

SPEECH ACTS IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED
COMMUNICATION

BY

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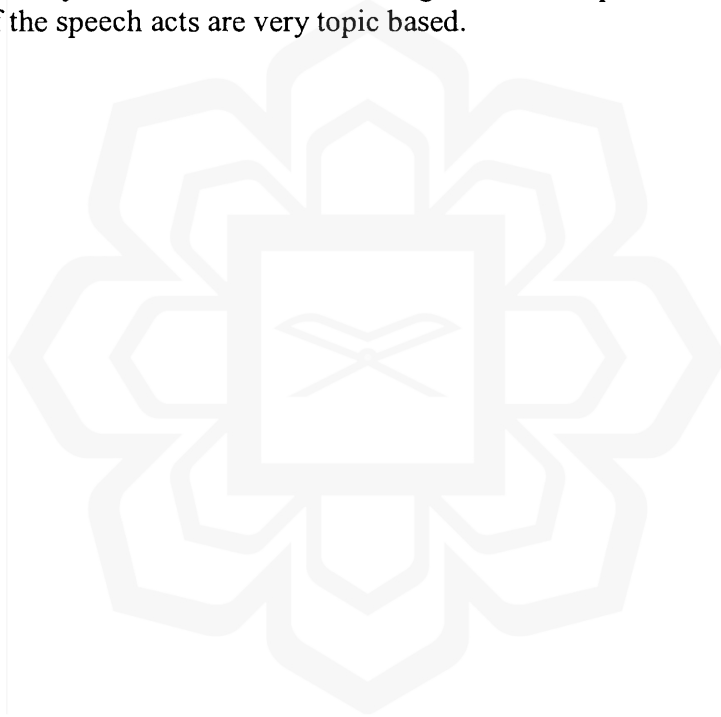
A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF HUMAN SCIENCES IN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE STUDIES

KULLIYYAH OF ISLAMIC REVEALED KNOWLEDGE
AND HUMAN SCIENCES
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
MALAYSIA

MAY 2003

ABSTRACT

This research is on speech acts in computer-mediated communication (CMC), particularly Internet Relay Chat (IRC). IRC is classified as a synchronous communication which has its own set of rules that sometimes differ from that of both written and spoken communication. The researcher has based her study on a Malaysian-based chat room, chat.mystar.com. Forty pages of chat sessions were printed for data, and these were analyzed word for word to seek types of speech acts used by chatters. The research sought the answers to two questions. The first one is pertaining to what the range of use of speech acts in CMC is. It was discovered that the range of speech acts is quite limited, though topics of conversation did play a big role in the use of speech acts by the chatters. The second question is whether there are any particular types of speech acts that are predominant. The researcher found out that speech acts of expressives and directives had predominance over other speech acts, but, again, this was based on the topics discussed by the chatters. These findings show that speech acts do exist in CMC, but the use of the speech acts are very topic based.

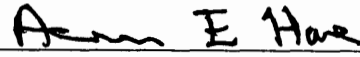


ملخص البحث

يعني هذا البحث بدراسة فعل الكلام أو المحادثة عن طريق وسيلة الاتصال المعروفة بالكمبيوتر (CMC) وخاصة الدردشة عبر شبكة الإنترنت (IRC). إن التخاطب عبر الإنترنت (IRC) له أصول وأحكام قد تختلف عن أحكام الكتابة أو المحادثة الشخصية. اعتمدت الباحثة في بحثها على نوعية وكمية المخاطبة (الدردشة) بين المميزين من طريق استعمال اللغة الإنجليزية كوسيلة مخاطبة. مثلاً هناك غرفة دردشة تُسمَّى Online's Chat room و chat.mystar.com والتي يستعملها المميزيون للتخاطب والتعارف. وقامت الباحثة بطبع (٤٠) صفحة لكي تحلل المعلومات والكلمات المستخدمة في التخاطب بين المخاطبين. إن الغرض من تحليل الكلمات هو من أجل الإجابة عن سؤالين. الأول: ما هو مدى استعمال فعل الكلام أو التخاطب عبر وسيلة شبكة الإنترنت. توصلت الباحثة إلى التخاطب محدود جداً بالرغم من أن موضوع المحادثة يلعب دوراً كبيراً في استمرارية التخاطب بين المتحدثين عن شبكة الإنترنت. السؤال الثاني: هل هنالك نوع خاص من المحادثة كان مسيطراً على موضوع وماهية المناقشة؟. وتوصلت الباحثة إلى أن فعل التبصير والتوجيه هو من السمات السائدة بين المتحدثين عبر الإنترنت. إن الكلام المعبر والتوجيهي هو الصفة الغالبة للمتحدثين عبر شبكة الإنترنت، ولكن هذا مبني على نوعية الموضوع المطروح للنقاش والتداول. إن الدراسة برهنت على أن هناك نوعاً من المحادثة عبر الكمبيوتر، وأنه وسيط ناقل للكلام بين المتحدثين، ولكن استعمال فعل الكلام مرتبط بموضوع النقاش.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of master of Human Sciences in English Language Studies.

