Friendly and Unfriendly Discourse in Japanese BBS Communication: A Preliminary Study*

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Abstract

This article compares messages posted in Japanese on a massive anonymous Bulletin Board System (BBS) website, Channel Two, with posts on fan sites and draws out the differing communicative behaviors of users. It first explains the nature, organization, and interaction of Channel Two within the framework of Community of Practice. This website, which exhibits provocative and rude message exchanges, is contrasted with fan sites whose messages are usually polite and friendly. Then the data from both sets is analyzed in terms of sentence ending forms and the use of sentence final particles. This study finds that the plain sentence endings and the absence of sentence final particles is far more common on Channel Two, while fan sites display exactly the opposite trend. Next, elements of structure, style, and content are given qualitative treatment in messages sent to Channel Two and fan sites; interactional characteristics are revealed and discussed. Differences in linguistic and interactional behaviors are shown to be due to two factors: the subject matter under discussion and presence or absence of protection of anonymity. Channel Two guarantees anonymity while fan sites do not. The topics under discussion on fan sites include mutual idols; users have positive, shared feelings toward them and thus are connected to one another. The subject matter on the particular Channel Two thread under study is a provocative and controversial figure, who acts to divide opinions of users, galvanize them, and encourage debate. As the users of Channel Two have developed a shared repertoire (i.e., exclusive jargon), shared codes and understandings might be seen as the basis of a "subcultural identity." This study features combined quantitative and qualitative analysis conducted on a small scale, characterizing features that make Channel Two linguistically and interactionally unique. Although the data set is hardly conclusive or complete, it is expected that future studies will explore further areas and possibilities suggested by this preliminary work in more rigorous ways.

1. Introduction

Although research on Japanese speakers' linguistic behavior in computer-mediated communication (CMC) is gradually increasing (Tanaka 2001; Matsuda 2001, 2002; Nishimura, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Kishimoto 2005; Miyake 2005), much is still unknown about the linguistic and interactional characterization in online communication in Japanese. This study is intended to address this critical lack of data in the field by offering an analysis of a BBS website called

Channel Two (*Ni-Channeru*). As in my early works on fan sites, I will examine the linguistic and interactional behavior of Japanese Internet users from a comparative perspective, namely Channel Two's features as compared to features displayed in the fan sites previously studied.

Unlike CMC, face-to-face (FTF) communication in Japanese has been investigated from a variety of perspectives, including style shift (e.g. Maynard 2002; Janes 2000), gender (Ide and McGloin 1990), and politeness (Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1988; Okamoto 1999). Linguistic choices have been discussed in terms of differentiations in social distance between participants, hierarchy, and insider/outsider distinctions. Such differentiations are identified in part by the use of honorifics, sentence final particles (Cook, 1990, 1992) and plain versus polite sentence endings (Maynard 2002, 2004). Yet in CMC, especially BBS communication, the participants' backgrounds, age, gender, places of origin and other features crucial for conversation participants to determine the linguistic forms and levels of politeness employed in FTF conversational settings are invisible. It is of interest to see how the unique setting of CMC affects users' communication.

In fan sites previously studied, users' behavior was found to be similar to casual conversation among peers in spite of the fact that the actual participants' age, gender, background, and other personal information was unknown. In this present work, I look at different BBS sites on which users exchange messages that are not cooperative or friendly by any means — often clearly provocative and unfriendly. On such contentious websites, a user, taking advantage of anonymity, need not be confined by offline complications that could limit expression. They can make whatever remarks they choose to type in this liminal web space where communication unthinkable in FTF settings is made possible. CMC enables participants far greater freedom in making a direct presentation of themselves and expressing what they feel in a manner similar to soliloquy as reported by Hasegawa (2005).

I will first place Channel Two within a framework of "Community of Practice" (Wenger 1998), with special attention given to the nature and the structure of the website. I will also explain how anonymity is maintained. Then I will present my data from a BBS thread concerning a certain personality on Math Board. The data is analyzed focusing on what structural sentence endings are chosen for message exchanges as compared to messages posted on fan sites. Data will be analyzed in terms of structures, styles, content, and interactional features. Finally, I would like to suggest that unlike socio-culturally bound FTF communication, the kind of language almost exclusively used on the website in question speaks to the increased linguistic freedom afforded by Japanese CMC. The abstracted choice of language forms removed from physical context allows a range of tools from very rude communicative behavior to super polite deferential discourse. A medium of communication in which the participants' backgrounds are suppressed is an environment where they can choose to express themselves as close friends or disparaging enemies as

determined by the subject matter under discussion. Implications of the study on Japanese speakers' communication styles will be addressed.

