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Usernames as Linguistic Devices of Self- and Other-Categorisation in Computer-Mediated Communication

Abstract

This study analyses metadiscourse produced by Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) participants on how they select and operate their usernames. The data comprises two answers to an open question in a survey conducted amongst participants of Чат30 ('Chat30'), a website on the Russian-speaking Internet. These texts are approached as excerpts of communication rather than survey data and examined using Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) as an analytical tool.

MCA originated from the work of Harvey Sacks, based on Ethnomethodology (EM) developed by Harold Garfinkel, who studied the interactional character of social reality. MCA serves to analyse linguistic strategies that people use to allocate themselves and others to so-called "membership categories" with commonly recognised sets of attributes ascribed to them.

The general perception within this analytical approach is that personal names are used to refer to people, but not to categorise or otherwise characterise them, and therefore are not considered as terms of categorisation. In contrast, the aim of this study is to show that CMC participants handle their usernames as information-rich linguistic tools that share characteristics with terms of categorisation.

1. Usernames in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

The functioning of usernames in CMC has been conceptualised in a number of ways, but what unites these approaches is the insistence that the role of usernames is to create a first impression (Johnová, 2004). Hence, usernames are often presented as static and non-negotiable, and displayed to the audience rather than co-constructed collectively. For example, according to Bechar--Israeli (1995), usernames are one of the "representational elements" of communication in Internet Relay Chat (IRC), whose role is to "tempt other participants to strike up a conversation", while Sidorova (2006, p. 74) describes them as "means of pre-communicational self-presentation". Danet et al. (1997) compare usernames to masks that participants 'wear' to disguise real identities and attract attention. Bays (1998) explains how usernames, playing the role of "face", constitute "a symbolic locus for presence" and substitute to some extent audio-visual cues. According to Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008, p. 258), in dating chatrooms usernames represent participants' bodies; this is how participants recognise each other as members of gender and sexual categories. Stommel (2007, pp. 144–145) conceptualises usernames as decontextualised "emblems" indicating users' identities in the form of stereotypical images of persons (such as female/male, upper-class, lawyer), because they are selected before any interaction takes place, and are fixed, i.e. they automatically appear with every post and do not change depending on the text. Androutsopoulos (2006, p. 525) also describes usernames as static, "emblematic" elements of CMC, and as "acts of self-presentation that are designed for and displayed to, rather than negotiated with, an audience".

Considering this tendency, it is not surprising that researchers have focused predominantly on analysing the semantics of usernames, often creating, broadly speaking, etymological, structural, associative or other groupings and classifications, based on their own ideas and judgements rather than the users' perspectives (e.g., Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Naruszewicz-Duchlińska, 2003; Sidorova, 2006, pp. 92–97; Stommel 2007, pp. 150–156; Van Langendonck, 2007, pp. 301–306). This trend does not seem to have changed over time. More recent works, including those related to usernames on social media and instant messaging platforms, also tend to focus on their semantics and/or structure, creating taxonomies for specific internet environments or websites (Hämäläinen,

2013, pp. 221–227; 2019, pp. 8–21; 2020, pp. 183–186; Szymański, 2013, pp. 824–829; Olivier, 2014, pp. 58–68; Xu et al., 2020, pp. 160–164). Another variant of these tendencies are attempts at automated recognition of demographic information based on usernames, e.g., at detecting gender of social media users either based on their usernames alone (e.g., Jaech & Ostendorf, 2015; Yuenyong & Sinthupinyo, 2020), or in combination with other data, such as first name, profile picture, colours, activities, etc. (Alowibdi et al., 2013; Vicente et al., 2019).

These studies tend to dedicate little attention to how usernames are perceived by their users. Although some of them present excerpts of users' accounts regarding their own usernames or the functioning of usernames in general, these accounts are usually not analysed in any systematic or methodical way. In both early and recent studies, any metadiscourse is typically taken at face value, and is only accompanied by short comments, or even cited without any comment at all (e.g., Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Stommel, 2007, pp. 148–149; Ecker, 2011, p. 9; Hagström, 2012, pp. 86–87; Hämäläinen, 2013, pp. 221, 228–232; 2020, p. 181; Xu et al., 2020, pp. 160–164).