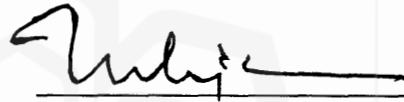


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Supervisor

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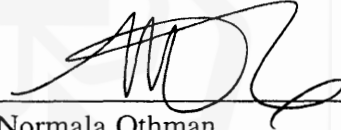


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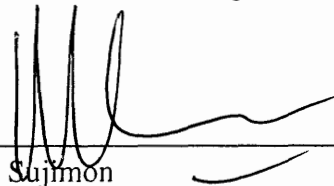


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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degree at IIUM and other institutions.

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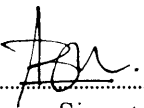
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Speech Acts in Computer Mediated Communication

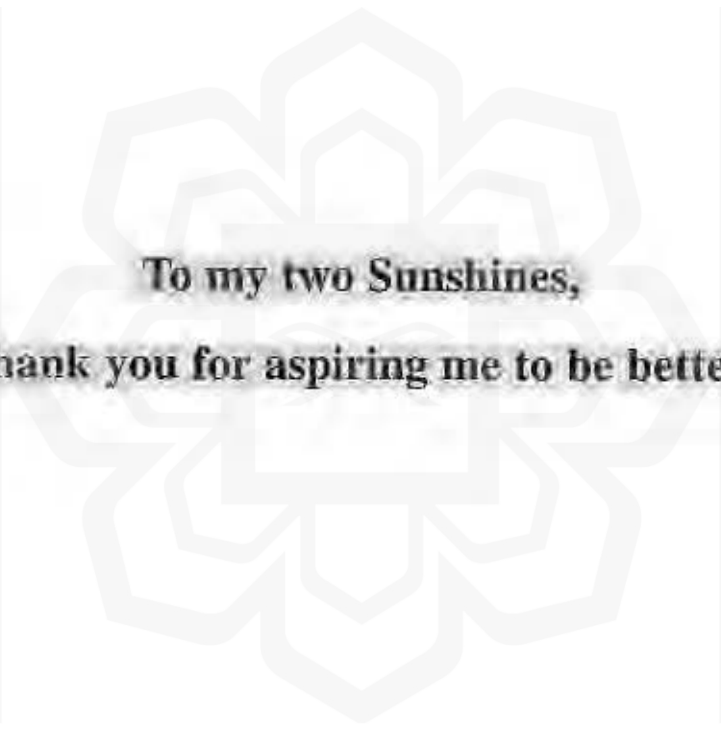
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**To my two Sunshines,
Thank you for aspiring me to be better!**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alhamdullillah to the Almighty Allah for the strength and courage He has bestowed upon to complete this paper.

My utmost gratitude to my family, especially my husband, Ahmad Rizal, for being a pillar of support throughout everything that I go through in life. I thank my parents, Abdul Razak Ismail and Fatimah Harun, for without whom I would never be motivated to do anything! I would like to express my utmost gratitude for their patience with me, and I hope they know how much I love them. My in-laws, Ahmad Tajuddin Abdul Rahman and Asiah Din, I thank you for your never-ending assistance. I thank my siblings, Ashraf and Azrina, for their encouragement and strength.

