kanuts, rather :P
28 [Brian] how that, mr. I Have To Be Percise On Internet Lingo?
29 [Jack] that's good.
30 18:36:20
31 [MiningMUD] Leo enters the game.
32 18:36:45
33 [Jouster] hi leo
34 18:36:59
35 [Leo] hola
36 [Jack] heh, you get pissy too easily brian :P
37 18:37:06
38 [Bert] lol
39 18:37:18

In line 1, Brian says, "HEH, I like Ray's new title." Brian, who is not a coder or administrator, complements another player's (Ray's) aesthetics in giving himself a new character title. In line 6, Jack an administrator and participant, asks, "why do you always do heh in caps?" Using the word "always," whether or not true, accuses Brian of habitually invoking this form, which Jack eventually marks as inappropriate. In line 8, Brian's justification is that, "it implies HEH is funnier than just a regular heh" and he uses an emoticon of sticking out his tongue. Brian teasingly responds to and codes Jack's original query as one of criticism rather than sincere, informational curiosity. This interpretation is justified when, in line 10, Jack does not agree with Brian's explanation, but rather counters with the criticism, "no, it's just lame." Jack normatively proclaims in line 13 that "funnier than a heh is lol," where lol signifies "laughs out loud." Note that, as mentioned above, "lol" was sometimes associated with AOLers, and was labeled as an unfortunate type of online interaction.

As seen in example 1, style manuals of legacy use indicated that capital letters could be used to express heightened emotion or emphasis. Yet, Jack eschews this potential aspect of the usage norm and negatively assesses the use of capital letters for "heh" as "lame." Further, he claims that the appropriate escalation of symbolic mirth should proceed from "heh" to "lol." Yet, in the world of possible responses, "lol" is not necessarily the only appropriate escalation after "heh." In this sense, Jack's interpretation is idiosyncratic because he chooses to invoke one aspect of codified legacy norms (that "lol" is often seen as laughing versus the quieter "heh") but ignores the norm that indicates that capital letters may be used for emphasis.

Even if codified manuals consistently proclaimed particular escalations of mirth, adhering to peculiar proscriptions would arguably be sadly restrictive in terms of expressing the self online. Contrary to discourses of youth's inattentiveness to their online communication, the present examples show close readings and normative criticisms of even small forms. Yet to what extent are these proscriptions actual norms? The term "lol" was seen as part of what Cherny (1999) called the "MUD register" or series of common communicative forms used on MUDs in the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet, "lol" has also been culturally associated with the expression of AOL participants,

who are coded as non-technical. It has also been linked to puerile forms of online communication (Tagliamonte and Denis 2008). Still, abbreviations such as "lol" are part of a wider range of online expressions of mirth that have found acceptance in online and mobile communication (Danet 2001: 17, 60). In example 2, Jack codes "lol" as appropriate, even though it has been associated in other contexts (including the same social group and discourse domain) with non-technical or inappropriate forms of communication.

Jack's criticism attempts to create an asymmetrical hierarchy between Brian and himself. Jack mentioned in an interview that he was an older teen, while Brian was a younger teen. Although children and adults tend to argue about similar things, such as "valued resources, controlling others' behavior, and rule violations" (Shantz 1987: 294), scholars note that in disputes, children may strongly support a position that they may not wholly espouse in order to manage "local" concerns (Maynard 1985: 19). Maynard (1985: 20) states that, "children appear to use normative assertions to promote or maintain an immediate social order." Such hierarchical bids become concrete only when they are "ratified" by other participants (Maynard 1985: 20-1).

When Brian uses the "HEH" form, he performs technical affiliation to the idea that this is an acceptable online form in MiningMUD. Jack does not ratify acceptance of this form, and thus challenges Brian's bid at displaying adequate participatory literacy. Jacoby and Gonzales (1991) observed similar relational dynamics in adult discussions about physics in university settings. Jacoby and Gonzales state that during sequences of talk, "interactionally achieved identities are only candidate constitutions of Self and Other until some next interactional move either ratifies or rejects them in some way" (Jacoby and Gonzales 1991: 174).

