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INTERNET: CULTURE DIVERSITY AND UNIFICATION

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Abstract. Culture specifics of the Internet usage is analysed. The analysis done is a preliminary work for the application of the socio-historical theory of human mental development. The practice of the Internet usage is ambigious as it gives rise to both the unification and the diversity. The parameters analysed include the techniques of the hypertexts browsing, and the status/position/rank of the communicators - its influence on holding the floor and turntaking rules, the ways the emotions are expressed while Internet communication, and the way the English language serves the functions of world-wide medium.

1. Culture Relatedness

The impact of Internet on human beings is ever increasing. Internet is a mediator in person-to-person communication patterns, in consuming, booking and banking transactions, in remote group activities, including pen-pals chatting, entertainment and game playing, problems discussion and solving, numerous sorts of cooperation and/or conflict. The psychological aspects of this profound impact might be investigated using the Vygotsky's (1962) socio-historical theory of psychic development. Among the fundamentally basic notions that Vygotsky introduced is the mediation process which includes acquiring and using instruments: material tools, signs, and semiotic systems. Another fundamental notion is the internalization process, which means that the external instruments are internalized, thus forming the core of the higher psychological functions. The external instruments are usually presented to a human being in the social contacts. Communication is thus essential for human psychic development, for acquiring culture norms and correct behavior patterns. Culture that presents to any person socialized material objects and socialized rituals, norms and behavior patterns is yet another fundamental notion introduced by Vygotsky.

The most complex and genuinely human forms of activity are mediated: primitive reactions and simplest generalizations give way to specific reactions and most abstract generalizations, mediated by the culture-related sign systems. Thus, the acquisition of tools and social norms is the mainstream of human psychic development. Information technologies ("high tech") represent the newest and perhaps the most complicated tools that influence psychic development. As G.Salomon phrases it, "the computer affords activities rarely possible with preceding technologies, suggesting that it may have the potential of affecting minds in interesting and important ways" (Salomon, 1990, p.27). It seems important that computer software is a semiotic instrument by its nature. This sign system is nowadays an inherent mediator in both human cognition and communication, in business or work activities, and in entertainment. Therefore the information technologies as a universal mediator are of primary interest to the cognitive and developmental psychologists, and to the communication researchers.

The idea of remediation is introduced by Vygotsky's followers (Cole, 1996) and refers to the psychologically significant changes in the mediation process - say, to the transfer from syllabic to alphabetical writing sign systems. The remediation processes might be traced in the same way the mediation is investigated. In the era of really overwhelming changes in communication technology and verbal behavior patterns - van Dijk (1993) insists that we are experiencing a second communication revolution - (re)mediation is an actual research area. The Internet-related research field seems to be fruitful for both psychology and communication theory.

There is another reason for Vygotsky's theory usage. Global computer networks give a kind of universal access to new ways of communication and cognition. At the same time the representatives of diverse cultures have specific culture-related patterns of cognitive and communicative behavior. Beginning with 1960s, global networking is an activity familiar for North-Americans mostly. But the period of monocultural network activities comes to an end. Now that all the nations have (or will have soon) an adequate access to the Internet, will the newcomers want to adopt the previously worked out patterns, or else they will try to adapt the new mediator to their specific traditions? The description and analysis of the various ways the different cultures transform fairly close (or even identical) mediating instruments forms the core of Vygotsky's theory. Thus we might expect that the prospective remediation problems centered around the Internet-driven activities will be best explained using the paradigm of the socio-historical theory.

The aim of this paper is to stress some culture-related problems inherent in communications via global computer networks (Voiskounsky, 1996). The discussion of these problems seems to be an essential prolegomena to psychological investigation aimed at finding out new cognitive and

communicative mental functions and strategies, new ways of internalization and/or externalization, etc. The most important problem that is stated in this paper might be phrased as follows. Do the Internet-driven practices lead to a greater cultural diversity or to a greater cultural unification? Both tendencies are presented at the time, as it will be discussed with more details in the paper. Thus the solution to this ambigious problem is by now maximally uncertain.