To Tanja, thanks for the printing sessions! You're a great sister-in-law! To Kak Mala, thank you for all the very needed ideas and information. To Nita, thank you for the extra push and backing I needed to start out with.

My eternal gratefulness to Dr. Adrian for enduring our sessions together. My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Haja and Dr. Normala for their extra support and guidance. I also would like to thank Nina for the phone-calls and forms.

Lastly, to my children, Adam and Afiq, for being the two main reasons to make myself a better person and my inspiration to grab all I can in life. I love you two SO MUCH!!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This research dealt with how language may be developed through Computer-mediated Communication (CMC). A branch of CMC, the Internet Relay Chat, or IRC, was used to analyze how an aspect of language, i.e., Speech Acts, is used in CMC. The research was aimed at discovering whether there is a range of speech acts in CMC, and whether one speech is more predominant than others in the CMC environment.

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to investigate and analyze the use of speech acts in computer-mediated communication. The research used data collected from the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) to investigate speech acts. This study was based on the fact that users of the IRC have developed their own virtual community in which they meet each other - often without any type of physical connection. They are connected merely by the words that they type and read. Though it could also be said that when speech acts were first introduced by Austin (1962), they were analyzed through written texts. Thus, speech acts were first described without taking into account the effects of intonation and body language on their interpretation. The use of IRC therefore, did not differ from Austin's pioneer study as chat sessions were printed out for analysis.

The use of computers via the Internet as a tool of communication is now as common as the use of the telephone. It is not beyond the norm for people to be conversing with each other through computer mediated communication (CMC) by means of synchronous communication, i.e., communication between individuals or groups that occurs at real time, i.e., direct and immediate responses, even though they have never met face to face. This form of language, though scripted - as the words are typed and the read by the receiver - may be viewed as spoken language as its form differs from that of written language.

According to Yates (1996), CMC resembles written language in respect of its vocabulary use, but is more like written language in relation to the use of personal pronouns. Yates also stated that CMC has higher frequency of modal auxiliaries than is typically found in both speaking and writing. It is therefore often categorized as a hybrid language, i.e., it mixes spoken and written styles of discourse, as well as having a style of discourse unique to itself.

Even so, there are paralinguistic features of the language of the IRC that 'chatters' use in order to depict intonation or body language, such as 'techspeak', 'emotes', 'cryptic language' and 'smileys'. Intonation is often indicated by a change to capitals, the use of italics, changes in colour in the font used and the font size itself. Most of these features are used by 'chatters' all over the world, i.e., they appear to be a universal form of expressing oneself through the chat rooms.

There are a huge number of chat systems to be found in the Internet. In the Malaysian context, the channels range from main chat room rooms such as #kampung, #veteran and #mamak. The users of these popular channels however, converse mainly in Bahasa Malaysia. The chat room that the researcher chose is a newspaper chat room, chat.mystar.com.my, in The Star's 'In_The_News' chat room. The reasons for choosing this channel were: its medium density population (about 11-16 chatters at a time); and due to the fact that chatters were normally discussing topics pertaining to current issues. It was also discovered that the chatters were mainly Malaysian, some based locally, and others who lived as far away as Sweden and the United States. The chatters also chatted in English, making it easier to decode their utterances. This therefore gave insights to the use of speech acts in their utterances.

The development of CMC began in the United States more than two decades ago when the Department of Defense developed a network called ARPANET, i.e., the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, which attempted to provide links through several radio and satellite networks. Hence, the Internet was conceived. What started as an

attempt to send messages via networks with 'peer' computers has now developed into a borderless, seemingly limitless flow of information - a highway that is accessible to almost everybody. From its roots as a tool of the military, the Internet is now a super-corridor, and an inexhaustible source, of both knowledge and, unfortunately, trash.

