

A Global Community or Gazing into the Abyss: Online Conversation and the Changing Nature of *Parole*

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In this modern world of technology, the internet has become a part of daily life. It is now possible to check your email, chat with friends, and scan the headlines of your favorite newspapers and magazines online. You can even conduct business and purchase household necessities, such as groceries, from your computer without ever leaving your home. Through instant messages many people communicate in ever shortening code, such as "lol" for laugh out loud and "bff" for best friends forever. Technology has made possible daily communication between people living in areas around the world. However, it is important to realize that online communication comes with both advantages and costs. In this modern age of faceless *parole* and cyberspace communities, are you participating in a global community or gazing into the abyss of a computer screen? This paper will explore the changing nature of communication with the advent of the internet. Specifically, it will argue that the type of online communication known as "online chat" is fundamentally separated from reality and, therefore, forms a new type of communication; a form of communication that has specific benefits and costs for both individuals and society as a whole. In addition, this paper will put forth the argument that because online chat is divorced from reality, it does not take the place of traditional *parole*.

This paper focuses on online conversation (or online chat) instead of email because online chat and email serve two different functions. Email is a new form of written correspondence that is taking the place of the letter. It is used to conduct business, to transmit messages via text, and, in the case of personal emails, to reinforce existing relationships. In contrast, online conversation is taking the place of face to face interactions; it is taking the place of speech acts that serve fundamentally different purposes than written communication, as we will explore later. Many people are forming relationships completely through the medium of the internet and, in particular, through online chat. In contrast to the evolution of written correspondence to email, a great deal is being lost with the shift from in person conversation to online conversation. It is for this reason that the focus of this paper is on online chat rather than on other forms of internet communication. In order to fully understand the ramifications of this shift, it is imperative to explore this developing trend in personal communication.

Now, the first question that must be answered is this: "what is online chat?" *The Encyclopedia of Computer Science* defines online conversation as,

...communication between two or more participants in which there is little or no perceived delay between sending a message and it being received and read. Whereas electronic mail may be compared to sending or receiving a letter by post, online communications are very much like conversations carried out in person or on a telephone.¹

Unlike face to face or telephone conversations, online chat relies almost exclusively upon the exchange of written language between "communicating" partners. However, language is only one method (and/or aspect) of human communication. With the advent of online chat, the nature of both conversation and language use has been changing. Therefore, in order to fully explore these changes and their possible consequences, the two key terms "language" and "communication" must be defined.

The first entry for language in the *Webster's Dictionary* reads as follows, "The expression and communication of emotions or ideas between human beings by means of speech, either written or spoken."² Language, then, is a means of communicating ideas and emotions that can be broken down into two broad categories: spoken language and written language. Both of these categories share the common structure of language: they both have a grammar and they are both made up of arbitrary signs. These signs (or words) are, themselves, made up of two components: the signifier, which is the actual word (spoken and/or written), and the signified, which is the concept that the word represents.³

However, there are marked differences between written and spoken language. Spoken language is innate (acquired early in life during a critical developmental period) but written language must be learned.⁴ Written language is a type of distilled spoken language that is, usually, divorced from the time and place of writing and is made up entirely of symbols that must be interpreted by the reader. On the other hand, communication with the spoken word has classically been viewed as a dynamic, social activity that takes place at a particular time and place.⁵ Saussure focused on the oral transmission and interpretation of signs but now it is understood that a speech act incorporates more this. In this paper, the definition of *parole* will be expanded to incorporate the many forms of communication that take place during an act of spoken conversation.

If spoken language is only one means of communication during *parole*, then the key term "communication" must be further defined in order for you to fully understand the changes that are taking place to language and communication in online chat. The first entry for "communication" in the *Webster's Dictionary* reads, "The act of communicating; exchange of ideas, conveyance of information, etc."⁶ Communication is, therefore, the transmission of information to another person. It is not linked solely to language but, rather, can be accomplished by many means. The definition of communication falls in line with the conception of *parole* as a dynamic exchange of information with another person.

In conversation, spoken language is only one method of communicating; you also convey messages through nonverbal communication, such as body language, touch, and eye contact. Even in telephone conversations, a great deal of information is relayed through the pauses in speech and in the tone of voice. "When individuals speak, they do not normally confine themselves to the mere emission of speech sounds. Because speaking usually involves at least two parties in sight of each other, a great deal of meaning is conveyed by facial expression, tone of voice, and movements and postures of the whole body but especially of the hands."⁷ These methods of transferring information are lost when thoughts are expressed solely through written language. *Parole* is, therefore, a dynamic, social activity, that incorporates both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication, which takes place at a particular time and place.

