Can u help me plz?? Cyberlanguage Accommodation in Virtual Reference Conversations

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ABSTRACT
Virtual reference services (VRS), often using instant messaging technology, are convenient for users and allow libraries to expand their patron base and the services they provide. Instant messaging is one of several new media that seem to encourage the production of cyberlanguage—nonstandard English replete with abbreviations of all kinds and surrogate face-to-face cues such as emoticons. Research suggests one way librarians can increase patron satisfaction, and thus use of services, is to speak the patron’s language. Using communication accommodation theory, which includes the notions of convergence (speaking another’s language) and divergence (divorcing one’s speech from another), this research seeks to uncover accommodative tendencies of librarians when faced with patron use of cyberlanguage. The data consists of 30 VRS conversations from Oregon’s statewide service, L-net, logged between August 2010 and February 2011. Frequency of cyberlanguage use by both patrons and librarians was obtained and compared via linear regression. Results do not support convergence but instead suggest that future work explore the possibility of divergence.

Keywords
Virtual reference service, chat reference, instant messaging, computer-mediated communication, cyberlanguage, speech accommodation.

INTRODUCTION
The Internet prompted new approaches to information seeking and use by offering a profusion of information easily sought and shared around the globe. Information seeking transitioned from a human-mediated, localized task, where one visits a nearby library or friend for assistance, to a diffused process allowing exploration of global information via an electronic intermediary. If searching on Google is such a snap, why bother with a trip to the library?

Librarians are trained to help users resolve their information needs. Yet because of the ease and convenience of using the Internet from a comfortable chair in your own personal environment, many users may remain oblivious to the kind of quality help and resources available to them through their local library (OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005).

Harnessing the power of the Internet, libraries have instituted virtual reference services (VRS), which enable library patrons to receive help with information queries online. Currently, many VRS employ instant messaging (IM) technology that allows two interlocutors to converse synchronously, via text, while at a distance from each other.

Online conversational media, such as IM, chat, and text messaging, have been shown to host a new variety of English, which will be referred to hereafter as cyberlanguage. To redress the limitations of these media, which omit face-to-face (FTF) cues and limit the length of individual messages, users reshape English into an abbreviated form that includes the creation of surrogate FTF cues. Acronyms, shortenings, emoticons, and onomatopoeic expression, for example, abound in cyberlanguage (Crystal, 2006).

A majority of studies on VRS focus on specific implementations and evaluations of the service while providing recommendations for improvement (Pomerantz, 2005). Some work suggests that the affective dimension of reference encounters plays a significant role in patron satisfaction (Desai, 2003; Durrance, 1989; Fagan & Desai, 2003; Nilsen, 2004). Recommendations for strengthening this dimension encourage librarians to “speak the patron’s language” (Fagan & Desai, 2003, p. 132) which requires knowledge of and facility with cyberlanguage.

Pomerantz (2005) encourages the research community to extend studies to other questions that have yet to be pursued, such as how the medium used affects the types of questions the users ask. This study aims to address a question that, to the author’s knowledge, has yet to be addressed—a question concerned with uncovering the degree to which librarians accommodate their speech to patrons. Accommodation theory suggests that when interlocutors wish to modify the social aspects of the conversation, they alter their speech to either reflect back
their partner’s language (when desiring social closeness) or divorce their speech from their partner’s (when desiring social distance) (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). Through lexical analysis, the frequencies with which patrons and librarians use cyberlanguage were obtained and then compared to determine if there were any relationship between a patron’s use of cyberlanguage and a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage—in other words, to determine if accommodative tendencies were present. The research question for this study is: To what extent is a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage associated with a patron’s use of cyberlanguage?

BACKGROUND

The Challenge of the Internet on Reference

When VRS were first introduced in the mid 1990s, they were conducted over email (Janes, 2002a), an asynchronous medium unequipped to offer patrons immediate, real-time responses to their queries. Later VRS moved to online forms, also asynchronous, until eventually libraries began to experiment with synchronous technologies such as instant messaging (IM) (Janes, 2002a).

