The problem of anonymity

The absence of authorial identity presents linguists with a particularly difficult situation. When we classify texts into types we rely greatly on extralinguistic information: the notion of a language variety arises from a correlation of linguistic features with features of the situation in which it occurs. In principle we know the speaker or writer – male or female, old or young, upper-class or lower-class, scientist or journalist, and so on. In short, we know who we are dealing with.

But on the Internet, a lot of the time, we don't. The writer is anonymous. In a wide range of Internet situations, people hide their identity, especially in chatgroups, blogging, spam e-mails, avatar-based interactions (such as virtual reality games and Second Life), and social networking. These situations routinely contain individuals who are talking to each other under nicknames (*nicks*), which may be an assumed first-name, a fantasy description, or a mythical character or role.

The consequences are a different kind of language. Operating behind a false persona seems to make people less inhibited: they may feel emboldened to talk more, and communicate in different ways from their real-world linguistic repertoire. They must also expect to receive messages from others who are likewise less inhibited, and be prepared for negative outcomes. There are obviously inherent risks in talking to someone we do not know, and instances of harassment, insulting or aggressive language, and subterfuge are legion. Terminology has evolved to identify them, such as flaming, spoofing, trolling, and lurking (p. 469).

While all of these phenomena have a history in traditional mediums, the Internet makes them present in the public domain to an extent that was not encountered before. But we do not yet have detailed linguistic accounts of the consequences of anonymity. The classical pragmatic theories do not easily account for it. Gricean maxims of conversation (p. 305), for example, only weakly apply to the Internet. Is a paedophile going to be truthful, brief, relevant and clear? Are extreme-views sites (such as hate racist sites) going to follow Geoffrey Leech's (1983) maxims of politeness (tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, sympathy)? And if brevity was the soul of the Internet, we would not have such coinages as *blogorrhea* (p. 457) and *twitterrhea*.

Electronically mediated communication of course is not the first medium to allow interaction between individuals who wish to remain anonymous, as we know from the history of telephone and amateur radio; but it is certainly unprecedented in the scale and range of situations where people can hide their identity, and exploit their anonymity in ways that would be difficult to replicate offline. The linguist is consequently faced with a growing corpus of data which is difficult to interpret in stylistic or sociolinguistic terms. A different orientation needs to be devised, in which intention and effect become primary, and identity becomes secondary. Internet text typologies need to become increasingly pragmatic.