

Collister, Lauren B. (2010) “\*-repair in Online Discourse.” *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43:3

Author's Accepted Version

\*-repair in Online Discourse

Lauren Brittany Collister  
Department of Linguistics  
University of Pittsburgh  
[lbc8@pitt.edu](mailto:lbc8@pitt.edu)

Bionote:

Lauren B. Collister is a Ph.D. student in Linguistics at the University of Pittsburgh. She received her M.A. in Linguistics from the University of Pittsburgh in 2008, and B.A.s in Linguistics and Music from The Ohio State University in 2006.

Abstract:

In this article, I present evidence of a repair morpheme in the variety of Online Written English (OWE) used by a community of World of Warcraft players. This morpheme, represented by the asterisk (\*), has no counterpart in spoken English but yet follows discernible rules for use and deployment within the community. While \*-repair follows many principles of repair used in spoken English, it has developed natively in an online environment using an extra-alphabetical character which is unique to the online community. The existence of \*-repair is one example of how OWE has differentiated itself from spoken varieties of English, and creates questions about the influence of the internet on language forms.

## 1. Introduction

Repair in discourse is a way for speakers to correct something that has been previously said incorrectly. Speakers can repair their own utterances or the utterances of others; repairs can occur on pronunciations, incorrect inflections, or misinformation. (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008). Speakers have a variety of strategies involved in repair, from prosodic cues to syntactic backtracking (Levelt and Cutler, 1983).

In this study, I document \*-repair, a repair strategy found in a community of online gamers, which is similar to strategies found in other online communities. \*-repair is an innovative form used in Online Written English (OWE) with no correlate in spoken English. This repair strategy involves using an asterisk (\*) as a repair morpheme to mark the corrected version of a previously incorrect discourse item (first mentioned in Collister, 2008). The origin of \*-repair is unclear, although Joshua Raclaw has speculated that it originated in the traditional orthographic custom of using an asterisk to indicate an afterthought (Raclaw, 2006). Another possibility is that the evolution of the asterisk as a repair morpheme is rooted in the traditional use of the asterisk as a wildcard character in command line interfaces. A history of \*-repair would be an interesting endeavor, if difficult, and would certainly shed light on how this structure evolved into what it is today.

However it evolved, the use of \*-repair as a morphological form provides evidence for the dynamic and innovative nature of the language variety used in online communities, and illustrates a unique and intriguing adoption of spoken language conversational rules into a digital, written space. In this paper, I will show how \*-repair is deployed in one particular community and the implications for research in online language use.

## 2. The community

My data for this study on \*-repair come from my ethnography of *World of Warcraft* (also known by the acronym WoW) in the years 2007–2010. WoW is a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG), a fantasy-style adventure game involving over ten million players from across the globe, created and maintained by the company Blizzard Entertainment. My ethnographic style was participant-observation – I created my own character and played the game like any regular WoW player, learning the controls of my character and the layout of the world. I joined a guild (a large-scale social organization) which was created and run by a friend of mine and documented all of the changes and evolutions of the guild over the years. To capture the language used by players, I used the /chatlog feature present in the game, which saved all textual chat data to a file on my hard drive. I recorded all instances of chat during my three years of ethnography, resulting in a corpus of over 500,000 lines of chat data.

The participants in this study were mostly members of the guild, although chat data were obtained from interactions with players outside of the guild and in publicly observable chat channels. The interactions studied contained no sensitive or identifying information; however, in order to protect the identity of the participants, all identifying information (including avatar names) were changed to pseudonyms. To my knowledge, all in-guild participants were over the age of eighteen, although other demographic data were obtained rarely if at all. Players were aware that I was collecting data and had the option to decline to participate in the study, although no one chose to opt out. I attempted to contact all players whose data appear in this paper to confirm their consent, although some could not be reached because they had quit the game, left the guild, or otherwise gone out of contact.