Though it is difficult to control what goes on in chat-rooms, there are rules that chatters are supposed to adhere to. All in all, there are more than fifty channel rules that have been formulated by IRC-administrators and IRC-operators. Of these, there are eight language rules which are more extensively laid out as compared to others, and this will enable the provision of a more convincing analysis of the language of chat rooms. These rules are needed as sometimes, those who use chat rooms abuse its anonymity, i.e., some will indulge in things like pornography in chat rooms that prohibit it. The rules are as follows:

- 1) Be friendly
- 2) No offending other users
- 3) No swearing
- 4) No yelling
- 5) No NetSex / CyberSex / Porn
- 6) No encouraging homosexual chat
- 7) No racial slurs, attacks or put-downs
- 8) No religious fighting

Framework

The study adopted the framework of Potter and Witherell's (1989) ten stages of analyzing discourse. This method was used in face-to-face discourse, therefore, the researcher adapted a few stages in order for it to fit with the characteristics of discourse in the IRC.

For analysis of the data, i.e., the analysis of speech acts used by chatters followed Neuage (2002). Neuage listed the speech acts that he wanted to analyze, then described

why the utterances that he had chosen fell under the speech act category. This approach was also chosen as it describes speech acts in their simplest form, i.e., following Searle's five categories of speech act: Commisives, Expressives, Declarations, Directives and Representatives.

Speech Acts

The philosopher John Austin coined the term 'Speech Act' in 1965 when he wrote his book, based on a series of his lectures, called 'How To Do Things With Words'. In it, Austin pointed out that words do not carry just meaning, but have the power to carry out 'actions' as well. Hence, the Speech Act Theory was developed in order to explain how we exploit language to reach the target of speech acts. The utterances "I name this ship" or "I now pronounce you man and wife" carry a meaning behind the surface level, and establish a higher dimension of social and psychological sphere. For example, the utterance "I now pronounce you man and wife". if uttered by a preacher, will put a new status on a couple, i.e., they are now married. If the same utterance was said by a child, however, it would not have any significant meaning to it.

A key player in the development of speech acts is John Searle. According to Smith (1990:53),

Searle, for his part, seeks precisely to *explain* the relation of promise and obligation by means of what he call "constitutive rules". Such rules are a matter of arbitrary convention, at least in the sense that there are no special "essences" or "universal necessary structures" by which they might somehow be constrained and which might serve them somehow intelligible. The illusion that there are such structures arises only as a result of the fact that we are able to ascribe "institutional concepts" to certain common or garden parts of reality that has been shaped and affected by rules of the constitutive

There are different categories of speech acts which were first initiated by Austin, and these were further developed by Searle (1969). The researcher calls these *first*

generation speech acts and *second generation* speech acts. The first generation speech acts comprises: locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary, informative, performative, expressive, directive, commissive, declarative and representative speech acts.

Listed in the table on the following page is a description of categories of first generation speech acts as described by Neuage (2002: 7-11).



Table 1.1
First generation Speech Acts

SPEECH ACTS	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE (in the context of CMC)
Locutionary	Defined with situation to the aims of the utterers while speaking. In other words, these are speech acts that have taken place. In a text-based chat room, these are typed codes.	• Hello. • Sniff sniff.
Illocutionary	Defined as complete speech act, made in an utterance which typically consists of delivery of the prepositional content of the utterance and a particular illocutionary force whereby the speaker asserts, demands, vows, names, promises, apologizes, congratulates, or suggests. It refers to the real actions that are performed by the utterance, where saying is equivalent to doing. At this level, a 'chatter' provides interpretation of the sentences as speech acts. Illocutionary acts may also affect the hearer, which Austin calls perlocutionary act.	• Good bye. • brb.
Perlocutionary	This could be described as the effect of utterances. This includes persuading, intimidating and incriminating.	• You think you're so smart! • If you don't like chatting with me, ignore me or leave!
Performatives	Defined as words that perform actions, for example, open or close. For a performative to say something, is to do it. In a chat room, performatives include words, acronyms, emoticons and abbreviations. there are two types of performatives, contractual (I will) and declaratory (I do).	• Gtg • :) • :(
Constatives	Defined as speech acts used to illustrate the position of an interaction, i.e., constatives can be concurring, insisting, affirming, disputing, claiming, identifying, conjecturing, informing, predicting, disagreeing, alleging, ranking, announcing, answering, stating, attributing, classifying, confirming, denying, disclosing, reporting or stipulating. An utterance listed in this category can be categorized as being true or false.	• I believe that it will be over within a month. • It's called "moab". short for mother of all bombs!