The Internet led to a shift in thinking about information seeking and use. In a world where Google is often the preferred method for resolving information needs (Connaway, Radford, Dickey, De Angelis Williams, & Confer, 2008; OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005; Radford & Connaway, 2007), being able to position itself on the Internet may bolster a library’s relevance. Furthermore, research from Pew Research Center (2005) and others indicates increases in Internet use over time. Radford and Connaway (2007, pp. 3-4) explain that “screenagers” (12-18 year-olds of the Millennial generation) “are at home in instant messaging and chat environments to a degree unmatched by preceding generations.” Meeting patrons on their own turf may strengthen a library’s presence and help to advertise what librarians can do for information-seeking users.

However, transitioning from years of FTF interaction to a mode of engagement where conversational moves are sometimes unclear, nonverbal signals are missing, and language often deviates from more customary forms of English poses certain challenges. “One of the biggest challenges in providing reference services in real-time is learning to communicate effectively with remote users and to translate the interpersonal skills used at the physical reference desk into the virtual environment” (Ronan, 2003, p. 43). Fagan and Desai (2003, p.124) suggest that librarians will need to learn “how to use the new medium to its fullest potential and overcome its inherent weaknesses with a population that is already quite comfortable communicating online.” Following these suggestions requires librarians to reinvent themselves online—something for which there are no clear guidelines.

Research on VRS


Other related work includes analyses of patron and librarian attitudes toward and experiences with information seeking and VRS. Radford and Connaway (2007) held three focus groups and examined 431 transcripts, logged between July 2004 and November 2006, to assess the attitudes and needs of “screenagers.” They believe an understanding of the patron base is important to promoting successful reference encounters. Their findings reveal that some “screenagers” trust Google more than a librarian and that they share both a lack of confidence in librarians’ technical abilities and a concern that librarians won’t care or understand their needs.

In a later study, Connaway et al. (2008) compared the attitudes and tendencies of Millennials and Baby Boomers at a Midwestern university. Older Millennials (undergraduates and graduate students) exhibited similar attitudes to “screenagers,” including a preference for Google. They were shown to use more cyberlanguage features and more informal speech than Baby Boomer faculty, who preferred libraries first and Google second.

At public and university libraries in Canada, Nilsen (2004) compared patron perceptions of VRS and the physical reference desk. She concluded that patron satisfaction was due not only to the quality of the answer but also to factors such as how well the patron felt he was treated by the librarian. Janes (2002b) surveyed 648 public and academic librarians on their experiences and attitudes toward using technology in reference. He found that academic libraries are more likely to employ technology for reference and that librarians who had used VRS in the past week, or who had more experience with the medium, were more likely to have a positive attitude about VRS. Librarians believe that VRS makes “reference work more accessible, more interesting, and more challenging” (Janes, 2002b, p. 560).

Analyses of the communication and content of online reference conversations are also pursued. Desai (2003) analyzed 140 university library VRS conversations that were logged from mid-September to mid-October 2001 and surveyed 44 patrons. She categorized conversations by the types of questions asked and evaluated discourse-level features such as greetings and closings. From these analyses she concludes that showing interest in a patron’s need is important to providing excellent service, but this is hard to do online because FTF cues are missing. She believes there
are ways to work around this, which include using an informal style and surrogates for missing FTF cues, such as emoticons to signify facial expression and emotive stance.

Radford (2006) evaluated the socioemotive properties of VRS transcripts submitted for an award and transcripts from a statewide service, and then classified conversations according to the types of interpersonal communicative strategies used. She believes that online communication isn’t necessarily less personal than FTF communication and that interlocutors can and do engage in conversation-personalizing strategies such as rapport-building, deference, respect-giving, face-saving moves, and compensation for the lack of FTF cues (which include use of cyberlanguage).

Fagan and Desai (2003) examined transcripts from a university VRS to uncover successful communication strategies. Similar to Radford (2006), Fagan and Desai (2003, p. 125) claim that personalized communication, cordiality, and showing interest can be achieved online, “but the cues are different.” They indicate that cyberlanguage features such as emoticons and punctuation duplication can help to personalize the conversation as well as introduce a level of “informality and fun in what could be a sterile medium” (Fagan & Desai, 2003, p. 130). This helps to make the librarian seem more approachable and less robotic. “Just as poor face-to-face reference can turn patrons off of asking for help, good instant messaging reference can turn them on to an unfamiliar library service” (Fagan & Desai, 2003, p. 154).