Online chat enables people from all over the world to communicate and share their thoughts and ideas. It is an amazing development in communication and opens up a world of possibilities. However, the expansion of our communication horizon has come with some very hefty costs. Online chat has taken the dynamic, social activity of *parole*, which includes both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication, and distilled it into the most symbolic form of language (i.e. the written form) in order to facilitate easy transfer. It is *parole* that has been divorced from the nonverbal aspects of communication that are inherent to speech acts.

Because we communicate in online chat by using written language, we are now forced to rely on only one form of data transmission and, thus, we have greatly increased the chances of error in data transmission. Conversation has been distilled into a unique written form of language that is no longer divorced from the time of writing. However, just as the written word is usually separated from the person that wrote it, online chat is also separated from the people who are participating in the online speech act. This is because the nonverbal connection that forms between speakers engaged in *parole* is lost. In this way, online chat can be treated as a kind of symbolic fetishism; this is a term that is developed from Marx's understanding of commodity fetishism and will be explored below.

Marx theorized that the bourgeois treated the commodity as a fetish; that they treated commodities as if they were neutral objects directly relating to other commodities, independent from the human interactions that created them.⁸ This is known as commodity fetishism. The abstraction of commodities destroys the link between the producers of the commodities and the items that they produce because the "use-value" (the usefulness of an object that points back to human need) is entirely separated from the "exchange-value" (the value of a commodity in the marketplace). In the same way, conversation is being separated from the people who produce it through the use of online chat. Just like commodities, online conversation is separated from the people and from the reality that creates and sustains online conversation. Thus, the true social value of communication is at least partially lost in online chat. Just as the abstraction of commodities affects society and the people within that society, so does the abstraction of *parole* because a healthy society relies on communication and a connection to reality in order to function.

Symbolic fetishism, then, can be understood as the separation of the physical person (i.e. the nonverbal aspects of *parole* and/or reality) from the symbolic form of language that facilitates online chat. When you have this separation, you in effect disconnect the person from the speech act. Thus, in online chat, speech acts relate to other speech acts in independence of the humans that sustain the conversations. And just as Marx thought that, "whatever makes a product a commodity goes back to human needs, desires, and practices", is also true of language; whatever makes language communication "goes back to human needs, desires, and practices."⁹ And, as social animals, a fundamental need, desire, and practice of human beings is connecting to others.

One way this connection is formed is by engaging in dynamic communication that takes place on many levels and incorporates both verbal and nonverbal aspects; this human connection coupled with the conveying of information is communication's "use value". When you engage in online chat, you divorce yourself from the reality and the connection that is conferred by nonverbal forms of

communication; you are communicating but that communication is, in effect, divorced from your body, divorced from the material, divorced from the real. It does not facilitate a full connection but only a connection on the symbolic level. The human aspect that makes communication truly meaningful has become divorced from the act of communicating. Your ability to communicate is limited by the constraints of online chat.

Therefore, while participating in online chat, people engage in *parole* but they never fully engage in *parole*. A connection is made between the people participating in online conversations but it is never a full connection, it is unfulfilling. In addition, people are now able to act upon their desires without moral constraint because they no longer have a human connection to the other that is facilitated by nonverbal components of communication. The other has become a virtual partner, purely symbolic, separated, real but unreal, because language has been separated from the real. Slavoj Žižek writes this about cyberspace in his book on reading Lacan, "because we are not directly interacting with real people, nobody is harassed and we are free to unleash our dirtiest fantasies."¹⁰

When engaging in online chat, you are able to act out your desires without direct consequences; in essence, you are able to remake who you are, to remake the self, and to convey this virtual self to the other. You are free to represent yourself in any way that you wish. You can redefine gender, race, age, class, occupation, and other factors of identity that cannot be easily changed in real life. However, because there is a lack of connection to the real, online chat has "exchange value" but has been divorced from true "use value". You have no idea what is real and what is not, what is true and what is false; the line between reality and fantasy has been blurred. Online *parole* is engaged in (exchanged) throughout the internet with others but it is hollow compared to *parole* that is attached to the real, *parole* with "use value", *parole* that builds and sustains connections between people within traditional communities. This is because *parole* is no longer connected to reality. It is *parole* but it is not.

Acts of online conversation, therefore, can be understood as a form of "*unparole*." Slavoj Žižek explains Kant's distinction between negative and indefinite judgments as follows, "In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant introduced a key distinction between negative and indefinite judgment: the positive statement 'the soul is mortal' can be negated in two ways. We can either deny a predicate ('the soul is not mortal'), or affirm a non-predicate ('the soul is non-mortal')."¹¹ The indefinite judgment opens up a way to understand the type of communication that is practiced online. The statement, "Online chat is real" can be negated by affirming a non-predicate, "Online chat is unreal". And the statement, "Online chat is *parole*", can be negated by affirming a non-predicate, "Online chat is *unparole*". It is in this way that we can have a better understanding of acts of *parole* online.