2. Theoretical framework and Channel Two

The frame of Community of Practice is used in this study because it gives a useful framework to describe linguistic interactions in virtual communities. Wenger (1998) foresees the emergence of online communities, saying, "People congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests" (7). According to Wenger, the concept of Community of Practice as the source of community coherency is defined by three dimensions:

1. Mutual engagement — community maintenance, doing things together
2. A joint enterprise — negotiated enterprise, local response
3. A shared repertoire — discourses, concepts, stories, styles, historical events

Channel Two is a huge collection of bulletin boards that are often called "threads" because they form the woven fabric of the whole. The particular bulletin board I study is one of these threads, or discussion subsets. Systematic analysis of its dimensions reveal that Channel Two meets the above three criteria for a Community of Practice.

There is great amount of mutual engagement, Wenger's first criterion, among Channel Two participants; that is, they exchange messages and expect reactions. They also file claims on certain messages that they feel should be deleted and discuss local rules and guidelines. Beyond those users who actively send messages, there is an even greater number who simply read posted messages. Inoue (2001) reports that on average more than 20,000 hits are recorded every hour and the site is accessed every 30 second. Inoue also states that only about 15 to 20 percent of the people who view the website actually send messages and on average one message contributor stays on the site for about an hour (2001, 31). They read messages and discuss topics at their own individual computers, but are also equally connected insofar as they discuss and maintain the website as a group. There is mutual engagement among users, and more so with contributors who have some degree of investment.

We observe the second of Wenger's criteria, joint enterprise, which can be seen in constructing and maintaining the website; more specifically, threads which make up bulletin boards that form the entire website. Though the users may not be conscious of website construction, the fact that so many users return to the site shows the popular support that keeps the venture going, just as interest keeps a thread open. There is lively discussion on deletion of messages in the name of maintenance. Frequent users of the website refer to themselves as "*Ni-Chaneraa*," which means

residents/dwellers of the boards of their choice on Channel Two. In a way this site offers them a place to live their life as Channel Two users.

Such shared culture most certainly constitutes shared repertoire, which is the third criterion. Users have accumulated a fairly large number of sophisticated discourse styles, language uses, and artifacts in the so-called ASCII Art, uniquely created and used by senior members, inherited by new members, and enjoyed by the rest of the group. The language used can also be regarded as membership manifestation. Similar unconventional language is not normally found in other aspects of the users' lives such as school or workplace. It seems they exploit these forms on Channel Two for at least two reasons: fun (it is not fun to use standard language) and they exhibit, probably unconsciously, their membership on the website in a similar way teenagers use slang terms among cliques.

Some language is so unique that it is difficult for the uninitiated to understand messages, so an online glossary of terms was compiled by senior members of the site. There is also a printed series published in 2002 and 2003[1]. Such language use constitutes a shared repertoire of this cyber Community of Practice.

3. Channel Two as a Cyber Community of Practice

In this section historical and background information on Channel Two is presented.

3.1. Origin:

Channel Two was created in May 1999 by an individual named Nishimura Hiroyuki, then age 26. Based on an interview with him in the *Ni-Channeru Sengen* (*Channel Two Manifesto* 2001), Nishimura was an active contributor to an antecedent website called *Amezou*. This site experienced difficulty and he voluntarily set up a new website that eventually took over the former site.Nishimura (often addressed as Hiroyuki) in a way inherited the former website and attempted to provide a virtual space for users to share interesting stories, jokes, and the like. He expected that if there was such a space on the Web, such messages would be posted on his site, according to the interview by Inoue (2001).

Nishimura makes clear in his message to new users to the site that senders are encouraged to post interesting stories, whether true or fictitious, in view of the vast number of viewers who enjoy reading them. One famous TV newscaster once referred to the postings on Channel Two as "(public) restroom graffiti."(Chikushi 1999) Although BBS is generally associated with exchange of useful or practical information and can be similar to discussion forums where serious message exchange takes place, this website is primarily intended for the opposite. Also, interactions on certain boards are carried out in an unfriendly and sometimes sarcastic atmosphere. It should be noted, however, that on a number of boards in Channel Two serious discussions on

various issues also take place.