2. Deep Truths

The most global – and vital for the prosperity of the mankind – ideas and concepts of today are multi-faceted and dependent on widely differing opinions and beliefs. One might mention such multi-faceted ideas as most of the moral and legal concepts and practices, political views, religious beliefs, some notions in science and humanities, estimations of art pieces, etc. Since the global politics has now departed with the practice of bipolarity, the new tendency is evident – to embrace, while decision making, the whole multitude of mosaic-like views. Differing and opposing views do not necessarily mean confrontation or inadequacy. In the nuclear physics field, Niels Bohr proposed, the two opposite views might be both true, when put in a broad enough paradigm. These views constitute what he called “deep truths”.

The Internet and the Web users have to gain experience in the hypertext browsing. Outside the WWW navigation, no research was intended or done on browsing techniques though browsing is evidently different from reading (and the reading techniques research and teaching is traditional in the education field). An essential difference lies in the fact that for the hypertext navigation individualized and not forced routes are welcomed. Thus, the Web surfing gives a chance for diversity as opposed to unification.

To perform thorough browsing one needs to be keenly interested in learning most various referential and connotative meanings associated with the hypertext notions, or the most various views on certain topics. After having learned various points of view, one is encouraged to make the best possible choice and to elaborate (or else to adopt) the seemingly most correct and personalized view. To work out the individualized position, one needs to acquire background dispositions and high enough educational level for making the personalized choice, and fairly high inner cognitive complexity to deal with plenty of meanings and opinions, with the multi-faceted and multi-optional information.

It is known (Adorno e.a., 1950) that those with an authoritarian background are best suited to adopt the one-sided view, the unique (“the only correct”) meaning. People with minor cognitive complexity, with routinized perception habits and reduced personal initiative, as well as lacking personal responsibility for competent decision-making, tend to take a highly limited navigation route

and to select extremely restricted pieces of the available information. “Deep truths” introduced by Niels Bohr are alien to the majority of the residents of authoritarian societies.

To step aside from the physics territory, the Web seems to be the means for saving all the alternative facts, concepts, and interpretations. To learn all the opposites, one has to take an overwhelming navigation route. To avoid the alternatives, a reduced route will do. The latter route leads the Internet users to unification. To seek for (and to gain) diversity while hypertext browsing is believed to be characteristic for the representatives of the cultures brought within the democratic tradition.

Nowadays, they prevail on the Internet, and the resulting Internet is a sort of projection of their democratic attitudes and values. Usually, the democratic tradition relies on the elaborated enough psychological mechanisms of dealing with cognitive complexities, on estimating, comparing, and handling alternatives, on sophisticated decision making. But the access to the Internet is globalizing very rapidly, and most of the newcomers to the Web (those speaking Chinese, Russian and other Slavic languages, Arabian, Spanish, or Portugal) have a definitely authoritarian background. Thus the Internet might turn out to be ambigious: whenever the majority of its users consists of the adepts of authotarianism, the linked browsing techniques will be restricted to the most simple selection methods. The law of contrast says though that for some of those who have just escaped from the totalitarian regime very broad-minded views and interests are characteristic, and they feel eager to find out all the differing opinions. Not so – too often – with the majority of those who experienced totalitarianism, possibly in preceding generations. The Internet and the WWW seen from the democratic/authoritarian point of view might give rise to both uniformity and diversity.

3. Views on Status

When discussed in the terms of diversity and unification, human beings’ status on the Internet is a multi-dimensional factor. We shall discuss the problem from three different standpoints.

3.1. STATUS AND DIVERSITY

Computer mediated communication is often expected (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978) to be especially democratic in a sense that in the Usenet discussions one only rarely bothers of ranks and status positions, or of age and gender of the newsgroups discussants. Research findings support this view (Sproull and Kiesler, 1992). The “equalizing” effect of computer mediated communication is widely believed to be a virtue, since in the Usenet discussions, in the e-mail

correspondence, in IRC chats, or in MUDs collaboration no subordination takes place, and only the opinions expressed are really valuable. That is, the stutterers, and the younger participants, and those of minor administrative rank and position, and of course women and ethnic minorities have best chances to express their views and never feel ashamed/embarrassed to contradict, to disagree, and to argue the views expressed by the older ones, or by someone of much higher administrative status. If this is true, Internet is to promote the diversity of the alternative views.