To my knowledge, so far, only Aldrin (2019, pp. 34–35) has conducted a systematic analysis of user metadiscourse in the form of interviews. The interviewees, four teenagers, talked about their naming strategies, use of usernames across time and contexts, experiences and attitudes to their own usernames, and their understanding of the role and functioning of usernames in general. Aldrin (2019, pp. 33–35) used identity theory and social positioning as well as folk onomastics as her theoretical framework. The findings indicate, that, firstly, usernames were described as linked with one's identity in one or another way (e.g., "a short description of who you are", "something you can connect yourself to") and, secondly, as tools of self-presentation and impression management (e.g., using multiple audience-specific usernames, abandoning "childish" usernames in favour of more "mature" ones). The teenagers' approaches were represented as a continuum from creative (preference for personalised, context-adjusted usernames) to pragmatic (preference for formal, universal and long-lasting usernames) positions.

Importantly, Aldrin (2019) goes beyond classifying usernames and theorising about their role and digs deeper into how their users actually use and talk about them. However, I would like to point out the following issues:

(1) Although the data comprises the teenagers' accounts, the analysis itself does not seem to fully reflect their perspectives. The material was searched for specific, *a priori* established phenomena, e.g., "recurring themes and

similarities as well as dissimilarities across participants" (Aldrin, 2019, p. 33), meaning (amongst other things) that some parts of the material were brought to the fore while others were left out. Hence, ultimately the results represent the author's viewpoint rather than the users'.

(2)   Despite approaching the material with analytical tools and stating that "[t]he data were interpreted", Aldrin (2019, p. 33) offers little interpretation. The author predominantly just reports what the interview participants said, occasionally citing them to illustrate her narration. Hence, the users' accounts are once again largely taken at face value.

2. Research material and method of analysis

The data used in this study comes from a survey that I conducted in 2011 amongst participants of the Russian-speaking website Чат30 'Chat30' (www. Chat30.ru) as a pilot study for my PhD project. I eventually chose different methodology and did not use the collected material.

For this study, I chose two responses to an open-ended question "Would you like to add anything else?" and analysed them as independent data.

I applied Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) as my analytical approach. MCA originated from the work of a sociologist Harvey Sacks (e.g., 1972; 1979), who in the 1960's and 1970's developed some techniques to analyse the practices of self- and other-categorisation in naturally occurring talk and text. He based his work on Ethnomethodology (EM) developed by Harold Garfinkel (1967), who made a range of observations about how people as society members communicate and collaborate with each other in everyday life in order to make sense of and co-construct their taken-for-granted reality. What distinguishes this approach from others is that EM recommends restraining from application or testing of any theoretical assumptions; rather, it is important to strictly focus on how participants (i.e. the data producers) themselves interpret the situation in which they take part (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. vii, 33; Francis & Hester, 2004, p. 23). EM-based MCA is therefore a strictly bottom-up approach that focuses on people's own perspectives as they recognise one another as certain sorts of persons.

MCA is used to analyse naturally occurring communication, both spoken and written. People categorise themselves and others in various situations of everyday life; therefore, any naturally generated material is suitable for analysis, including transcribed recordings of conversations, court trials, radio and television broadcasts, various documents, articles, scripts, literary texts, social media posts, and so on. Similarly, any scientific inquiry constitutes a social occurrence and produces natural, analysable communication (Garfinkel, 1967, p. viii). On this basis, I am approaching my research material as natural communication rather than survey responses in order to perform a close, nuanced analysis.