Amongst the *second generation* speech acts are: commissives, expressives, declarations, directives and representatives. Neuage (2002:14-15) describes these as listed below:

Table 1.2
Second generation Speech Acts

SPEECH ACTS	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Commissives	Speech acts that deal with agreeing, guaranteeing, inviting, promising, swearing and volunteering.	• I'll do that for you. • I promise to look after it.
Expressives	Speech acts that tell others about ones attitudes, feelings and emotions. It states what a person feels.	• I'm so happy! • It saddens me.
Declarations	Speech acts that deal with utterances that bring about a new dimension in a person's life, for example, in cases of marriage or divorce.	• I now pronounce you man and wife. • As of this moment, I resign as CEO of this company.
Directives	Speech acts that advise, admonish, ask, beg, dismiss, excuse, forbid, instruct, order, permit, request, require, suggest, urge and warn.	• You may leave the room now.. • Please do not throw that away
Representatives	Speech acts that express belief about the truth of a proposition, for example, asserting and hypothesizing.	• Everyone's really nice there. • All the food there is excellent.

Computer-mediated Communication

Because language used in CMC can be described as 'spoken speech in script', then there must be a prevalent use of speech acts in this form of communication, just as it has prevalence in regular face-to-face interaction. This is evident from the fact that both share the same structural component of a given speech event (Hatch, 1992), for example, the actors and the act of turn-taking. An advantage of CMC however, lies in the fact that it is free from the constraints of space and time. There is no barrier in either time or distance.

CMC also allows one to be more uninhibited when compared to actual face-to-face interaction. This has its advantages and disadvantages. Its advantage is that it may improve on the way a person can open up to a new idea or topic, as well as giving them the courage to be candid, as their anonymity could be used as a confidence booster. It is because of this that CMC is widely being used as a teaching tool. Students who are deemed quiet, and who therefore may not take the opportunity to speak in a traditional classroom setting, may have enough opportunity for them to comment on something in a classroom using CMC as an intermediary force. This is obvious from the number of educational websites in the Internet, such as www.languagegames.com for students at beginner level, to computer-based grammar instruction for college level ESL students, as available on-line from the University of South Florida (Nutta, 1998). Another more informal aspect of CMC is Internet Relay Chat or IRC, which will be discussed later in the thesis.

A serious disadvantage of anonymity in CMC occurs when users abuse its use to disrupt the lives of others, i.e., CMC in general, and chatting in particular, has acquired the reputation of lacking politeness skills. Some chatters find it amusing to harass others, or in a term widely used in CMC, 'flame' others. Most chat rooms do have people watching over its 'chats', i.e., IRC operators, so those who are out to flame others would most likely be expelled from the room. These people, however, have the right to re-join the group after a few minutes, and the probability of the flaming session happening again is there. If, however, the same user repeatedly flames others, however, they can be permanently banned from the chat room.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC)

The IRC was first used in Finland in 1988, developed by Jarkko Oikarinen as a public domain software. IRC is actually a form of interactive written discourse that opens social domains in which people may interact with one another. On IRC there is a huge number of people interacting with one another simultaneously through various

'channels'. These 'channels' are small electronic communities that one could join and take part in.

The organizational aspect of conversational sequences and exchange structure of language produced on the IRC is one that can catch one's attention (Werry, 1996). Overlaps and interruptions are impossible, because everything is displayed in chronological order, as typed by the chatters. For Werry, reading the conversational sequences is almost like trying to follow the text of a play where the characters' lines are all jumbled up. He stated that (1996:51):

...successive, independent speech acts are simply juxtaposed, and different topics are interwoven.

The length of each utterance is also very short. This is due to the fact that typing takes time, and if a 'chatter' takes time in typing, then the person they are chatting with might lose interest in the topic of conversation, and will start chatting with somebody else. The fewer people a chat-room has, the longer the length of an utterance, and vice versa: if a chat room contains a lot of people, then it is evident the length of the utterance tends to be short.