Moreover, the partners communicating via the Internet are believed to be friendly and open, as they are long distance from the social pressure. “In some companies that use computer networking, communication is strikingly open as employees cross barriers of space, time, and social category to share expertise, opinions, and ideas. In a democracy, people believe that everyone should be included on equal terms in communication; no one should be excluded from the free exchange of information” (Sproull and Kiesler, 1992, p.13). The authors conclude: “New communication technology is surprisingly consistent with Western images of democracy”. Other researchers strengthen this view, saying: “What people are creating on the Internet is a conversational, demassified, non-representational democracy that transcends the nation-state” (Nguyen and Alexander, 1996, p. 111).

It is essential that the argumentation base and the cultural level of the Internet discussions is high due to the fact that the Usenet subscribers have worked out the tradition of explicit citations: the excerpts from the other discussants’ previous messages that are actually opposed or agreed upon are usually inserted to a new message in a prefixed form. This tradition is really beneficial and leads to more solid argumentation than it usually takes place in face-to-face polemical discussions. The tradition resembles that of the publications in the research journals, but in the Usenet newsgroups citations are widely used in the contexts going far beyond the scientific problems and research discussions. Thus the projective diversity of opinions expressed and comprehended during the Internet-related discussions is fundamentally based.

3.2. STATUS AND UNIFICATION

The optimistically democratic view on the computer mediated communication meets strong objections based mostly on the fact that the group communication via global or local area networks is a part of the existing social hierarchical networks. “The ‘faceless’ nature of the communication in CMC may often reinforce the bureaucratic or hierarchical dimensions of interaction for this reason” (Spears and Lea, 1994). In a thorough ananlysis of the problem, G.Mantovani supports the findings that the opinions expressed by networkers of high or low positions might meet quite a different amount of attention. “How

can we monitor and evaluate the quality of the attention given by the audience to a speaker in an electronic situation? Will the audience pay equal attention to the messages of a low-status member of the group and to those of a high-status member?" (Mantovani, 1994, p.50). And indeed, there is experimental evidence that the high-status networkers dominate the group discussions (Weisband et al., 1995). "Social status is usually detectable", concludes Ma (1996, p. 185).

Unlike face-to-face communication, the subscribers to the newsgroups may "hold the floor" as long as needed. When real-time discussions occur, the groupware includes functions that are analogous to the "turntaking" rules. Some experimental results suggest that explicit turntaking rules (for which the groupware is responsible) are more efficient than anarchical and voluntary interruptions (MacKinlay e.a., 1994). Neither status nor age and gender of the preceding discussants influence the networker when it is his/her turn to hold the floor.

Still, Perrolle (1991) believes that gender differences lead to the increase of the effectiveness of holding the floor. She hypothesizes that "computer-mediated communication reduces the social solidarity in existing social groups, but it facilitates conversations among strangers" (Perrolle, 1991, p. 357). In case the strangers differ from the aborigines in their cultural background, they face special problems – one of those mentioned in R.Ma's paper: "East Asians do not always verbalize "no" to turn down another's proposal. The "yes" or "no" message can be encoded and decoded by varying the level of enthusiasm associated with an ambiguous "yes" message... It would be much more difficult to create such a variation in computer-mediated conversations" (Ma, 1996, p. 178).

Mantovani believes that e-mail is "of little use in the first stages of the formation of a new group or of the earlier development of a new project" (Mantovani, 1994, p. 58). This view is supported by the fact that CMC is rarely or ineffectively used for negotiations, which is an essential part of democratic traditions. Mantovani gives two strong conclusions: first, that "CMC does not generally foster democracy in organizations" (Mantovani, 1994, p. 57), and second, that "CMC is not friendly toward all its potential and actual users" (Ibid). These findings validate the idea that the rank/position/status/gender/age factors reduce diversity on the Internet and lead to unification. The gender-related issues need more profound discussion, which is out of the range of this paper.

3.3. STATUS AND CULTURE

The abovementioned considerations are entirely consistent with the principles of the Western democratic tradition, as Lee Sproull and Sara Kiesler identified it. To grasp an idea of an alternative position, try to imagine for a moment and

to share the uneasiness of a newsgroup discussant (say, born in the Far East Asia): the etiquette and even linguistic structures of his/her mother tongue demand that the age/gender/status/position/what_else are precisely known before addressing another participants. Although all this is not really needed when using English, that sort of uneasiness might form a certain psychological barrier for the discussant, and thus might restrict (or influence in some other negative way) his/her participation in newsgroup discussions.