3.2. Popularity:

Channel Two alone attracts almost two thirds of all BBS users nationwide, according to a survey by Web Advertising Bureau (2005). Their survey shows that over 14 million users accessed BBS sites including Channel Two and Yahoo! Japan BBS in September 2005. Some 9.9 million, or over 67% of all BBS users accessed Channel Two.

One reason for attracting such a large number of people lies in dividing the website into numerous boards depending on areas of topics (there are more than seven hundred boards now), and each board is even further subcategorized by specific small-scale threads that users create. Each board has on the average about 200 to 300 topic threads. So almost anyone can find a section that is of interest to him or her. Within a certain board, the thread that is accessed most recently is placed at the top in the link list with the number of total posts indicated, and some users compete over which favorite thread comes to the top.

3.3. Anonymity:

Another reason for Channel Two's popularity is the fact that almost complete anonymity is maintained when contributors send their messages. No email address, ID number or registration password is necessary. Contributors can remain anonymous or use whatever pseudonym they like when sending messages. When they choose to remain anonymous, the sender's name normally appears as *nanasi san* (名無しさん) Mr./Ms. Nameless but there are a number of variations depending on the thread of the board. For example, if a message is sent to a thread in the Linguistics board, the sender's name usually appears as:

> *Nanashi zoo wa hana ga unagi da* 名無し象は鼻がウナギだ！
> Nameless elephant TOPIC nose SUBJECT eel COPULAR

This literally means "the nameless elephant has an eel nose," which is a mixed and parodied version of two of the most famous examples in Japanese linguistics (*zoo wa hana ga naga.i* 象は鼻が長い 'As for the elephant the nose is long' and "*boku wa unagi da*." 僕はウナギだ 'As for me, it's eel').

To understand the counterpart of Mr./Ms. Nameless on Math board requires some mathematical knowledge. It is *hyaku sanjuu ni banme no sosuu san* (132 番目の素数さん) or Mr./Ms. 132nd Prime Number. The answer for the 132nd prime number is 743, and this number can be read via rebus reading as "*nana shi san*" or Mr./Ms. Nameless.[2]

Some users who contribute regularly prefer to use set nicknames or "handles"; such people are referred to as "*kote han*," which means users with "fixed handle names." There are also systems that prevent other users from abusing these handles.

3.4. Nature of interactions:

There are several ways in which interactions among users take place. The most popular way is to refer directly to the individual message number attached to each post. Thus, another participant, or even the same sender, can post his or her response to the message by referring to the author's message number using an angle bracket (>). Such interactions occur in any thread in the boards, unless the topic is so limited or outdated that it attracts few people.

Another form of interaction is found in open discussion of message deletions, carried out on the Message Deletion Board. As senders can remain anonymous, the content of messages is not always appropriate for the Internet such as the disclosure of personal information. There are of course general and board-specific, local guidelines in order to protect individual privacy and maintain ethical standards, and based on such guidelines, certain kinds of messages are subject to deletion.

One can submit a request for message deletion accompanied by the reason for the deletion, and, if the request is considered to be fair, the massage is deleted. However, becaues the deletion of messages is carried out by voluntary users called message-deletion executors appointed by the website creator, there is much room to debate the validity of decisions on the deletion. There also is a time lapse between filing and actual deletion; inappropriate messages could remain on the Internet for some time. Then there arise sophisticated (for so young an organization, anyway) debates on what should and shouldn't be deleted. To keep a message or delete it thus concerns the maintenance of the website, and participants actively engage with one another to refine and internalize the discoures.

Prior to submission, senders are expected to view and grasp what has already been discussed on the particular thread in which he or she would like to participate. Such considerations force writers to find appropriate outlets and truly consider the audience. If a message is sent to a wrong thread, it is subject to deletion. To make the flow of message posting as smooth as possible, the voluntary message-deletion executors remove or relocate not only messages with inappropriate content, but also these misplaced messages.

Anyone can ostensibly become one of the volunteer helpers if they can get the endorsement of the creator, Hiroyuki. A candidate sends in a short statement of purpose and is handpicked by him at his sole discretion (there is no overseer except for him). Before an ordinary user can function on the website in this capacity, he or she must have a detailed knowledge of the threads,

boards and the structure of the website. There are about 20 to 30 message deletion executors. This highly groomed elite is more experienced in the website and can be considered Channel Two's core members.