2.1. Membership Categories

As stated above, in ordinary situations of everyday life people organise themselves and others into a huge variety of categories, such as man, woman, mother, customer, junkie, and so on, in order to make sense of their relationships with others and their functioning within the society. The importance of these categories lies in the fact that they are not just labels – instead, they exhibit the following properties (Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 2007a, pp. 469–470):

- They are grouped into **collections** that perceptibly go together, such as professions (e.g., teacher/doctor/lawyer), family members (mother/father/son), and nationalities (Russians/Germans/Britons).
- They are ascribed **category-bound activities** and other attributes (behaviours, entitlements, obligations, competencies, etc.), or "forms of conduct", that are perceived as particularly characteristic of their members.
- They are **inference-rich**, meaning that they carry common-sense knowledge about what category members are like, how they behave, what their rights and obligations are and so on.
- They are **protected against induction**, which means that when a person who is perceived to be a member of a specific category does not comply with the common knowledge about this category, people tend to assess them as a deficient or exceptional member of the category rather than to revise their knowledge about the category itself.

Thus, it could be said that membership categories serve as a kind of storage system for common-sense knowledge that more generally facilitates the

construction and re-production of social order that people typically take for granted.

2.2. Names and terms of categorisation

As Schegloff (2007a, p. 463) explains, the topic of membership categorisation can be analytically approached by locating it within the domain of "practices for referring to persons". Namely, there are certain patterns that can be observed regarding how people refer to one another. For example, there is a preference for minimisation (i.e. references are typically accomplished by the use of a single reference form), and a preference for recipient design (i.e. if possible, so-called "recognitionals" are used, which are reference forms that enable the recipient to recognise who is being referred to). Within this domain, names are deemed "prototypical and ideal recognitionals", partly because they also belong to the group of minimised reference forms (Sacks & Schegloff, 2007, pp. 24–25).

As it is explained, any person can be referred to in many ways, e.g., he, Joe, a guy, my uncle, someone, Harry's cousin, the dentist, the man who came to dinner. These methods include names and terms of categorisation; hence, both names and terms of categorisation can be used for "doing referring". However, while terms of categorisation can also be used for "doing categorisation" – names cannot. On the other hand, most of referring is not done by terms of categorisation, and furthermore, most of the time when terms of categorisation are used, they are used to do other things than referring (Sacks & Schegloff, 2007, p. 24; Schegloff, 2007b, pp. 433–434).

Thus, within this analytic practice, names, as a rule, are not considered to constitute categorising devices. However, the studies within this field have traditionally involved official, especially given names. They were also mostly performed in Anglophone countries, and typically did not include semantically transparent names, such as nicknames or usernames. Yet there have been some indications that these kinds of names may actually be used in a similar way to terms of categorisation. For example, Rymes (1996) has shown how an individual nicknamed *Little Creeper* adds new meanings to his nickname along with gaining experience as a gang member and how these meanings are negotiated in interactions on an ongoing basis, which is reminiscent of how the category-bound activities might be negotiated and established in

interactions. However, in this case, this process is not directly related to the semantics of the nickname. Haviland (2007, pp. 228, 233–234) on the other hand, shows how semantics of a nickname may be brought up to invoke certain characteristics of the named person, namely, a group of gossiping men used the nicknames *Lazy Domingo* and *Small Lazy Domingo* both for reference (to pick up an object to talk about) as well as to characterise the referent and point out what aspect of identity would be discussed.

Some studies also present examples of how semantics of usernames are referred to in conversations, but the samples are typically short and are not analysed methodically. For example, Bechar-Israeli (1995) observed how the semantics of usernames were referred to in a conversational play, e.g., a user named *HollyCow* received comments about "butchering" them, while *god* provoked reactions like "oh my god" and "now i know god exists". Similar word-playing comments observed Fedorova (2002), e.g., *Сезонный охотник* [sezonnyĭ okhotnik] 'seasonal hunter' was asked who their prey was.

In my earlier study (Aleksiejuk, 2017a, pp. 232–293; 2017b), I showed how one selected username was operated in numerous interactions as a tool for "doing categorising" by both the user himself and his interlocutors. To illustrate this, I will show some examples in conversations collected from a Russian-speaking forum Посиделки [posidelki] 'gatherings' (previously http://posidelok.net, currently https://posidelki.3bb.ru), between a user named *Chainik* and his interlocutors. This username derives from a commonly used Russian word чайник [chaĭnik] 'teapot; kettle'. This term has also a secondary, colloquial meaning that indicates an incompetent, inexperienced or generally unintelligent person and can be translated as 'dummy'. In the collected conversations, we can observe numerous references to both the primary and secondary meanings of this word that frame the named user as a specific category of person (Aleksiejuk, 2017a, pp. 232–293; 2017b), but here I only show examples related to its primary meaning.