Considering politeness theory in speech, Westbrook (2007) examined the role of formality markers (such as standard capitalization and complete sentences) in 402 VRS conversations during the 2004–2005 academic school year at a public university. Formality markers conveyed power in the conversations, “taking the lead” as it were; and “generally speaking, library staff ‘took the lead’ in the exchanges,” often adjusting their level of formality to that of the patron, but usually maintaining a level of formality a notch higher (Westbrook, 2007, p. 649).

**IM and Cyberlanguage**

Instant messaging is a synchronous medium whereby two interlocutors communicate by typing out their responses on separate transmission lines. Synchronous media, such as chat (which allows for more than two interlocutors at a time) and IM, are thought to mimic the pace and spontaneity of FTF speech (Werry, 1996). Like FTF speech, less planning and revision go into IM messages, so disfluencies are common and tone tends to be informal. Unlike FTF speech, IM does not require co-location of interlocutors and interlocutors may converse anonymously using pseudonyms. Because of these conditions, visual and aural FTF signals are missing. While the lack of FTF cues could be seen as a drawback to the medium, Walther, Loh, and Granka (2005) claim that it is not a hindrance because users can and do compensate linguistically through the use of surrogate FTF cues such as emoticons.

Because IM and chat media often restrict the character length of messages, content tends be brief (Crystal, 2006) and turns (complete thoughts contributed to the conversation by interlocutors) may carry over multiple transmission lines (Cherny, 1999). Furthermore, turns are often interrupted and can give IM and chat a chaotic appearance (Crystal, 2006; Herring, 2002). IM is seen as less interruptive than dropping in on someone, is considered to afford more equal control of the conversation, and is thought to be well-suited to quick questions (Nardi, Whittaker, & Bradner, 2000).

Cyberlanguage, used in online conversational media such as IM, chat, and text messaging, is a refashioning of general English into “abbreviated and often pictographic representations of concepts where layers of meaning are packed into a few simple keystrokes” (Christopherson, 2010, p. 1). It is employed to suit the constraints of the medium and the situational aspects of the conversation, and as such is characterized by a set of features that help interlocutors save time, reduce effort, redress the lack of FTF cues, and manage online discourse. While many of the cyberlanguage features are ages old (Crystal, 2008), in no other written communication situations are they used in such abundance.

Specific cyberlanguage features include acronyms, shortenings (removal of syllables from the word, e.g. **prob** for **problem**), clippings (removal of the last letter of word, e.g. **goin** for **going**), vowel and consonant contraction (removal of vowels or consonants, e.g. **pls** for **please**), emoticons, onomatopoeic expression (e.g. **moo**), letter duplication (e.g. **nooooooo**), punctuation duplication (e.g. **yes!!!!!**), using punctuation to symbolize repairs (e.g. **great to repair gerat**), using all caps for emphasis or shouting (e.g. **WHAT are you saying?**), using dashes or other punctuation to indicate breaks in utterances, omission of punctuation (**im for I’m**), letter or number homophones (e.g. **u** for **you**, **2** for **to**), single letter forms (e.g. **r** for **ready**), symbolic substitution (substituting non-alphabetical characters for larger concepts, e.g. **?** to signify confusion), and more (Baron, 2008; Cherny, 1999; Christopherson, 2010; Crystal, 2006, 2008).

Studies of cyberlanguage include linguistic analysis of the language itself including identification of lexical features (Cherny 1999; Werry, 1996), evaluation of play and performative aspects of the language (Cherny 1999; Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, & Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997; Werry, 1996), descriptions of discourse level features such as turn-taking (Collister, 2008), and evaluation of social aspects surrounding the language’s use (Smith, 2006; Nardi et al., 2000). Both work and recreational contexts are explored. Methods usually involve content analysis, discourse analysis, and/or lexical analysis of collected transcripts.
Communication Accommodation Theory at the Intersection of VRS and Cyberlanguage

The introduction of VRS has offered librarians the opportunity to expand and reconceptualize some of their duties and adapt their communication strategies accordingly. This may involve becoming facile with the technology, learning to adapt FTF techniques to a medium that precludes the use of FTF signals, and understanding and using a language that deviates from traditional forms of writing. Additionally, with some patrons preferring Google over a librarian and holding negative perceptions of librarians (Radford & Connaway, 2007) or viewing a trip to the library as “tedious” (OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005, Section 1, p. 14), librarians may be faced with the additional challenges of making themselves and their services relevant, approachable, and sought after. To address these challenges and increase patron satisfaction, researchers like Fagan and Desai (2003) and Radford (2006) suggest that librarians use communication strategies that build rapport and establish good relations, personalize the conversation, and confirm their interest and engagement with the patron and his problem. Such communication strategies can include knowledge and employment of cyberlanguage features. “Online librarians need to be receptive to patrons’ chosen language, style, and spelling” and be able to speak the patrons’ language (Fagan & Desai, 2003, p. 141). This receptivity to another’s language and response in kind is indicative of the phenomenon of communication accommodation.