Online chat, therefore, is an act of *parole* that is neither *parole* nor *not parole* but *unparole*. It is a speech act that is neither real nor not-real but unreal. The dynamic social activity of *parole* that includes both verbal and nonverbal communication has become divorced from reality but not fully, because it is still an act but a hollow act with no or little truth value, and is, therefore, unreal; It is *parole* that has aspects of true *parole* and yet is divorced from the human connection that is the use value of *parole* and is a hollow form of communication; it is *unparole* separated from reality and, therefore, from the very context that gives it

meaning. This is because, in addition to the transferring of information, speech acts also perform other functions including: the social functions mentioned above, the creation of personal identity, and the fulfillment of desires.

Language is not passive; in both the written form and the verbal form, it is used to do things and it has effects upon others and upon the world in which we live. "You can use language to make promises, lay bets, issue warnings, christen boats, place names in nominations, offer congratulations, or swear testimony."¹² In fact, many philosophers, such as Ricoeur and Kristeva, have even pointed to the great importance of language in the creation of personal identity.¹³ And for language to have such an effect upon the self, others, and the world, it must be rooted in reality.

Both written language and *parole* are rooted in the real. It is in the real world that you make promises, have conversations, and swear testimony. It is, usually, in reference to the real world that you write emails and letters. Written language, as a form of distilled speech, is used to connect with others but not as deeply as with *parole* (because speech acts are dynamic and written language is not) but both forms of communication are still rooted in reality. In fact, when online chat is used as a way to connect with loved ones and friends, it is not fully divorced from the real world and, therefore, is not a form of *unparole* because the speech act is rooted in reality; it simply becomes a dynamic form of letter writing that incorporates aspects of *parole*. It is still limited by its lack of nonverbal aspects but rooted in reality never the less. And just like with letter writing, online chat used in this way cannot fully take the place of face to face conversation because *parole* provides the greatest connection possible when communicating. The written form of language is most often used to reinforce personal relationships, but *parole* is the basic way that we form new and lasting connections, connections that go deeper than language.

It is through mediums of expression connected to reality that you touch others. It is through language and both verbal and nonverbal communication that you become a part of each other's lives; it is how you participate in society and grow as individuals. In *First Alcibiades*, Socrates argues that "an eye sees itself best by seeing its reflection in the eye of another (132C-133C), and this is applied to our knowledge of ourselves."¹⁴ *Parole*, with its deep ties to reality, performs important functions in daily life and human society. It connects you to the other and, at the same time, enables you to understand yourself through the eyes of the other. It is through the other and engaging in *parole* with the other, that you come to understand who you are. It is through *parole* and the bonds that *parole* creates that people come to form communities. It is by seeing yourself in the eyes of the other that you come to have compassion and empathy.

Online chat has become a part of daily life for many people around the world and it may have many advantages and serve many uses in modern society. However, it is precisely because of this that it is important to understand the costs and limitations that these advantages come with. Online chat has enabled you to have conversations with people from around the world but, by increasing your communication horizon, it has also separated the use-value from the exchange-value of the speech act. It is important to realize that online chat has been divorced from reality and, therefore, cannot take the place of traditional *parole*. So much is being lost when you form relationships completely over the internet and have

conversations while staring into a computer screen rather than into the eyes of another. In this modern age of faceless *parole* and cyberspace communities, are you participating in a global community or gazing into the abyss of a computer screen? That is a question that you must answer for yourself. However, the next time you have a conversation with someone over the internet, ask yourself if this exchange is truly significant or if your time would be better spent, like Socrates, engaging in meaningful "face to face" *parole* with others in your community.□

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¹ "ONLINE CONVERSATION", *Encyclopedia of Computer Science*, <http://www.credoreference.com.navigator-wcupa.passhe.edu/entry/5881159> (accessed October 17, 2007).

² Victoria Neufeldt and Andrew N. Sparks, *Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 280.

³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1972), p. 115.

⁴ Victoria Fromkin et al., *An Introduction to Language* (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), p. 356.

⁵ Yousif Elhindi, "Ferdinand De Saussure," in *Key Thinkers in Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Siobhan Chapman and Christopher Routledge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 244.

⁶ Fromkin, p. 280.

⁷ "Language," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-27166> (accessed October 17, 2007).

⁸ Lambert Zuidervaart, "Theodor W. Adorno," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2007 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2007/entries/adorno/> (accessed October 17, 2007).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Slavoj Zizek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), p. 100.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹² Fromkin, p. 207.

¹³ See Paul Ricoeur's book, *One Self as Another*, and Julia Kristeva's book, *Tales of Love*.

¹⁴ Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 230.