A criticism is only a bid at creating asymmetrical identities; its success depends upon its interactive uptake. In example 2, Brian both ratifies and interrupts Jack's performance of technical affiliation by: 1) revising his talk in line 23 and asking for approval from Jack in line 28; and 2) by counter-criticizing Jack as being excessively restrictive in adjudicating appropriate communicative forms. In line 23, Brian downgrades his talk from the strongly emotive capital letters to "heh, I like Ray's new title," a revision which apparently ratifies Jack's criticism. Brian performatively colludes with Jack's assessment that Brian used an incorrect form and therefore displays inferior participatory literacy. The displayed sentiment may not map to Brian's internal assessment, but outwardly it appears collisional. McDermott and Tylbor (1995: 218-219) define collusion as a process in which "members of any social order must constantly help each other to posit a particular state of affairs, even when such a state would be in no way at hand without everyone so proceeding." Here, Brian colludes with Jack's characterization of Brian's input as "lame" by revising it and seeking Jack's approval of the revision.

However, Brian's ostensibly approval-seeking question in line 28, "how [sic] that, mr. I Have To Be Precise On Internet Lingo?" also criticizes Jack. Brian's aesthetic framing of his criticism is creative, since his original comment was to comment on a player's *title*. Here, he provides Jack with a new title, one that is critical of Jack's criticism. Naming is often perceived as a trope of power over another; here Brian gives Jack a name that suggests that Jack has violated online norms of conversation by being overly "precise." Hyper correction is a violation of one of netiquette's "core rules" (Shea 1994). Rule 10 states, "Be forgiving of other people's mistakes." Even if Brian

has made a mistake, Jack may have been in error to "correct" it so publicly. Jack displays sensitivity to Brian's criticism by counter-accusing him in line 36 of getting "pissy too easily." In line 38, Bert says "lol" which could be metapragmatically interpreted as providing collusionary solidarity to Jack's correction of Brian in his admonishment to use "lol." Bert's use of "lol" is not coded as problematic, even though it is sometimes associated with AOL participants, who are often labeled as a lower form of technical personae.

The shifting evaluation of the same signifiers ("lol," capital letters used for emphasis, and capital letters in "HEH" being coded by Jack as "lame") within the same cultural group illustrates how idiosyncratic interpretations of ideologies that resemble "netiquette" and other legacy norms of online interaction are called forth in ways that may yield local identity hierarchies. These idiosyncratic interpretations may complicate creative online expression as participants collude to revise even very small communicative signifiers. At the same time, they attempt to ratify expectations about online forms that few or no individuals may actually espouse. People may not really care that capital letters are used for emphasis, but invoking an ideology that the practice is undesirable helps manage local, interactional hierarchies such as those between teenagers Brian and Jack.

Coveillant policing of written expression does not necessarily facilitate online interaction in all cases. On the contrary, it might be argued that disagreements over such small details potentially consume interpersonal, communicative bandwidth in unnecessarily disruptive ways. Rather than ensuring smooth online interaction, such idiosyncratic interpretations of online literacies propose interpersonal hierarchies that promote rather than reduce communicative conflict.

5. Metapragmatic uses of technologized written forms: The case of "l337 speak"

In addition to capital letters and escalations of mirth, other contentious expressions involve "leet speak," also written as "l337 speak," "l33t speak," or "l337 5p34k." In "leet speak," interlocutors substitute letters for similarly visually-appearing numbers and symbols such that, for instance, "A" becomes "4" and "W" becomes "|/\|," among other choices (Ross 2006). A "3" often substitutes for an "E" and a "7" might be read as a "t." In addition to standardized versions of "leet speak,"[3] participants may achieve creative communicative and auditory effects when various chosen symbols are read aloud (Blashki and Nichol 2005: 83).