2.3. *Chainik* as a term of categorisation

Chainik (**Ch**) repeatedly enacts certain activities such as greeting newcomers, offering tea, articulating questions and comments on the newcomers and instructing them, which might be associated with the role of a forum's host. For example, a teapot might be seen as an attribute of a host and a common

requisite for gatherings. His routine way of doing it includes linking these activities explicitly with his username (example 1), but categories can also be made recognisable and relevant without being referred to directly, just by enacting category-bound activities (Schegloff, 2007a, p. 474), so that once the mentioned activities have been established as bound up with *Chainik*, they invoke this category when enacted (example 2).

(1) **Ch** – *привет!!!!!!!!!! я чайник тута захочешь чай напою...*
     [hello!!!!!!!!!! I'm a teapot here I'll serve tea if you want...]
(2) **Ch** – *привет заходи раздевайся разувайся, добро пожаловать к нашему столу!!!!!!!!!!*
     [hello come in take off your coat and your shoes, welcome to our table!!!!!!!!!!]

Based on shared common-sense knowledge, *Chainik*'s interlocutors (**In**) recognise his actions and play along, e.g., by enacting tea-tasting and other related activities (examples 3 and 4). In this way, they cooperate in constructing this category and establishing its category-bound activities.

(3) **In** – *спасибо* ☺ *как же хочется чаю с лимончиком, мм*
     [thank you ☺ I'm just dying for some tea with lemon, mm]
(4) **In** – *ух ты!! Красиво, и вкусно, варение, кажется, клубничное*
     [ooh you!! Beautiful, and tasty, looks like strawberry preserve]

Further, both *Chainik* and his interlocutors included his username into collections. They typically create collections that include so-called positioned categories, i.e. positioned hierarchically within the collection. They are often used to contrast certain categories. As Hester (1998) explains: "if a person is an X, but he or she behaves like a Y, where X and Y are positioned higher and lower relative to each other (...), then that person is due either praise or complaint". For example, in the collection 'stages of life', adults are positioned higher than children and when behaviour of an adult is described as childish, it is often to indicate that it is inappropriate, and to discipline them. Example 5 shows a similar case – reference to the production date invokes age-related collection in which 'coffee pot' represents a younger age, while 'teapot' – older, and age-inappropriate behaviour is pointed out. In example 6, *Chainik* creates a collection of hierarchically organised categories 'teapot' and 'samovar', where 'samovar' is perceptibly superior to a teapot.

(5) **In** – *насчет чайника – по году выпуска вижу, что он ну никак не кофейник, а косит под школьника*
[as for chainik – by the production date I can see that he's in no way a coffee pot; yet, he plays a schoolboy]

(6) **In** – *приветик! А почему чайник?*
[hi! And why chainik?]
Ch – *если б я себя самоваром назвал то я думаю я б не стал от того умнее, красивее и здоровея*
[if I called myself a samovar, I think I wouldn't make myself cleverer, more beautiful and healthier]

Establishing category-bound features and protection against induction might be enacted by pointing at deviations from expected conduct, such as what a category member is lacking or fails to perform. Examples 7, 8 and 9 show complaints and criticism of *Chainik*'s deficiencies and failures as a category member.

(7) **In** – *у тебя что нет свистка? У чайникоф должен быть свисток!*
[don't you have a whistle? Chainiks should have whistles!]

(8) **In** – *не применяет средство от накипи.*
[he doesn't use descaler.]

(9) **In** – *ходит где-то чайник блин, а мы чая так хотим*
[chainik is wandering god knows where, while we want our tea so much]

To summarise, both *Chainik* and his interlocutors operate his username as an inference rich term of categorisation, i.e. as carrying information about what he is or should be like, what he does or should do, what to expect of him, and so on. In interactions, this membership category is consistently constructed, negotiated and re-defined by establishing sets of category-bound attributes, indicating deviant behaviour, and comparing with other categories within relevant collections.