Due to the fact that one cannot see the body language of the person s/he is chatting with, and there are no paralinguistic features evident, the IRC has developed its own form of paralinguistic features in the form of words. These include hugs, kisses, yawns, and shaking hands, just to name a few. Werry also points out that there is evidence that paralinguistic features do exist, and that chatters develop more features with the use of their imagination. In Herring (1996: 59), he says:

The process of self-consciously constructing the paralinguistic dimensions of communication may heighten the sense of their artificiality, and lead to an increased tendency to experiment and play with them...The greater ability to experiment with a range of different roles on IRC may contribute to the increased verbal play observed.

Statement of the Problem

As stated by Werry (1996), speech acts in the IRC are so juxtaposed that sometimes it is not noticeable which speech act is actually being carried out. CMC, including IRC, is now being used as a tool of teaching, and learners need to have control and understanding of a range of speech acts. With the application of CMC in general and the IRC in particular, it might not be clear whether learners are able to develop the range of active and passive speech acts that they need. Therefore, there is a need to investigate whether or not there is a range of speech acts used in CMC, and how these speech acts are actually executed in the IRC, paying close attention to second generation speech acts, i.e., commissives, expressives and directives.

Research Objectives

1. To find out if there is a limited range of use of speech acts in CMC.
2. To see whether particular types of speech acts are predominant.

Research Questions

The study attempts to look at the following questions:

1. What is the range of use of speech acts in CMC?
2. Are there any particular types of speech acts that are predominant?

Significance of the Study

To discover whether CMC is an effective tool in helping learners develop the range of speech acts that they need as active or passive users. The study also investigates whether some speech acts are more dominant than others in the IRC. This could prove to be useful to instructors who wish to teach their students certain aspects of speech acts in the CMC environment. The study also investigates whether there are particular types of speech acts that are more dominant than others in the chat room.

Definition of terms

The definition of some important terms is as follows:

- i. **Speech acts:** a term coined by Austin in 1962, it states that words carry more than meaning, i.e., how language is used to actually accomplish acts. Austin states that many utterances are equal to actions, for example, the utterance, “I now pronounce you man and wife”, if uttered by one of authority, may bring the people that it is being uttered to to a to a new social and psychological reality (Neuage, 2002).
- ii. **Computer-mediated Communication (CMC):** CMC is a process of exchanging thoughts, ideas and information via computer networks. The concept of CMC is best illustrated as the possibility for communication amongst people who are physically separated, through text-based communication of an electronic medium. (Nik Aloesnita, 2001).
- iii. **Chatters:** Those who chat in the various channels available on the Internet
- iv. **Chatiquette:** The rule of etiquette that chatters should adhere to, i.e., emphasizing on the aspect of courtesy in chat rooms.
- v. **Lurk:** This occurs when a chatter logs on to a particular channel and observes the chat sessions, without actively participating in the conversations.
- vi. **Emoticons:** Designed by chatters to make-up for the non-existence of face-to-face interaction, body language, facial expression and eye-to-eye contact. Symbols such as **:0**, **:)** and **:P** are used in order to indicate a chatter’s emotions, motive and desires. To make clear what a chatter is trying to relay, the symbols must be viewed from a 90-degree angle counter clockwise. Emoticons are also often referred to as smileys.
- vii. **Synchronous:** Communication between individuals or group that occurs in real-time (like face-to-face interaction).
- viii. **Asynchronous:** Communication between individuals or groups using e-mail, bulletin boards, forums, web-pages or other inactive textual Internet interactions.
- ix. **Flame:** Refers to the process of expressing feelings or opinions in a very emotional way. A frequent occurrence in CMC, chatters often use highly inflammable language while chatting without any obvious reasons.

Organization of chapters

This thesis will comprise five chapters. Chapter One describes the summary of the study conducted. A literature review of relevant studies will be presented in Chapter Two, whilst Chapter Three will describe the methodology used in carrying out the research. Chapter Four will expound on the findings of the study. Chapter Five will provide the conclusions and recommendations based on the research.