### 3. The uses of \*-repair

In this section, I will document the ways that \*-repair is used in the community of World of Warcraft players from my ethnography. I will first discuss the forms that \*-repair can take, then I will discuss what types of errors license the use of \*-repair, followed by a discussion of positioning of repair turns.

#### 3.1. The form

\*-repair is used to repair a typographical error (typo) in a previous line of chat. When a player makes a typo in chat, the next message sent by this player will contain an \* character and the corrected version of the error, as in Example (1).

- (1) 1 11/27 21:14:52.750 [Party] Aniko: when i run ot  
2 11/27 21:14:54.765 [Party] Aniko: out\*

In line 1, the player Aniko mistypes “ot” instead of “out”. Immediately following this, he types “out\*”, with the \* indicating that this is a repair. In this particular example, the player uses the \*-repair morpheme following the corrected version of his previous error; however, the \* can occur before the correction, as in (2), below.

- (2) 1 11/28 19:49:29.015 [2. Trade] Wafflez: Now that you throw me, cage and all into a  
wall, I’m technically “damaged” goods :p  
2 11/28 19:49:39.062 [2. Trade] Wafflez: \*threw

Here, Wafflez makes his repair in line 2, using the \* before his corrected word, “threw”. The placement of the \* in the repair turn seems to be a matter of personal style in this community – there are no discernible patterns regarding the precise placement of the \* on the left or right edge of the repair turn.

There is an existing allomorph of the \* used in \*-repair – namely, ^. The use of ^ in place of the \* in \*-repair is not very common and usually restricted to certain individual players. One player who uses the ^ allomorph is Rufus, seen below in Example (3).

- (3) 1 5/12 00:45:32.242 [Guild] Rufus: they key dodging!  
2 5/12 00:45:36.746 [Guild] Rufus: keep^

Rufus is a veteran of MMORPGs and World of Warcraft, but the use of the ^ allomorph does not seem to correlate with either of these identity statuses (as we might expect, following Steinkuehler’s (2005) research on the use of different allomorphs of lexical items by “beta-vets” and “n00bs” in the online game Lineage II). The particular conditions of the use of the ^ allomorph may require more extensive demographic information which I do not have access to in the present study. The study of this variation may be a viable project for future research.

#### 3.2. Types of errors

In Examples (1) and (2), we saw two different types of errors being corrected. In example (1), Aniko corrected a typo in which he did not type a certain letter which resulted in a misspelling of a word. In

Example (2), Wafflez is correcting a morphological error, namely tense marking – he typed ‘‘throw’’ when he meant ‘‘threw’’. It is not determinable whether this was a typographical error by Wafflez or a production error. The question becomes – can both typos and production errors license the use of \*-repair?

The answer to this question can be found by looking at multiple instances of \*-repair by the same person. Several examples of the same player making multiple repairs sequentially exist in my data. For instance, sometimes players will make a typo in attempting to correct a previous typo, which can result in a string of \*-repairs, as in (4), where the player Komix first mistypes the name of the item he wants to buy (a typographical error), then in his second message forgets to include the price he will pay for the item (a production error), so must take yet another \*-repair turn.

- (4) 1 11/23 17:13:37.937 [2. Trade] Komix: wtb (=wanted to buy) glove of old  
2 11/23 17:13:47.281 [2. Trade] Komix: gloves of old\*  
3 11/23 17:14:20.203 [2. Trade] Komix: wtb gloves of old 40g\*

From this example, we can see that \*-repair is licensed to be used with different types of errors, not simply typos.

### 3.3. Positioning of \*-repair

Hutchby and Wooffitt (2008: 60) discuss the different sequences and positions of repair, which I have reproduced below.

- Self-initiated self-repair: Repair is both initiated and carried out by the speaker of the trouble source.
- Other-initiated self-repair: Repair is carried out by the speaker of the trouble source but initiated by the recipient.
- Self-initiated other-repair: The speaker of a trouble source may try and get the recipient to repair the trouble – for instance if a name is proving troublesome to remember.
- Other-initiated other-repair: The recipient of a trouble source turn both initiates and carries out the repair. This is closest to what is conventionally understood as ‘correction’.