The present study complements these findings by showing users' own stories and reflections on the selection and usage of their usernames.

3. Data analysis

The selected responses are by users named *don luciano* and *Венеция* [veneʦiɪ̯a] 'Venice'. *Don luciano* describes one username and focuses on how it expresses his inner self and values, and seems attached to it irrespective of the audience's reactions. *Венеция*, on the other hand, describes testing a number of usernames and reactions to them before choosing one that suited her needs. I have split the texts into smaller sections for the analysis.

3.1. *don luciano*

(10) *Дон это не мексиканцы, не испанцы, не Хосе и Луис Антонио.*
       [Don is not [about] Mexicans or Spaniards, or Jose and Luis Antonio.]

Don luciano begins by introducing the honorific title 'don', the first component of his username. To do this, he brings up two categories in the collection of nationalities (Mexicans and Spaniards), that are commonly recognised as Spanish-speaking nationalities, and then Spanish-sounding names for persons that, in this context, can be taken to be members of these categories. He frames these categories as categories with whom this title could be associated, but should not in this case, i.e., *don luciano* does not belong to the same category as (don) Jose and Louis Antonio. Thus, 'don' may indicate members of more than one category.

(11) *Это по моему мнению показатель чести и своеобразной справедливости,*
       все самое лучшее и хорошее из истории.
       [This is in my opinion a sign of honour and a particular kind of justice, all
       the best and right in history.]

Then he lists a couple bof qualities commonly perceived as positive (being honourable and just, contributing to history in a positive way) that according to him are bound-up with this title.

(12) *Истории написанной кровью. Истории сицилийской мафии, криминальной*
       истории.
       [The history written in blood. The history of Sicilian Mafia, the history of crime.]

He then reveals what category, other than Spanish-speaking nationals, the title 'don' indicates, namely, members of Sicilian mafia in the collection of criminals (the way the history of the Sicilian mafia is listed along with the history of crime indicates that they are both linked).

(13) *Надо брать всегда самое хорошее из любых моментов жизни из любых ее проявлений, ведь криминальные законы это по сути своей перевоплощение законов природы. Око за око, брат за брата, честь (она же жизнь) твоих родных и близких. По другому говоря человечество стало (по его мнению) венцом природы не горлопаня перед мамонтом "давай свой хобот. Я жрать хочу".*

[We must always make the best of every moment of life in all its manifestations, criminal laws are essentially an embodiment of the laws of nature, aren't they. An eye for an eye, a brother [looking out] for a brother, honour (which equals life after all) of your family and friends. In other words, humankind has not become (in its own opinion) the crown of nature bawling out at a mammoth "give me your trunk. I want to eat".]

Next, *don luciano* places the mafia category within certain moral order. He explains that the criminal code of conduct is based on natural laws, which can be read as meaning that it is essentially good or reasonable. Appeal to nature seems to be quite a common strategy to validate certain behaviours, viewpoints and so on. Its main postulation is that what is (supposedly) natural is automatically good or justified. To support his argumentation he uses the expressions *ведь* and *же*. In this context, they both convey similar sense, and can be translated as 'isn't it', 'after all' or 'indeed'. Such expressions signal referring to shared knowledge and prompt agreement, pointing out that something is self-evident and does not need explanation because everybody knows it. He supports his argumentation further by pointing out that it is a commonly shared opinion that humankind has survived and thrived thanks to following these laws.

(14) *А так там очень много правильного и справедливого, только закон для многих что дышло, как под себя повернут и по фигу что для большинства не вышло.*

[Other than that, much of it is right and just, except that for many the law is like a drawbar, [they only care] how to steer it to suit themselves and don't give a damn that for the majority it didn't work out.]