Communication accommodation theory suggests that when interlocutors wish to narrow the social distance between themselves through mutual identification, they will “adapt to each other’s communication behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic-prosodic-nonverbal features” (Giles et al., 1991, p. 7). This is called convergence. Librarians in Radford’s (2006) study who mirrored patrons’ use of cyberlanguage could be seen as converging toward the patron. When an interlocutor converges, he or she may be viewed in a favorable light, possibly seen as more supportive, more understandable, and more personally involved in the conversation (Giles et al., 1991). Divergence is when interlocutors “accentuate speech and nonverbal differences between themselves and others” in order to distance themselves from their conversation partners (Giles, et al., 1991, p. 8). When an interlocutor diverges, he or she may be seen as insulting, impolite, or hostile. Although, in Westbrook’s (2007) study, convergence is suggested by the librarians’ adjustments of formality to match patrons’ shifts in formality, the librarian’s tendency to occupy a higher level of formality could be seen as divergence.

This preliminary research study sits at the intersection of VRS, cyberlanguage, and accommodation theory. To make a start at evaluating the validity of recommendations on using cyberlanguage as a way to build rapport and promote patron satisfaction, a foundational understanding of accommodative techniques present in VRS conversations must be obtained. Thus, the goal of this research is to investigate possible accommodative tendencies of librarians in their use of cyberlanguage when providing assistance through a VRS that uses IM technology.

METHODS

This study examines 30 conversations from Oregon’s statewide VRS, L-net, that were logged during a six month period from August 15, 2010 through February 15, 2011. L-net, available to Oregon residents, is staffed by librarians from public, academic, school, and special libraries, as well as some volunteers.

Although there is no official statement instructing librarians to mimic patron speech in VRS conversations, L-net service coordinator, Caleb Tucker-Raymond, encourages librarians to do just that (Tucker-Raymond personal communication), which makes L-net fertile ground for the study of possible cyberlanguage accommodation. Formalized expressions of policy and guidance to librarians are located in four documents:

- Service Philosophy: http://www.oregonlibraries.net/philosophy
- L-net notable transcripts (as examples of good practices): http://www.oregonlibraries.net/notable

Librarians are asked to synthesize the information from these four documents and to use their best judgment in applying the concepts in these documents to their approach to reference encounters. In the Guidelines, librarians are encouraged to use “interpersonal communication practices that promote effective provision of reference service,” correct grammar and spelling while “striking a balance between speed and professionalism,” and “chat communication techniques to keep the patron engaged.” L-net notable transcripts include examples of cyberlanguage features such as emoticons, punctuation duplication, and onomatopoeic expression. The training handout advises librarians to “mirror the patron” (p. 5).

Thus, L-net librarians are asked to understand cyberlanguage and determine when to use it to develop rapport, while maintaining a level of professionalism in their writing. Given that cyberlanguage is inherently informal and deviates from standard English norms, determining its appropriate and timely use is no small task.

4
Sampling and Data Collection

The 30 conversations used for this preliminary study were selected from a larger set of 836 conversations (logged from mid-August 2010 – mid-February 2011) that were randomly sampled for a broader analysis. The 836 conversations sampled represent 6% of the available conversations during that six-month period.

The 30 conversations were selected at random after satisfying a few prior constraints. Conversations must have included:

- at least 100 words so that enough conversation was collected to be able to determine whether an effect exists or not,
- at least 3 lines of transmission from a patron so that there is enough patron speech to possibly affect a librarian’s speech,
- at least 5 lines of transmission from a librarian to account for transmission lines that are not true conversation (e.g. that include only a URL to a resource) while providing enough librarian speech to determine any possible reactions to patron speech,
- and use of cyberlanguage at least once in the conversation by the patron (to introduce the possibility of influence).