Technical limitations of the website's overworked server hold the number of messages in one thread to 1,000, after which no more posts are allowed. The retired thread is moved to storage and eventually archived in so-called "data files." If interest in the topic does not wane, users always have the recourse of starting a new thread with the same title and topic as a continuation. When the number of messages approaches 1,000 in certain popular threads, one witnesses competition among users who seek to obtain the coveted final message. In fact, even, round numbers like 200 and 300 are so popular that some dialogues concern the topic of who bagged what message number.

The initial message determines what is going to be discussed in that thread. Sometimes this original message sender will remain to administer the course of the thread and be senior to subsequent members who read and/or write about it. If this initial message sender posts an accusational or confrontational message, then the remaining messages may bear a similar tone.

4. Analysis of Data: Unfriendly Exchanges

The main data to be analyzed was collected from Channel Two in May and June 2003. I additionally use data previously collected from fan sites for comparison. The Channel Two data centers of a thread called "God XX's Super-Hyper logical N＝NPart 9" (XX is a pseudonym) and was chosen for its "unfriendly" tone of discussion, a unique feature in research data published to date. It deals with on-the-web statements and behavior attributed to a controversial mathematician and regular Channel Two who was claimed to have once taught at a private university based on the contents of the messages sent to prior threads of this topic. The thread exemplifies sometime unfriendly atmosphere of Channel Two.

The first message was posted at 19:22 on 03/05/05, and 1,000 messages had been exchanged within 40 days. Its 28th revived thread continuation existed until recently. By way of contrast, all the fan sites from which I collected data from August to September 2000 have disappeared.

The data was first analyzed to determine how many words each message has on average. I then turn to examine what style each message basically displays according to Maynard's (2002) basic distinction of plain or polite style. In some messages the two styles are mixed, but based on sentence ending styles and overall tone in one message, it is possible to make the plain/polite judgment and make general observations. Within one message when there are more sentences with plain sentence endings, the message is determined as plain and when the message has more sentences with polite endings it is considered as polite. In some limited instances, messages do not

have any sentence ending styles, such as messages written in English or those consisting of ASCII Art graphics. In those cases, the messages are treated as N/A and excluded from the rest of the analysis. There are 50 such messages out of 1,000 total. The distribution of styles in comparison to fan sites[3] is given in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Comparison in Basic Styles of Messages between Friendly and Unfriendly Sites

	Total words in messages	Average Words per message	Number of messages	*da-dearu* plain style	*desu-masu* polite style	n/a (Excluded from analysis)
Unfriendly sites:						
Channel Two	76752	80.8	950(100%)	760 (80%)	190(20%)	50
Friendly sites:						
Fan sites total	55183	200.7	275(100%)	42 (15%)	233(85%)	0

We find a very clear difference in the distribution of the two styles. The *desu-masu* polite style is used in 85 percent of fan site communication, while that style is limited only to 20 percent of cases on Channel Two. Furthermore, some instances of *desu-masu* use on Channel Two are unfriendly, using overly polite form as parody of convention. The default style on Channel Two is the *da-dearu* plain style, which is used in 80 percent of all messages, almost a complete reversal of fan sites.

Further investigation reveals that the average number of words per message differs greatly. It is far shorter in Channel Two, about 80 words per message, than in fan sites, which feature an average length of 200 words. This correlates to the use of sentence final particles such as *ne(e)* as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Occurrence of Sentence Final Particles on Channel Two and Fan Sites

	Total words	Number of messages	Words per message	*Ne(e)*		*Yo*	
				Tokens	per message	Tokens	per messages
Unfriendly sites							
Channel Two	76802	950	80.7	154	16.2%	161	16.9%
Friendly sites							
Fan sites total	55183	275	200.7	293	106.5%	58	21.1%

We notice that there is a huge difference in the occurrence of *ne(e)*. *Ne(e)* is a sentence final particle that signals a speaker — or writer — is in a receptive state of mind and expects confirmation and rapport. Or, simply, it shows that he or she wants to talk with, not at, someone. Clear is that the use of *ne(e)* is far greater in fan sites, used once or twice per message. On the contrary, *ne(e)* in Channel Two is limited only to 16%. As for *yo*, which connotes "I'm telling

you," this particle signals new information that the addressee may not know. Such an act of giving new information can occur almost in any communicative setting, and this explains the small difference (16.9% on Channel Two and 21.1% on fan sites) for the occurrence of *yo*[5]. A general observation of the Channel Two thread gleaned from these two charts is that most messages are in *da-dearu* plain style and limit use of the rapport-seeking sentence final particle. Uninitiated readers of the Japanese sentences featured prominently therein will likely find the style as well as content inflammatory and offensively rude.[4]

We now turn to more linguistic characterizations and interactional features that have accentuated the language usage exemplified in Channel Two data. Analysis will be broken down into four categories: structural, stylistic, content, and interactional properties. Messages will be examined in somewhat more depth and given a comparative analytical treatment.