This might be true, taken for example Japanese-born networkers, as their linguistic politeness rules system ("keigo") includes a continuum of attitudes towards the other discussants, whose positions (as well as a great deal of another necessary data) are to be definitely and precisely known beforehand. The attitudes of discussants to the problems under discussion might lead to the choice of quite differing verbal formulae, too. Forced ignoring of etiquette and politeness rules make a networker change radically his/her verbal habits. It's worth mentioning that the unique emoticons worked out by the Japanese network communicators "show an affection without any specific indication" of the modality of emotions, or even "to apologize some possible offense" (Aoki, 1994). The forced or even deliberate change of verbal habits leads certainly to a decresed diversity.

One may predict that the uneasiness of this sort is reduced taken the most cosmopolitic samples (within any particular ethnos) of those networkers for whom English is not their mother tongue. At the same time when discussing really important problems the world Internet community would prefer that the less cosmopolitic samples (within every particular nation) expressed their views, too. Diversity is definitely more supposed to lead to pure originality, and at the same time to consensus, than the unified and slightly cosmopolitic population of the existing Internet community. Culture related barriers are certainly not adding any benefits to the effective group discussions via global computer networks. Thus, the status-related ways of increasing both diversity and unification on the Internet are dependent on the culture-related factors.

4. Expression of Emotions

Generally, computer mediated communication is supposed to be personal and spontaneous. Personal means that unlike the process of official documents exchange, the discussions in the Usenet newsgroups, or in the e-mail/BBS communication, in IRCs and MUDs contain personal opinions and feelings. The views expressed during these group or one-to-one discussions are usually rather laconic, and lack mentioning possible background knowledge. Spontaneousness means that the networkers react to opinions and beliefs expressed by their partners very rapidly - sometimes even before reading the message to the end.

In personal spontaneous dialogues there is plenty of room for expressing feelings and affects. This is surely the case with human to human links mediated by global computer networks. Investigations show that 25% e-mail messages produced by undergraduates (new adepts to e-mail correspondence) contain fragments of intimate communication (McCormick and McCormick, 1992). The obstacle to the emotional richness in these interactions is sometimes poor command of the language used.

Special signs expressing the emotional states - “smileys”, or “emoticons” (Panko, 1993; Rice and Love, 1987; Sproull and Kiesler, 1992) - are to compensate the lack of adequate means of expressing emotions when using the Internet services. The nearest analogue of smileys - the facial expressions of a human face. Usually, several basic emotions are stressed: joy, surprise, contempt, suffering, fear and anger; sometimes the list of basic emotions includes more positions (Izard, 1977). Each emotion has its own conventional image with the eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth and other facial elements indicated.

The perception of basic emotions by means of facial expression may differ due to the age and the ethnocultural origin. The psychological concept of the emotional intellect is worked out recently: the emotional intellect is defined as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey and Mayer, 1994, p. 312). The researchers point to the three facets of the emotional intellect: accurate appraisal and expression of emotions, adaptive regulation of emotions, and utilization of emotion-based knowledge. From numerous studies (Davitz, 1969; Izard, 1977) it is known that the meanings of emotions develop: that is, when children grow older and socialize, most of them learn to express and comprehend emotional states with greater accuracy, they recognize emotions, classify and verbalize them more precisely, and they show more adequate reactions to the whole range of affects expressed by their communicative partners. Besides, people differ in the accuracy of identification of emotions expressed with faces (Buck, 1984). These psychological findings support an idea that the comprehension of smileys is age-dependent, and culture-dependent.

Since children, beginning with early age, find great interest in the Internet, and get accustomed to the computer mediated communication, the age dependency of the emotional intellect in its CMC-related applications needs to be investigated. The accuracy of the perception of facial expressions of six basic emotions have been examined experimentally (Voiskounsky, 1996).The conclusion is that the perception of emotions (according to the pictographs of facial expressions) is age-dependent: skills in decoding the emotions, taken 7 years old children, are less formed, complete, exact and entire as compared to children who are 10 years old. Differences in a relative easyness of recognition of certain basic emotions have been discovered; joy and suffering are

recognized best; several specific features necessary for adequate perception have been identified. In the younger group the meaning of contempt is not separated and selected while pictographs classifying.