He then explains that the laws he was referring to are essentially good, while the problem is that many people bend the rules to their own advantage while harming others. This can be read as a strong manifestation of protection against induction – although it looks like a considerable proportion of members in this category bend the rules, this user still talks about them as if they were an exception rather than typical members of this category. He also constructs a contrastive relational pair of categories within the context of criminal morality: 'law-abiding Mafiosi'/ 'law-breaking Mafiosi' (relational pairs are a type of collections, cf. Jayyusi, 1984, p. 123; Francis & Hester, 2004, pp. 40–41).

(15) *Ну это мое мнение и оно всегда. Не подумайте обо мне плохо просто я с Вами честен и если Вас интересуют ники я рассказываю почему именно он.*
[Well this is my opinion as it always is. Do not think badly of me, I'm just honest with you and if you are interested in nicks, I'm just explaining why this one specifically.]

The subsequent part of *don luciano*'s text describes the reasoning behind his choice of username. It begins by a hedging statement saying that he has presented his own viewpoint and nobody else's, followed by an expression of concern about my opinion about him. This is because he knows what common-sense inferences would normally be drawn from his descriptions by referring to so-called "common culture". As Garfinkel (1967, p. 76) explains, the term "common culture" refers to "socially sanctioned grounds of inference and action" that concern all aspects of life, including "the conduct of family life, market organisation, distribution of honour, competence, responsibility, goodwill, income, motives among members, frequency, causes of, and remedies for trouble, and the presence of good and evil purposes behind the apparent workings of things". Thus, it serves as a reference point for sense-making and acting.

(16) *Хотя честно говоря каких то особых целей я перед этим никому не ставил. Так, то что хотелось моему внутреннему Я, то что по сути своей есть моя сущность. Примерно вот так. И ничего не скрывая, не играя, просто показываю что я за человек. Нет ширмы, маски. И соответственно хотелось что бы человек понимал, примерно, что от меня можно ожидать.*

> [Although to be honest I did not set any particular goals for this nick. Just what my inner self longed for, what fundamentally constitutes my essence. Something like that. And without hiding anything, without playing games, I'm simply showing what kind of person I am. No cover, no mask. And, conversely, I wanted people to understand, let's say, what can be expected of me.]

And finally, he explains that his username represents "what kind of person" he is fully ("without hiding anything") and directly (without "playing games" and covering or masking it). He also expects others to infer from his username what conduct could be expected of him, which is another reference to shared common-sense knowledge.

3.2. *Венеция*

(17) *мой первый ник был СнеДурочка, т.к. шла в чат целенаправленно „дурачиться", много шутить и не хотела, что бы воспринимали всерьёз. Своим ником давала понять, что могу говорить глупости и вести себя крайне игриво.*
[my first nick was *SneDurochka*, because I visited chatrooms deliberately to 'fool around', to joke a lot and didn't want to be taken seriously. With my nick I made known that I might talk nonsense and act extremely playfully.]

Венеция begins with describing her experience with one of her previous usernames, *СнеДурочка* [snedurochka], a wordplay combining the name *Снегурочка* [snegurochka] 'Snow Girl' (a fairy tale character) and a word *дурочка* [durochka] 'silly girl'. She lists activities bound up with this username (fooling around, joking a lot, talking nonsense, acting extremely playfully) and expresses expectations that others would infer what conduct to expect of her ("I made known"), thus, presumes certain shared common-sense knowledge about it.

(18) *Но когда вступала в спор или пыталась отстаивать свою точку зрения, меня ни кто не воспринимал, игнорировали, не шли на обсуждение серьезных тем. С трудом завоевывала авторитет в общении.*

[But when I got into an argument or tried to defend my viewpoint, nobody took notice, they ignored me, wouldn't engage in discussing serious topics. I struggled to gain authority in interaction.]

Then she reports that the audience's reactions confirmed her expectations, but it turned out to be problematic because once she had been ascribed certain activities, her interlocutors would not change their attitude towards her even when she changed hers. This can be perceived as protecting the category against induction on the part of the interlocutors by refusing to accept deviations from expected behaviour.

(19) *Только после того, как показывала свое фото, на меня обращали внимание.*
[Only when I showed my photo did they pay attention to me.]