4.1. Structural analysis: fragment with only nouns at the end versus fragment with sentence final particles

We find many sentences in Channel Two have *da-dearu* plain style. However, quite a large number of messages within that category do not even have *da* or *dearu* at the end of the sentence. They are linguistically classified as fragments, and most such fragments have nouns only at the end of the sentence (*taigen dome* in Japanese traditional linguistic terminology). It is true that fragments also occur in fan sites, but never without sentence final particles. In fan sites, sentence final particles are used far more frequently, and function as displays of modality (Cook 1992). This means that even when *desu* or *masu* are not used, such messages do not end abruptly with nouns only. Observe example (1) from Channel Two and (2) from fan sites:

(1) *aikawarazu baka marudasi no mure*　相変わらず馬鹿丸出しの群れ
    unchanged　fool　undisguised　GEN[6] group
    "［You are］as always a group undisguised fools"

(2) *Kaoruko wa itsumo doori yo.* かおる子 は いつも どおりよ。
    Girl's name TOP usual same SFP
    "I'm the same as ever."

In Example (1) above, the message is given directly without grammatical copula or interactional markers that would perhaps be used in FTF conversation, and conveys abruptness and impoliteness; this would be finished with *yo* or *sa* if spoken. Example (2) from a fan site also lacks copula and is a fragment, but it ends with a sentence final particle *yo*, which shows speaker's attitude, invites communication, and can be regarded as a full sentence, depending on the manner of

linguistic analysis employed. Thus a crucial difference between messages on Channel Two and fan sites is found in fragmentary structures of noun-only endings in Channel Two offerings versus those with interactional features (i.e., sentence final particle) that can also occur in an FTF conversational setting.

4.2. Stylistic analysis: *Da-dearu* plain versus *masu-desu* polite style

Over 80 percent of messages on Channel Two are written in plain form, juxtaposed to the some 85 percent of fan site messages featuring polite verbiage. The lack of sentence final particles and even copula in Channel Two messages transmits to the reader a feeling of insolence and aggression , which can be a sort of empowerment for the writer that might be an underlying cause for them to keep returning. An example from Channel Two is given in (3) below; (4) from a fan site is given for comparison:

(3) *Itu mondai ga kenzai ka site mo fushigi de wa nai*
いつ問題が顕在化しても不思議ではない。
When problem SUB be actualized even wonder be NEG
"It's never a surprise when problems surface."

(4) *Watashi mo rediisu dei san kai me itte kimashita.*
私も、レディースデイ 3 回目行ってきました。
I also ladies day the third time go-GERUND come-PAST
"I also went to the third showing on Ladies' Day."

Readers of (3) will find it direct or even rude, while (4) bears soft and polite tone with the *masu*-ending.

4.3. Content analysis: Inflammatory, provocative remarks versus sympathetic, cooperative remarks

This category has quite a few examples from both web spaces. Examples (5) through (7) are from Channel Two, and (8) through (10) are from fan sites:

(5) *Ora ora doo shita saru domo, teekoo wa sore made ka?*
オラオラどうした猿ども、抵抗はそれまでか？
Hey hey how did monkey PL[derogatory], resistance TOP this until INT
"Hey hey, you monkeys, can't you put up a better resistance?"

(6) *Omae ra kichigai no see de nihon ga tsubureru.* お前らキチガイの所為で日本が潰れる。

You ［derogatory］ PL crazy GEN fault due to Japan SUB crash

"Japan will be ruined by you crazy assholes."

(7) *Kore ga kenka ja*   これが喧嘩じゃ

This SUB fight be ［archaic］

"This is the way to fight."

(8) *Anna ni suteki na   syookaibun made tsukete itadaki, kangeki no kyokuchi desu.*

あんなに素敵な紹介文まで付けていただき、感激の極致です。

That to the extent wonderful introduction even attach HON impressed GEN extremity be

"I am extremely grateful to you for attaching such a wonderful introductory note."