The ethnic and culture differences should be obvious as well. To recognize the smileys, one needs fairly developed mental skills of rotating the pictographs (90 degrees, clockwise). Thus, the whole process of recognition is most familiar to those whose cultural habits include left to right writing and reading. This mode of reading and writing is habitual for native English (or another European languages) speakers, but it is not universal. Billions of people are best trained to read and write top to down, or right to left. Will they automatically recognise the face-like pictographs, or they will find the ways the emotions are marked to be extremely uneasy and unnatural? There are evidences that they might favor latter supposition. Namely, the emoticons used while telecommunicating in Japanese language, are straight – in the sense that to recognize them one needs no rotation at all (Aoki, 1994).

The non-exhaustive (based on the discussion of the emotional intellect problem field) answer to the main question, namely, whether the Internet leads to the increase of uniformity, or, contrary, of diversity, might be phrased as follows. The “Cyberworld population” has worked out a seemingly universal system of fixing the emotional states while communicating via computers and global networks. This system is based on the use of smileys, or emoticons. Active use and recognition of emoticons is age dependent, and what is important, the ethnic “dialects” of the lexicon of smileys have emerged. The expected expansion to the Cyberworld of representatives of those ethnoses that have now only limited interest and access to the Internet might result in major changes in the now-habitual nonverbal language of expressing emotions.

5. Languages in Contact

5.1. ADAPTATION WITHIN NEWSGROUPS

The messages produced in the Usenet newsgroups, or in IRCs and MUDs, might be thought of as being close to a some sort of professional English texts. Though the situation is partly analogous to adapting English as a means of professional communication in numerous technical fields, the difference is nevertheless crucial. The fact is that the Internet users cannot be treated as representing any single profession. There is some resemblance with the language usage in the Middle Age Europe: all the educated people spoke and comprehended classical Latin, although their professions differed greatly. With not a single native speaker, Latin was functioning as a means of education, religion, and research.

The within-newsgroups language adaptation takes usual forms. First, an increasing proportion of the Internet users do not have a good command of English, and thus they use simplified grammar constructions and a very limited vocabulary. And second, the fluent English speakers (or writers) start to simplify and to censure their speech in a manner as though they are supposed to address a foreigner. It makes great sense: non-native speakers of English would face otherwise even greater problems with comprehension, they will be able at best to guess the meanings of non-simplified phrases produced by native speakers of English. It is known that non-native English speakers, particularly those who first learnt non-alphabetical writing systems, transfer their literacy processing skills from their mother tongue to English, and have serious problems when meet for example unknown words (Holm and Dodd, 1996). The unknown words might be inserted both by newsgroups subscribers and by those who compile "action list" words, or "generic actions" (Argyle and Shields, 1996): the terms that denote simple - and sometimes physical - actions. Lists of these words are at everyone's disposal whenever one needs to express feelings, actions, etc.

That is, really complex and/or laconic and/or metaphorical expressions might turn out to be impractical, and the best experts in English need to adapt to the worst ones when communicating via the Internet. Poor comprehension of genuine English messages might result in mass unsubscribing those newsgroups where the native speakers of English do not self-censure the messages produced and avoid high redundancy. The mechanism described leads to reducing the variety of opinions expressed in newsgroups. Mutual, quite definite and easy comprehension is a prerequisite for multi-ethnic discussions in newsgroups. From the fact that even the experts in English are not supposed to use (while communicating via Internet) the most refined language styles, one might easily deduce that there are rather strong prerequisites for the unification process related with the world-wide Internet communication.

5.2. WAR OF WORDS

The language used for the Internet inter-ethnic communication and for the instructions on how to get access to numerous databases and to navigate through the hypertexts is mostly English. When the new medium emerged, and years after (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978) the networkers were almost solely North Americans, and the usage of English seemed more than natural. Now that the computer mediated communication connects people thoroughout the globe, the usage of English meets problems. The problem is sometimes called the "war of words" (Pollack, 1995). The discussion takes places rather intensively, and mostly in popular press (Mandel, 1996; Pollack, 1995, 1996; Specter, 1996).

