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Title of submission: Is Electronic Language Exerting an Influence? A Comparison of Textual Profiles from Student Newspaper Articles

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Abstract of paper:

The language of email, and electronic language in general, has undergone rapid development with the increasing pervasiveness of computer technology. Some researchers have observed the similarities between the development of contact languages and the development of electronic language in terms of a 'creole' of traditional speech and writing. One of Naomi Baron's (2000) predictions for the future development of electronic language, based on precedented contact language research, suggests that electronic language might manifest a direct influence on the linguistic characteristics of the more traditional modes. The possibility that this influence might have begun to be realized at a lexico-grammatical level in writing forms the hypothesis for this exploratory study.

Taking press reportage in an American university newspaper as a likely domain to show the effects of this influence, two matched sample datasets were selected from the beginning and end of a ten-year period, during which time computer use and electronic language has undergone extensive growth and development. Using an analytical methodology focusing on co-occurrence patterns in traditional grammatical and lexical features, this study profiled the datasets across three of Douglas Biber's (1988) six textual dimensions, on a continuum between the two poles of 'spoken-ness' and 'written-ness'. Comparisons were drawn with pre-established mean profiles of newspaper articles and general electronic language. Statistical testing was also used to test for significant differences.

The results did not confirm that the texts were assuming more characteristics of electronic language over time, and were instead somewhat conflicting. The profile differences in the most prominent dimension were marginal, and although there were some positive statistical test results, these suggested non-unified movements towards both poles of the continuum. It is possible that this experiment was conducted too early in the overall development of electronic language. Alternatively, a broader-based experiment may be required, using all of Biber's textual dimensions and a cross-generic sample of comparative texts. These results indicate that the sample texts are indeed

demonstrating some signs of change at a grammatical level, but the changes are inconsistent with predictions, and beyond the parameters of this study.