So far, all of the examples of \*-repair have been that of self-initiated self-repair. In my data, there are many instances of using \*-repair for other-repair, as in (5).

- (5) 1 1/2 06:16:50.546 [2. Trade] Shak: NEED SOME MORE FOR ZG (=Zul’Gurub) RAID.  
GOT A HOLE BUNCH!!  
2 1/2 06:17:21.375 [2. Trade] Azria: \*whole . . .

In (5), Shak makes an error by typing ‘‘hole’’ for ‘‘whole’’, which is corrected by another player, Azria, who uses \*-repair to do so. This is an example of other-initiated other-repair in second position – Azria corrects Shak’s error for him, after thirty-one seconds have passed without a self-repair. In other words, Shak had sufficient time to correct his error, and Azria saw that he had not done so and moved to correct the error for him. This type of correction is not usually perceived as polite – while proper grammar and spelling are seen as important on this particular server (see Friedline, 2008), correcting someone else’s error is still a face threat. It is important to note that Shak had been ‘‘spamming’’, or sending multiple

copies, this message to Trade chat for nearly an hour at the point when Azria made this correction; so, perhaps getting tired of Shak's constant insistence on posting his recruitment message, the denizens of the Trade chat channel began to make fun of him to amuse themselves and possibly correct his behavior. Most of my instances of \*-repair as other-repair are of this nature – gently teasing another player who has made a careless spelling error.

Even Example (5), however, is still an example of \*-repair occurring in second position. “Positions” refer to the number of turns after a trouble spot that the repair occurs – the above examples all have the instance of \*-repair occurring in the turn following the trouble spot, which is referred to as second position. “First position” is when repair is initiated before the end of the turn in which the error occurred (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008: 63) – in OWE, first position repair is not usually visible to the recipient since speakers can use the backspace key to delete any errors in typing if they are noticed before the message is sent to chat (although, see Tanskanen and Karhukorpi (2008) for an interesting look at first position repair in online discourse). Second position repair is by far the most common because the speaker has noticed an error as soon as the entirety of the message was sent to the chat box and appeared on the speaker's screen. \*-repair can be used in positions other than second position, although it is rare in my data. These instances usually involve other-initiated self-repair, as in (6).

- (6) 1 7/9 01:06:41.234 [Party] Lumins: nice amount f mana killer  
2 7/9 01:06:50.203 [Party] Killeroo: what  
3 7/9 01:06:55.468 [Party] Lumins: of\*

In (6), Killeroo asks for clarification in line 2, and Lumins corrects his typo from line 1 in line 3 using the \*-repair feature. This is an example of repair occurring in third position, in the second turn following the completion of the turn containing the trouble spot. In this particular example, it may be the case that Lumins does not understand why his message is unintelligible until Killeroo asks for clarification.

I have no clear instances of fourth-position \*-repair in my data. Schegloff (1992) argues that the vast majority of repair occurs either in first, second, or third position, which may account for the lack of data I have of \*-repair in fourth position. However, it seems that the types of repair that usually occur in fourth position are not conducive to the use of \*-repair. Hutchby and Wooffitt illustrate the existence of fourth-position repair by using an example of an ambiguous statement where the hearer does not understand what it was that the speaker meant and must negotiate the new meaning. The example that they use is reproduced below in (7).

- (7) 1 M: Loes, do you have a calendar,  
2 L: Yeah ((reaches for her desk calendar)  
3 M: Do you have one that hangs on the wall?  
! 4 L: Oh you want one.  
5 L: Yeah

(Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008: 64)