English seems to have no alternative in the computer networking field, but the real problem is that the mother tongues of the ever ascending number of networkers differ, and for the majority of them English is usually a taught language. Another aspect is that a great many of societies are not happy with the fact that to have an access to the most favorable Internet services one needs to comprehend and to speak English. Many countries try to make their best to install and maintain pretty enough and valuable enough distant information sources and lively newsgroups using their national languages.

The problem is not connected exclusively to the Internet usage. Just the same problems face the initiators of world-wide exchange of TV entertainment programs, popular music pieces, technological documentation, etc. Tourists usually find it most practical to have at least a limited command of English to make inquiries. The ships' and air jets' commanders all over the world have no options - they have to communicate only in English. Different states (France for example) give serious efforts to protect their native languages, and to restrict the expansion of English. Some other societies make efforts to enhance their residents the effective usage of world telecommunication links. For example, Malaysia is said "to offer more education in English to prepare its citizens for the information age" (Pollack, 1995). The strategies and tactics thus differ a lot.

There are in fact many other "wars of words" - to name the discrepancy between the poor and the rich, or between the illiterate and the educated, or even the feminists' opposition to the "man made language" (Spender, 1980). The Internet in a way accelerates very real and very actual linguistic problems inherent for the modern mankind.

The levels of mastering English vary greatly; the top level would be the usage and understanding of laconic style and witty phrases, including metaphors, epithets, and many other rhetorical figures. This is perhaps the prerogative of qualified journalists and writers, and all the verbally gifted persons, especially if they have taken – years ago, perhaps - creative writing courses. Moreover, the perfect command of English supposes the knowledge of culture realities, of slang expressions, and of most different layers of language usage. Unlikely that this level is useful while computer mediated commuication. At the moment, the Internet messages are composed of a really peculiar form of speech that combines attributes inherent for the written and oral speech, for dialogues and monologues (Voiskounsky, 1997). Moreover, a great deal of Internet users differ greatly in their language skills and foreign cultures expertize. This differentiation impacts the effectiveness of the Internet usage and the distinctness of the psychological dimensions in the cyberspace.

5.3. NETWORK ENGLISH

The dominant language of the Internet communication is sometimes compared to the Basic English. And why not to a pidgin English (Voiskounsky, 1995)?

There are several ways of a pidgin formation, when two or more languages are in contact. To illustrate one of them, imagine that two adolescents found themselves suddenly at an inhabited island; both of them learned English at school for one year only (Trudgill, 1983). This is an example with the speakers of three languages forming jointly a pidgin or a lingua franca. In case only one of these three languages is dominant (for example, English), the pidgin will keep developing while non-natives communicate to one another using the dominant language. There are another principles of pidgins formation, when communities of speakers share a certain geographical area (like the speakers of Bantu languages in the Central and Southern Africa), or else when two non-cognate languages come to contact on a permanent basis; say, a local and a European (mostly Portugal, English, Spanish, or French) languages.

The pidgins often reserve the lexical system close to European languages (some local lexical items are usually added, though); phonetic system is the subject of modifications and adaptations to the local articulation habits (usually diphtongs are reduced to the monophonemic sounds, fricatives change to explosives or affricates, etc.); grammar system of the most of the European languages keeps to be simplified (copula verbs may disappear, the same with the case and number of nouns and adjectives, verbs retain the sole unchangeable form, analytical tendencies strengthen, i.e. connections between the words in phrases are marked by special words instead of affixes, etc.).

Global networking creates similar situations of the English language usage by non-native speakers. By simplification and by mistakenly introducing some features of their native languages (different word order, for example) into English the Internet users are supposed to form actively an entirely new form of a pidgin English, which might be called a “Network English”. It is an unique example of a written version of a pidgin, as the standard way of forming pidgins was always a prerogative of spoken communication (Bell, 1976; Trudgill, 1983).