(9) *Jishin no higai ni   awareta kata ni omimai moosiage masu.*

地震の被害に遭われたかたにお見舞い申し上げます。

earthquake GEN damage encounter people ［POLITE］ OBL sympathy express

"I sincerely express my sympathy to those who have suffered from the damage of the earthquake."

(10) *konban wa. Ie, hajime mashite de shoo ka?*   こんばんは。いえ、初めましてでしょうか？

This evening. no, first meeting is probably INT

"Good evening. Or should I say how do you do?"

The Channel Two examples clearly convey the provocative, inflammatory, and defiant attitude of senders. In contrast, fan site examples show gratitude (8), sympathy (9), and politeness (10). Indeed, the final writer is even worried about which greeting expression would be appropriate to use and reveals consideration to other users.

Content, it seems, is the biggest factor weighing in on the decision of whether or not to play nice. On fan sites, users discuss their favorite actors, movies and so on; what they like to talk about is discussed in an environment where everyone agrees and there is no reason to debate. In the case of Channel Two, the subject matter concerns a provocative mathematician whose discriminatory and extreme opinions on topics draw passionate opponents and zealous defenders. Members from both sides argue against one another, condemning and criticizing with derogatory personal attacks. Yet it seems users enjoy posting and reading even defamatory messages in Channel Two insofar as they are able to express with guaranteed Internet immunity what they couldn't otherwise express. This may be a symptom of offline weakness manifested in online overcompensation, but Channel Two, whatever the root cause, functions as a release valve for users to vent the pressures and stresses of the day . This coincides with Beebe's (1995) observation on why people make rude utterances.

4.4. Analyses of interactional features: rare occurrence versus richness in such markers

Interactional features include the conspicuous use of *kanji* (Chinese characters, or pictographs with inherent meaning) in parentheses at the end of a sentence. The category also includes emoticons, but here I limit the discussion to the use of *kanji* only. In summation, these tools supply extra linguistic information—emotional response, facial expression, and so on—that is unavailable in CMC, but closely approximates FTF communication (though perhaps emotion flows more freely and participants become more expressive when not physically visible). In Channel Two messages, such features are used, but in a fairly limited capacity such as the *kanji* for laughter being used to show scorn and mock another as in the example below:

(11) *somo somo marukkishi aite ni sarete na i desu na (wara*
　　　 そもそもまるっきし相手にされてないですな（笑
　　　 in the first place completely company OBL do PASS NEG be SFP (kanji for laughter
　　　 "You were never really considered right from the start!" (laughter)

In my Channel Two data set, only 24 instances of *kanji*, all of them laughter （笑）, occurred out of the total of 950 messages. On the other hand, such uses of *kanji* on fan sites are so widely seen that numerous variations have arisen (Nishimura 2003b). There exist at present between 20 and 30 *kanji* used to move CMC closer to FTF, drawing out the meager state of Channel Two's single character. Below is just one of a myriad of examples from fan a site:

(12) *tetemo sutekina saito desu ne!* (kanji for like very much)
　　　 とても素敵なサイトですね！（惚）
　　　 very wonderful site be SFP
　　　 "Your site is so wonderful, isn't it!" (getting passionate)

4.5. What makes the difference?

How does one account for the differences between Channel Two and fan sites, both forms of BBS with a few technical departures? There are tremendous differences in sentence structures with or without sentence final particles, stylistic choices, and interactional properties. We have also found that the overall tone of messages differs greatly.

Although Channel Two and fan sites are both part of the invisible context of online CMC, the nature of the subject matter is fundamentally different, drawing a different crowd of people for different reasons until finally the parallel contexts become almost mutually exclusive. The subject of the Channel Two thread in question is a controversial figure who not all participants

like or support and thus acts as a divisive foil for debate, while fan sites' subject is an idol with whom every participant has a mutual and bonding connection. Connection with the idol is likely to extend to site visitors. Therefore, consideration toward users' intended interlocutor, the absence in Channel Two or presence in fan sites, could possibly be one major determinant in language choices.

The role of new media such as the Internet is to enable us to have interactions with others in a faceless community that transcends both time and space. Fan site examples show that we communicate in CMC in a similar way to FTF communication when participants wish to show consideration to others based on a feeling of connection through a mutual interest that translates to "friendship." In contrast, Channel Two reveals that users' behavior can differ greatly from FTF communication when users do not care about other participants based on the nature of the contentious subject matter.