In prior online cultures, using "leet speak" could index interlocutors as having technical abilities such as programming and hacking skills, as well as cleverness and creativity (Ross 2006). Hackers, who manipulate hardware and software in unanticipated ways, reportedly developed the form to prevent administrators from detecting hacking activities and to subvert automated profanity filters (Carooso 2004). According to the Urban Dictionary (n.d.b), l33t speak "grew and became popular in online games such as Doom in the early 1990's as a way of suggesting that you were a

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[3] For examples of alphabetical translations of "leet speak" see Carooso (2004) and Blashki and Nichol (2005).

hacker (h4x0r), and therefore to be feared. Leet, or 1337, is a short form of 'elite,' commonly used by video gamers to suggest that they are skilled."

Exhibiting a subversive connotation, leet speak resembles so-called "anti-languages," which are secret to outsiders (Halliday 1976). Simple anti-languages principally involve relexicalizations, or substitutions of words that have equivalents in the standardized language. Recent examples are analyzed in case studies of rap music (Olivo 2001) and citizen's band (CB) radio. For instance, truck drivers creatively used relexicalizations in CB slang to speak freely without being deciphered by authority figures such as "smokies" or police officers (Montgomery 1986). More important than secrecy, however, is that an anti-language attempts to realize an alternative social order, and "it implies a preoccupation with the definition and defense of identity through the ritual functioning of the social hierarchy" (Halliday 1976: 576).

In the alternate reality of hackers—who espouse free circulation of information (Raymond 1996: 234)—using leet speak helped create a space whereby information did not face censorship. Although typographic and orthographic substitutions in leet speak may be initially jarring to the outsider, they are not indecipherable, as Thurow (2003) similarly found with regard to abbreviations used in mobile text messaging systems. An anti-language is invoked to establish an "us" versus "them" mentality, in which anti-language users espouse similar communicative ideologies. Non-standard forms of expression are "powerful but also playful means for young people to affirm their social identities by deviating from conventional forms" and thus align themselves to each other and away from authoritarian figures (Thurlow 2003; Androutsopoulos 2000).

However, when outsiders appropriate anti-languages, their usefulness for creating social solidarity may weaken for original users. Interviewees said that "leet speak" was appropriated by lesser technical groups, such as "warez d00dz" (pronounced "wares dudes"), AOL users, and other hacker "wannabes" who used these forms in feeble attempts to signal membership in hacker communities without demonstrating the commensurate technical skills that the form connoted. For instance, "warez d00dz" are defined as people who distribute "warez," which are versions of software for which copyright protection has been removed (Raymond 1996: 478). Distributing warez is considered a lower level technical intervention than complex hacking. This pattern conforms to Heath's (1989: 394) observation that certain "uses or styles achieve a higher valuation than others," and "certain features of these registers, especially vocabulary, will be borrowed by those who esteem both the norms and goals of these professional groups."

Eventually, what was once recognized as a symbol of technical prowess and insider membership became ridiculed by technical enthusiasts who formerly used it. As one journalist put it, "It's been overused—mainly by teenagers trying to win respect among hackers—to the point where it has become a source of amusement or annoyance" (Carooso 2004: 76). Further, "to speak l33t—at least to excess—is to betray the fact that one is not leet" (Carooso 2004: 76). MiningMUD participants who used it might be judged negatively because it was no longer associated with elite technical prowess, but rather, indexed poseurs (Heath 1989: 395).

"Leet speak" is not a standardized code. Although there are regular substitutions, it involves creativity and freedom, both to write and read it (Carooso 2004). It requires human processing bandwidth to parse and interpret, activities which may tax some participants. Some online interlocutors invoke standards of practice in online written

ideologies that stress being kind to a reader. These ideas invoke what Grice (1999: 80) would characterize as the maxim of "manner" in which an interlocutor should "execute his performance with reasonable dispatch." A line of chat filled with numbers and creative symbols may violate this maxim and irritate interlocutors, as occurs below. In example 3, two conversations are concurrent. One is on the "Chat" or MUD-wide communication channel. The other is on the MUD's "Newbie" channel which was reserved for new players or "newbies" to seek help and share information. Most participants simultaneously monitored several chat channels, although experienced players might turn off the Newbie channel.