5.4. IMPACT ON NON-ENGLISH COMMUNICATION

Both network and non-network versions of English are influencing non-English communication patterns. Journalists are discussing for example the “CyberSpanglish” - the Internet-related Spanish language spoiled (or enriched?) with the English terminology (Rivas, 1996). The same might be said of the Russian language usage in teleconferences (i.e. newsgroups). This might be illustrated with some examples derived from the real network communication protocols. English words, phrases and abbreviations are inserted - both in

Cyrillics and in Latin - into Russian Cyrillic messages. The selective process of the pidgin formation starts with the certain English vocabulary layer; i.e., terminology used in the computer programming and computer networking fields. This layer opposes the most usual layers participating in the traditional pidgin formation - namely, the trading and the daily life vocabulary layer.

In a survey administered in 1994, Russian networkers were asked to estimate the proportion of Russian/English/non-English network communication. Of 489 respondents, 45 per cent use mostly Russian, and 18 per cent use Russian only. The equal proportion of Russian and English correspondence is characteristic for 27 per cent of respondents, and 10 per cent of them use mostly English. Thus there is a considerable amount of networkers who are regular users of English and are possibly able to provoke (along with many other non-native English speakers who are non-Russians) the pidgin formation.

In Russian-language teleconferences the alphabets are intermixed (that is, both the Latin and the Cyrillics are widely used). For example, names of foreign persons and/or companies are usually inserted in Latin transcription. The same might occur with certain terms which have no good Russian equivalents, or when citations from the messages produced originally in Latin alphabet are discussed. The intermixed alphabets are used outside these contexts as well, for the sake of making the messages more elaborative and argumentative, or for humorous reasons. The latter might be traced when observing the signature parts of messages, which very often include maxims and/or witty phrases in foreign languages (mostly in English). These signatures function as a kind of mottoes/logotypes characterising in some way the networkers themselves. Thus the possible extension of the Internet Signature Project (Tsang et al., 1994) to take into consideration Russian-born signatures might show certain specifics.

English phrases and words are used in national-language computer conferences in order to shorten the messages. Two ways of shortening might be noted. First, foreign phrases are inserted into Russian messages, sometimes as abbreviations. For example, popular foreign abbreviations are IMHO and BTW (used mostly in Latin notation, but sometimes in Cyrillics as well), which mean respectively: “In my honest (humble) opinion” and “By the way”. Second, English words (in Cyrillic notation) are used as a kind of stem: in combination with common endings/prefixes/suffixes these wordstems constitute Russian-like words. Note for example the word `gate`, that is heavily used in the context of computer telecommunications. Combined with adequate Russian prefixes and endings, the following English terms are constantly used in Russian language messages: PC, message, mail, mailbox, crosspost, hub, telnet, voice, login, routing, node, sysop, direct, source, flame, spam, programmer, point, link, user, etc. Usually, these terms have adequate Russian language equivalents, which are neglected.

5.5. IMPACT ON ENGLISH USAGE

The standard way of a pidgin formation is the simplification of English and its adaptation to a Russian-speaking population having limited knowledge of English. The adaptation and simplification processes concern the usage of a limited vocabulary (consisting of two main compounds - simple English taught at high-school, and professional English), and of incorrect and simplified grammar (usage of the present tenses only, loan translations and transmissions of Russian word order in a phrase, etc.). The occurences of that kind of simplified language usage might be easily observed in the English messages produced by native Russian speakers within any Usenet newsgroup.

One might expect that similar processes take place in another geographical areas where networkers speak different languages. When Russians and some other non-native English speakers start collaborating and corresponding, the “standard” sociolinguistic situation emerges. Namely, the speakers of two non-dominant languages intensively correspond in dominant English. It should be argued thus that the computer networking gives all the needed chances to form a pidgin "Network English”: non-native English speakers born in diverse geographical regions and under diverse sociolinguistic settings communicate in a simplified basic Network English. This is a way of verbal unification within the Internet usage. The unification is based on the prevalent diversity of the ethnic group members that might participate in the network English formation. Thus, the more diverse cultural settings, the less evident and proper are the effects of the unification process.

6. Conclusions

Culture specifics impacts the Internet usage. There are certain factors that lead to both diversity and unification of the Internet-related communication and cognition. Among the discussed factors the unification might prevail, but the final result is not certain yet. Along with the discussed parameters (i.e., the hypertext browsing techniques, the status and the adaptation within newsgroups, the expression of emotions, and the pidginized “Network English” formation) a great many other parameters have to be analysed to come to the final conclusion. The problem discussed is ambigious.

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