In Japanese FTF conversation, various efforts are made to avoid direct statements and negative remarks. However, in the liberated CMC space of suppressed personal data, users find it easy — even fun — to make almost any inflammatory, provocative or sarcastic remark. Those who choose to do this might feel marginal or oppressed by the outside world and thus act out online. This is the same kind of empowerment seen in putting others down to feel strong or build ego. The aggressive nature of such users (seemingly in the Channel Two case to be mostly male) alienates counter elements, calming elements, and spirals further and further into an unfriendly and unwelcoming environment. The fundamental reason for users in any case to send messages is that it is fun and satisfying when messages are read and stimulate response.

5. Concluding remarks

We have thus seen the unfriendly interactions on Channel Two, and let us consider again how Channel Two fits the defining criteria for Community of Practice. Channel Two users have developed unique language and interactional patterns over time, which can be the best motivation to consider Channel Two as cyber community of practice. They have even produced physical artifacts such as the publication of Channel Two dictionaries, and this clearly shows they are mutually engaged in their joint enterprise.

We should be cautious, however, that the concept of Community of Practice has been developed as a learning theory origenally, and has been used to describe offline communities in a number of research works, such as language and gender and so on (e.g. Holms and Meyerhoff 1999); though it can be applied to online community reasonably well, if we attempt to make a deeper and precise description of this online community, we should look for some other defining criteria in a more suitable framework that would capture the nature of this online environment.

Herring (2004) proposes frameworks for describing online community in a more comprehensive way, and such an approach can be a direction for future research.

This study reveals two factors acting on choices of language in CMC communication: 1) subject matter determining presence or absence of connection among participants and 2) the nature of the medium mediating discourse. The disadvantage of studying in the FTF environment, namely the overabundance of variable factors, is eliminated in online CMC exchanges, thus allowing for a more clear connection between content, connection, and decisions to be friendly or unfriendly.

When confronted with users sending messages that are intentionally unacceptable in other contexts (that being offline), one is forced to consider the intriguing notion of an Internet *sub-* or *counter-cultural* community. Indeed, "resident/dweller" users of Channel Two often consider themselves *Ni-Channeraa* (Channel Twoers) in a separate and autonomous identity transcending the physical world. This possibility for counter or emerging culture online is but one of many research topics to come out of this modest study that highlights the necessity for further exploration of the field of Japanese CMC.

This study has examined linguistic and interactional features of online communication on an "unfriendly" Japanese BBS website, Channel Two, as compared to "friendly" communication on fan sites. This study features mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis conducted on a small scale to identify features that make the website linguistically as well as interactionally unique. As a preliminary work, the limited nature of the study is acknowledged in hope that more complete studies will follow to expand and supplement this new entry into the culture. It is expected that future studies will explore further areas and possibilities in more rigorous ways.

Even with what little information we have been able to glean here, the implications of changing communicative behaviors on Japanese speakers' styles seem abundant. With the advent of new technology such as the Internet we can observe communicative behavior from additional perspectives. In a similar way to paradigm-shifting in tele-communications (Marvin 1988), new communicative patterns emerge in this invisible mode of communication when it reaches the critical level to affect the general populace and subvert what communicative styles came before. CMC studies will be another facet through which we may observe the manner of communication when our physical presence is suppressed.

Notes

(1)   *Niten* (2002) and *Zoku Niten* (2003), both compiled by Niten Purojekuto are the series.

(2)   Suzuki (2003) gives variations of what message sender is referred to on Channel Two (70-74).

(3)   For details of the fan sites studied previously, see Nishimura (2003b)

(4)   The use of these sentence final particles can be gendered. Though on fan sites some indications to the message contributors' gender in general is available, which is female, no conclusive evidence with which to determine the gender of message senders on Channel Two is available because of the anonymous nature. The figures in Table 2 lead one to guess that there may be more male than female contributors, but no evidence to support or deny this speculation is available.

(5)   Though other sentence final particles like *zo* and *sa* were observed (26 tokens of *zo* on Channel Two and 3 on fan sites, and 15 tokens of *sa* on Channel Two and 3 on fan sites), because of such small number of occurrences, they were not included for analysis.

(6)   Capitalized abbreviations that show grammatical functions for morphemes／words throughout this article are as follows:
   GEN: Genitive case, TOP: Topic marker, SFP: Sentence Final Particle, SUB: Subject marker, NEG: Negative, INT: Interrogative, PL: Plural, HON: Honorific, OBL: Oblique case, PASS: Passive.

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