What Counts as Cyberlanguage

Decisions made about what to count as cyberlanguage were based on descriptions of features in previous work, on whether the term is commonly used in general English, and whether the feature signaled actual cyberlanguage use as differentiated from accepted conventions for VRS interaction. For example, although missing capitalization of the initial letter of an utterance and missing ending punctuation such as periods are typical cyberlanguage features, they were not counted at this time simply because most VRS transmission lines contain them, indicating unremarkable, conventional use of cyberlanguage. However, lack of capitalization of proper nouns (e.g. oregon for Oregon, galileo for Galileo) and the pronoun I were counted as cyberlanguage. Shortenings such as info and sec (for second) were not counted as cyberlanguage because of their common occurrence in general English. Similarly, OK, ok, or o.k. (and other variants) were also not counted as cyberlanguage. Common acronyms (such as DVD) found in everyday speech or writing, if capitalized, were not counted as cyberlanguage.

Chunks

IM conversations are complex entities and determining any linguistic accommodation between participants requires viewing the conversations as examples of evolving social situations. To account for the fluctuations of cyberlanguage use within a conversation, each conversation was broken down into discrete chunks that represented a pair of turns by both the patron and the librarian. These chunks consisted of a patron turn, followed by a librarian turn, where a turn is considered to be an uninterrupted series of transmission lines by either interlocutor. For example, Figure 1 provides a partial view of a hypothetical conversation and shows how this transcript would have been chunked. There are two chunks so far in this conversation, each consisting of a set of patron lines followed by a set of librarian lines. When a new patron line appears, that begins a new chunk. Because the first librarian line is not preceded by a patron line, it is not a part of any chunk.

Counting Cyberlanguage

For each chunk, the number of lines where a patron used cyberlanguage and the number of lines where a librarian used cyberlanguage were calculated. So for example, in Figure 1, Chunk 1 shows that the patron used cyberlanguage on all three of his lines in that chunk and the librarian used one time on the only librarian line in that chunk. Examples of the patron’s use of cyberlanguage includes punctuation omission and lack of capitalization of the pronoun I (im instead of I’m), punctuation duplication (??), and a letter homophone (u for you). The librarian’s single use of cyberlanguage is a non-standard use of punctuation duplication, in the form of ellipses that are being used as a surrogate FTF cue to signify the librarian stepping away from the conversation.

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Chunk 1
Patron turn
Librarian: Welcome to L-net. How may I help you today?
Patron: im trying to figure out if a tomato is a veg or a fruit??
Patron: can u help me plz?
Patron: i need 2 sources to support my claim

Librarian: sure, hold on a moment and I’ll search...

Patron turn
Librarian: thks

Chunk 2
Patron turn
Librarian: oxford dictionary says it depends on the perspective
Librarian: scientific or cooking
Librarian: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/page/tomatofruitveg
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Figure 1: Chunks in a hypothetical conversation
These counts constitute the values for two variables in this analysis: P-use (a patron’s use of cyberlanguage within a chunk) and L-use (a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage within a chunk). These values were obtained for every chunk in all 30 conversations to help expose any relationship between a patron’s use of cyberlanguage in a chunk (P-use) and a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage in the corresponding chunk (L-use).

Cumulative counts of cyberlanguage use were also obtained for each chunk to account for any possible effects of a patron’s cumulative use of cyberlanguage in a conversation on a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage. In other words, two types of possible influence were considered:

- a patron’s use of cyberlanguage within a chunk (P-use) on a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage in that chunk (L-use),
- and a patron’s use of cyberlanguage over the course of the conversation leading up to a particular chunk (the variable P-cum) on a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage in that chunk (L-use).

To calculate cumulative use, the sum of uses in all chunks prior to the chunk in question, but not including that chunk, was obtained. For example, suppose the hypothetical conversation in Figure 1 included 3 more chunks and counts were as shown in Table 1 below.

Chunk 1 would not include a cumulative count because there are no prior chunks. As with P-use, P-cum was evaluated over all chunks within a conversation.