Negotiating meaning in this manner is not conducive to the use of the \*-repair morpheme. Since \*-repair is normally used to correct typographical errors, the original error must be present immediately within the screen space in order for the readers of the message to understand what is being corrected. Previous

research has documented that speakers choose to repair their speech when it is most fluent to do so (Seyfeddinipur et al., 2008), and initiating repair several turns after the problematic spot by using \*-repair would interrupt the flow of the conversation, requiring interlocutors to look back through the chat log for the referenced problematic turn. Such long-distance repair as would be involved in fourth-position repair would perhaps be too far for \*-repair to be a viable option, and speakers must use other repair strategies. Furthermore, since \*-repair is usually used for typographical errors of some form, the negotiation errors and interpersonal misunderstandings involved in fourth position repair (Schegloff, 1992) are not the types of errors that \*-repair is used for. The complete lack of fourth position \*-repair in my three-year data set is evidence supporting this theory, although certainly not ultimate proof that \*-repair never occurs in fourth position.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In Section 3, I have shown how \*-repair is deployed in one online community. There are stylistic options for positioning of the morpheme (on the left or right edge of the turn), as well as extant variation in the form of the ^ allomorph. \*-repair can be deployed for self- or other-repair, and in immediately sequential turns. Although \*-repair mimics repair functions present in spoken language and documented extensively by Conversation Analysts, the existence of a distinct repair morpheme is one significant difference between Online Written English and spoken forms of English. Furthermore, the morpheme consists of a character which only exists in written form, as there is no pronounceable version of an \* (other than saying its name, ‘‘asterisk’’). The use of an extra-alphabetical character marks this form as unique to written English, and its widespread use across many online communities indicates that users of Online Written English have embraced it as a feature of their particular language variety.

It is my hope that other researchers will take up the investigation of the \*-repair morpheme and its variants and pursue investigation of its deployment across other online communities. Many questions remain unanswered: is its left- or right edge positioning merely an individual style choice? Are there predictable variation patterns in its allomorphy (as with the use of the ^ allomorph by the player Rufus)? Does \*-repair operate with spatial conditions on its use – i.e. is there a limit on how many turns can pass before the use of \*-repair is no longer viable? Do other languages with an online presence have similar repair morphemes – could \*-repair even be a cross-linguistic phenomenon which exists only in one particular medium of communication (the internet) regardless of the language being used in the community? The answers to these questions await more research, and can further illuminate the influence of the internet on language varieties.

#### **References**

Blizzard Entertainment, 2004. *World of Warcraft*.

Collister, Lauren, 2008. Virtual discourse structure: analysis of conversation in *World of Warcraft*. Unpublished Master’s Thesis. University of Pittsburgh.

Friedline, Benjamin, 2008. A linguistic profile of power and identity in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. Unpublished Master’s Thesis. University of Pittsburgh.

<http://etd.library.pitt.edu/ETD/available/etd-11022008-165743/unrestricted/Friedline11-17-2008.pdf>  
(accessed 20.03.10).

Hutchby, Ian, Wooffitt, Robin, 2008. *Conversation Analysis*. Polity Press, Malden, MA.

Levelt, William, Cutler, Anne, 1983. Prosodic marking in speech repair. *Journal of Semantics* 2 (2), 205–217.

Raclaw, Joshua, 2006. Typos in chat. AIR-L Listserv. <http://listserv.aoir.org/htdig.cgi/air-l-aoir.org/2006-July/010216.html> (accessed 12.0310).

Schegloff, Emanuel, 1992. Repair after next turn: the last structurally provided defense of intersubjectivity in conversation. *American Journal of Sociology* 97, 1295–1345.

Seyfeddinipur, Mandana, Kita, Sotaro, Indefrey, Peter, 2008. How speakers interrupt themselves in managing problems in speaking: evidence from self repairs. *Cognition* 108, 837–842.

Steinkuehler, Constance, 2005. *Cognition and learning in massively multiplayer online games: a critical approach*. Doctoral dissertation. University of Wisconsin-Madison.  
<http://website.education.wisc.edu/steinkuehler/thesis.html> (accessed 15.09.07).

Tanskanen, Sanna-Kaisa, Karhukorpi, Johanna, 2008. Concessive repair and the negotiation of affiliation in e-mail discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40, 1587–1600.

This paper was published in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, Volume 43 Issue 3, in 2010.