(3)
1   Chat: [Melinda] bai bai ;)
2   Melinda sadly returns to real life.
3   [MiningMUD] Melinda left the game.
4   [Non-relevant text omitted]
5   Chat: [Jason] L8R, Melinda
6   Newbie: Quinton says: N 3 1 g0+ n 3 /\/4|23z(?)
7   Newbie Quinton laughs
8   Earth standard time: Sun Jul 25 01:29:22 [1999] PST
9   Newbie: Henry scratches his head.
10   Newbie: Allie says: stop it with the warez
11   Newbie: Darius says: MUAHAHAHAHHAHAA
12   Newbie: Quinton loves to make fun of aol
13   Newbie: Henry ponders whats going on.
14   Newbie: Henry says: LOL! aol

In line 6, Quinton asks, "N 3 1 g0+ n 3 /\/4|23z(?)" and then he "laughs" in line 7. One interpretation of Quinton's text when read aloud is, "Anyone got any warez?" which is written in "leet speak." The question asks if anyone attending to the channel has any "warez" or pirated software that has been stripped of its copyright protection. In line 9, Henry "scratches his head" which arguably signals that Quinton's entry is difficult to interpret. In line 10, Allie, who is not an administrator in the game, admonishes Quinton to "stop it with the warez" indicating that she recognizes but does not appreciate his use of "warez" forms of written expression. In line 12, Quinton says he "loves to make fun of aol" which retroactively links this form of communication to AOL users, whom he enjoys mocking.

Quinton's move may be interpreted as indexing hacker culture, "warez d00dz", AOL users, or even simply being playful with an online medium, much the way Danet (2001) describes for creatively experimenting with the visual possibilities of online text. Yet, Allie criticizes this form and issues a bald directive that Quinton cease using it. Playfulness, expressed in "l33t speak" is not valued and is discouraged in this encounter. Allie may be criticizing Quinton for invoking lower-technical forms of expression, for being "annoying" and using a hard to read form on the Newbie channel, or for a combination of grievances. Notably, after he has been admonished, Quinton says in line 12 that he "loves" to "make fun" of AOL." He accounts for his behavior by retroactively encoding it as a metapragmatic parody of the written literacies of a less technical "other."

In line 14, Henry colludes in the parody by saying, "LOL! aol" which associates "LOL" as a form used by non-technical participants, specifically AOL users. By mocking AOLers in line 14, Henry also performs technical affiliation by attempting to write himself into a group that is technically superior to those that would use forms such as "leet speak" and "LOL." Yet, "lol" is a standard abbreviation in MUDs (Cherny 1999) and in online communication in general. Henry's statement works on a double level, to straightforwardly express amusement (by "laughing at" AOL users) and also metapragmatically to mock those who use the form "LOL" itself (in capital letters) such as AOLers. This mocking usage contrasts with Jack's admonishments in the same community in which "lol" was coded as the appropriate mirth-indexing escalation from "heh." Within the same community, and in the same line of text, "lol" is interpreted both as acceptable to "us" and as associated with "them" or AOLers as people less technical than the present interlocutors.

Ideologies of written language not only change over time, but are idiosyncratically interpreted in the same discourse domain. What was once seen as a secret technical code in the form of "leet speak" and lauded for its *illegibility* to the casual reader was interpreted on MiningMUD as simply "annoying" and carried an association with "wannabes" from warez and AOL groups who had insufficient skills to participate adequately in technical milieus. Of course, empirical research would be required in warez and other communities to understand their self-perceived level of technical abilities.

Allie admonishes Quinton's use of "warez" speak, and sets up a local norm such that it arguably would have been difficult for Quinton to continue to use it. The admonishment curtails Quinton's expressive freedom, even metapragmatically, in his parody of the "leet speak" form. Interestingly, in the immediately prior entries on the other chat channel, note that other participants engaged in typographic and orthographic word play. In line 1, Melinda, who was at the time a MiningMUD coder, says, "bai bai" for "bye bye" and adds a winking emoticon. In line 5, Jason (who was not a coder at this time but later became one) mirrors her orthographic word play with the standard expression "L8R" for "later," as in "see you later." Perhaps Quinton was inspired by their word play. Although Melinda and Jason are not chastised, Quinton's version, which was more complex and included a reference to "warez" dudes receives admonishment and censorship.