To determine if there is a significant relationship between a patron’s use of cyberlanguage and librarian’s use of cyberlanguage, data were entered into SPSS 19 and linear regression was conducted. The dependent variable is L-use and the independent variables of interest are P-use, P-cum, Control variables include a librarian’s cumulative use of cyberlanguage (L-cum) on a patron’s use of cyberlanguage within a chunk (P-use) or over the course of a conversation (P-cum), was not a significant predictor of L’s use of cyberlanguage (L-use). Co-use of cyberlanguage between patrons and librarians is not evident in these 30 conversations, indicating no support for convergence along cyberlanguage lines (see Table 3).

Because L’s use of cyberlanguage is not shown to be reflective of P’s use of cyberlanguage in these results, one could then ask whether divergence is taking place in these conversations. For example, in some conversations, patrons throw out a variety of cyberlanguage features, such as lowercase I and proper names, asterisks to symbolize repairs, emoticons, and letter and punctuation duplication, while the librarian tends to adhere to more standard forms of English, possibly adopting a smaller, more reserved set of features such as occasional dashes to break up utterances and ellipses (as a surrogate FTF cue).

**DISCUSSION**

If divergence occurs in L-net VRS conversations, an examination of the surrounding social context would be prudent. For example, Giles et al., (1991) explain that when conversation partners come from different social backgrounds, divergence may be more likely to occur. They discuss studies that have shown that interlocutors with lower social status are more likely to converge than interlocutors with higher social status. Librarians could be viewed as having an elevated position by virtue of the patron’s plea for help. Librarians hold the key to the three most commonly used features for patrons are lowercase I and proper names (35 instances), punctuation omission (15), and emoticons (11). Librarians use ellipses as surrogate proxemic cues (non-aural FTF cues such as body language and movement) (16), dashes to break up utterances (11), and lowercase I and proper names (10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Per conversation</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
<td>271.67</td>
<td>179.76</td>
<td>100-930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chunks</td>
<td>8.47</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>3-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines</td>
<td>28.67</td>
<td>19.60</td>
<td>10-97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patron lines</td>
<td>11.23</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>3-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian lines</td>
<td>17.43</td>
<td>14.65</td>
<td>5-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per chunk</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>2-11</td>
</tr>
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<td>Patron lines</td>
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<td>.66</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian lines</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1-10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Descriptive information about the 30 conversations

A quick analysis of the types of features used reveals that...
information that could resolve the patron’s need; and the patron using reference services has recognized that, to obtain the desired information, he must go through the librarian to get it. Radford and Radford (2001) examine perceptions of libraries and librarians in popular culture (e.g. novels and films) and found stereotypes about them as controlling forces, inspiring fear. Ruppel and Fagan’s (2002) findings that some patrons may not want to appear stupid could be an expression of the feeling that being “in need” reduces one to a perceived, lower social position.

Other possible contextual factors could include individual variability of the librarians themselves. Their online writing styles and attitudes toward writing and how one should communicate at work may influence whether they use cyberlanguage in VRS conversations. For example, one librarian’s speech was marked by brief, somewhat mechanical statements as in:

Librarian: Thank you
Librarian: Please hold while I search
Patron: ok
Librarian: still searching
Librarian: Thank you for waiting
Patron: no prob.
Librarian: still searching
Patron: thanks for helping me by the way
Librarian: one moment please

This style of communication, formal and similar to automated operator utterances, probably clashes with the use of cyberlanguage, which is typically colloquial and informal.

Furthermore, L-net librarians synthesize guidance from multiple documents to arrive at an individualized perspective on the overall service philosophy of the organization. This has the advantage of allowing librarians to personalize their approach to delivering reference services, which may help to humanize what might otherwise appear to be a stilted and mechanistic wizard behind the curtain. However, an individualistic interpretation of the guiding documents may lead a librarian to steer away from cyberlanguage, because some suggestions such as correct grammar and spelling and a professional tone, in some ways, conflict with typical cyberlanguage use. For example, one librarian’s speech, marked by standard sentence construction (using initial letter capitalization and ending punctuation), included complex sentences with multiple clauses, conjunctions, and the use of semi-colons, as in: “I have also looked at the direct question you have asked and put it into search engines to see if it has a basis in a homeschool or other database; there is nothing there. If there was, I could refer you to that.”

Lack of familiarity with cyberlanguage could also contribute to seeming divergent behavior. Interlocutors may be clumsy in their attempts to converge because they lack “sociolinguistic experience or repertoire to enable them to achieve their desired convergent effect, and they may compensate by converging linguistically and nonverbally along some alternative dimension” (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991, p. 15). Perhaps the librarians in these 30 conversations are largely unfamiliar with cyberlanguage, which might preclude or curb their use of it. Most librarians in these conversations did not venture much beyond the use of ellipses, dashes, and common emoticons such as the smiley :-) and the winking face :-) However, it would be premature to presume that divergence along cyberlanguage lines indicates a threat to rapport-building and provision of excellent service. These librarians could be converging along other lines such as politeness, the use of face-saving strategies, and utterance complexity and density, which could positively affect a patron’s view of the service. For example, in two conversations the librarians employed several politeness markers and face-saving techniques. When one of the patrons indicated that she or he had clicked the wrong button, the librarian responded with a soothing “no worries :-) Both librarians qualified their questions with parenthetical statements explaining why they were asking, as in: “Is this for an assignment? (Just curious - knowing that will help me with helping you...)” This type of statement communicates the librarian’s intention to learn more so as to be of better help, not to intrude on the patron’s privacy. Both librarians complimented the patrons’ questions by saying the questions were “tough” or “challenging;” and both used smiley emoticons to punctuate their comments with friendliness.

In any case, if divergence is occurring, it may be due to any of several explanations: personal attitudes about writing, commitment to a personal ideology about the job, personal interpretations of the organization’s expectations of the librarian, or a lack of familiarity or facility with cyberlanguage. If divergence were confirmed in future investigations, it would be prudent to also determine which forces contribute to divergent behavior and this may require the acquisition of personal information about librarians, such as their attitudes about writing and grammar, their personal work philosophies, and their experience with online, conversational media and cyberlanguage. Such information was unavailable for this preliminary study.

CONCLUSION
Use of cyberlanguage in VRS conversations has been suggested as one possible way to strengthen patron relations. Patrons who are satisfied with their interaction with a librarian may be more willing to return (Durrance, 1989), and continued use may help to safeguard a library’s position in the information seeking and research process of information users. This study sought to discover accommodative tendencies by librarians when faced with cyberlanguage use by the patron. Results suggest that a patron’s use of cyberlanguage has no influence on a librarian’s use of cyberlanguage, leading one to ask if divergence is occurring.
Although the sample size was small in light of the number of VRS transcripts available, it was appropriate for making an initial foray into determining if a future, more detailed investigation is worthwhile. To explore accommodation further, a larger sample size would be required. Sampling methods may require adjustments as well. Conversations with only one or two instances of patron use of cyberlanguage, or even common uses sometimes seen in general English (e.g., lol for laughing out loud), may not influence a librarian to respond in kind. Thus, the lack of convergence could be due to insufficient cause. Perhaps introducing a threshold of three or more patron uses, possibly limited to uncommon uses, would provide a more solid base of potential influence from which to work. To this end, determinations about what is “common cyberlanguage use” would be required. To minimize the chance of bias, the 836 conversations could be pared down to only those conversations that included at least N number of uses of cyberlanguage by a patron, with N being greater than one, and then conversations could be randomly selected from that new list.

Other areas worth exploring in regards to accommodation to cyberlanguage include investigating a librarian’s influence on a patron’s speech, which would require redefining chunks so that they begin with a librarian’s turn followed by a patron’s. Perhaps a librarian’s divergence away from cyberlanguage induces a patron to converge toward the librarian by mirroring a reduction in cyberlanguage in their own speech.

A comparison of VRS conversations with two types of patrons, children/teens and adults, could provide an added dimension to the description of this phenomenon. If children and teens are more likely to use cyberlanguage than adults, which has been discussed in the news and explored by scholars such as Crystal (2008), would we see a difference in a librarian’s accommodative tendencies when communicating with these different age groups? Perhaps librarians are more likely to converge toward the patron with increased cyberlanguage use if the patron is a suspected child or teen.

Finally, once a more complete description of accommodative tendencies in VRS is obtained, results can be corroborated with patron assessments of the encounters to sift out which types of accommodative techniques contribute more to patron satisfaction. It may be that converging toward a patron’s use of cyberlanguage does not result in high patron satisfaction, and so perhaps converging on some other type of communicative dimension (e.g., utterance complexity, use of politeness markers) plays a more significant role in patron satisfaction.

REFERENCES