Although written ideologies must be historicized, what accounts for the multiple usages and interpretations in the same domain? One interpretation involves examining the channels on which their entries appear. Note that Quinton makes his move on the "Newbies" line, a MUD-wide channel set up to assist new players. Perhaps Allie was sensitive about odd forms appearing on a chat line reserved for new players. A second explanation for the inconsistency of admonishment may be found in the fact that Melinda and Jason use more widely-familiar, playful forms in very sparing ways. A third interpretation, which is not inconsistent with the first two, is that Quinton uses the form in a way that explicitly associates it with a group considered as technically inferior by many computer technologists. Once a playful form becomes associated with "them," criticisms and admonishments may have less to do with Gricean maxims of readability than with identity negotiations. As all three examples show, even within the same discourse domain, the same cultural group, and sometimes even within the same

interaction, ideologies may be idiosyncratically used and interpreted to craft public, technical, and sometimes asymmetrical identities of participatory, online competence.

6. Conclusion

The analysis suggests a complex relationship to Blommaert's (2004: 659) assertion that literacies such as slangs "are primarily local," even though they also "connect with transnational groups or networks in which ingredients of slang have high value and carry enormous prestige." Indexing their locality is the fact that written forms and playful typologies may be received differently across online groups. Yet, when participants criticize or parody such forms, they are referencing ideologies of writing and trying to situate their identities in favorable hierarchical positions within larger imagined communities of technologists. Through the act of evaluation, they also reify such technical communities. The literacies discussed above are not limited to the MUD, but are rather transnational literacies associated with technologists who display affiliation to tokens of technical expertise and related techno-cultural, communicative values.

However, ideologies can exhibit a micro-local character when they are idiosyncratically invoked and interpreted differently within the same encounter. Calling forth various ideologies with different cultural connotations can perpetuate them even though they might not receive strong support if participants interrogated them too closely. Although participatory ideologies are often justified as increasing smooth communication, in some cases, they may do just the opposite. They may cause conflict about the necessity of their implementation and their restrictive communicative effects. These findings suggest the need for scholarly examination of how individuals engage in "coveillance" with online peers in the same domain to monitor and evaluate each other's linguistic performance. Contrary to discourses that suggest that age and technologized forms of communication yield inattentiveness to written forms, the present case showed that coveillance is frequent and participants evaluate even minute written forms.

When literacies are contested between individuals, access to communicative resources may be threatened, as when people self-censor, receive criticism, or may have their speaking rights and privileges compromised online. Identity negotiations rooted in normative literacy debates may challenge the possibilities for creativity and self-expression in participatory media spaces. Access to communicative rights vary on a spectrum from, say, being banned from a chat channel, to more subtle forms, such as ignoring a participant's contribution. Amid online negotiations of technical identity, whither creativity? What are the participatory limits of personal creativity in particular groups and who benefits from these limits?

Blommaert (2004) rightly contends that evaluation of social meanings of written literacies should ask "where" are they geographically situated? Scholars further assert that it is important to ask "when" do these evaluations take place (Irvine 2004)? The present study extends these questions by encouraging scholars to ask, "what" are the technical affiliations of the evaluators? Variables such as age (Thurlow 2003), ethnicity, gender, and class have received primary attention in studies of written ideologies, such as orthographies (Androutsopoulos 2000). Yet, technologies of the word call for

attention to how performances of affiliation to technical groups influence asymmetrical and collusionary communicative dynamics. This is especially important in digital environments, which are becoming the nexus of everyday, distributed social life. Interactional collusions may reify indifferently-adopted ideologies that may constrain creativity in environments that technically offer a broad palette of self-expressive forms.

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