These attitudes changed only when she used a so-called 'modifier' in the form of her photograph, which apparently evoked other qualities than those associated with the username. Modifiers are devices to "neutralise the applicability of the presumptive knowledge" about the category. For example, we can say "she's 70" and add "but she's fit and healthy" to counteract the common image of someone that age. Nevertheless, modifiers protect the category against induction because they frame one specific member as exceptional but have no effect on the knowledge about the category itself (Schegloff, 2007a, p. 469).

(20) *За тем Василиса, очень был комфортный ник для меня, но его ни где не регистрировали, т.к. очень распространенный. Было мило изображать из себя то „премудрую", то „прехитрую" Василису = сказочницу.*
[Then *Vasilisa*, this was a very convenient nick for me, but they wouldn't register it anywhere, because it's very common. It was nice to pose as 'wise' then as 'cunning' *Vasilisa* = the storyteller.]

Next, she chose a username *Василиса* [vasilisa] referring to Василиса Премудрая [vasilisa premudraɪ̑a] 'Vasilisa the Wise', a fairy tale character. She links this username with the qualities of being wise and cunning, and describes displaying them as "nice" and "convenient". The problem this time was that this username was so popular that there were many sites where she could not use it because it had already been taken. Thus, according to her

report, many other users wanted to display characteristics linked with this username, which confirmed that it evoked desirable characteristics.

(21) *Другой ник был Шанель, он так же "диктовал" определенную манеру поведения и общения... Приходилось быть гламурной, томной и делать вид, что я "богиня", это не в моем характере.*
[Another nick was *Chanel*, it also 'dictated' a specific way of behaving and interacting... I had to be glamorous, languorous and play a 'goddess', it's not in my nature.]

Then she reports that while using her third username, *Шанель* [shanel'] 'Chanel', she found herself acting out of character. This was because she tried to live up to the conduct associated with this category, which involved behaving in a way that was unusual to her. This also happens in real life. Some people do not fit in the categories they are ascribed to. As members of the common culture, they subscribe to the commonsense knowledge about these categories and tend to consider that there is something wrong with them and not with the category. As a result, they may feel inadequate and try to change. In this way they reproduce the knowledge about the category – hence, protect it against induction.

(22) *И наконец ник Венеция, это 100% попадание в цель моего посещения чатов, я могу быть и "богиней", и шутить, веселиться как сами итальянцы, быть простой, а так же могу быть "мудрой" и старой как сама Венеция...*
[And finally, the nick *Venice*, it 100% nails the goal of my visits to the chatrooms, I can be a 'goddess', I can joke, have fun like Italians do, be ordinary, and I can also be 'wise' and old like Venice herself...]

Finally, she came up with a username *Венеция* that she found suitable because she could link it with a wide selection of activities and characteristics, i.e. behave in various ways with few restrictions.

Conclusions

Both users have described operating their usernames similarly to how terms of categorisation could be used, namely:

- Including them into collections (e.g., *don luciano* in the collection 'criminals').
- Ascribing category-bound activities to them (e.g., being wise and cunning linked with the username *Василиса*).
- Referring to shared knowledge by expecting others to draw relevant inferences about what information they carry, expressed either directly (e.g., *don luciano* explicitly stated that his interlocutors should infer from his username what to expect of him), or indirectly (e.g. *Chanel* behaved in the way that she thought would be expected of someone with this username).
- Describing instances of protection against induction (e.g., *СнеДурочка* complaining about her interlocutors refusing to change their attitudes towards her).
- Demonstrating the common-sense understanding that categories as used for everyday practical purposes do not exist outside of interactions; instead, they are produced and reproduced in cooperation with others.

This does not mean that usernames are utilised for 'doing categorisation' each time they are used. As explained in the section "Names and terms of categorisation", terms of categorisation can be used for both categorising and referring. What is more, some of them, arguably, are used for predominantly for referring. For example, such terms as 'mum' and 'dad' are a customary way to address and refer to parents (although there might be cultural differences) and it is safe to assume that most of the times they are used it is to 'do referring'. Similarly, usernames can be used to categorise (some of them probably more often than others) as well as refer to and address the named person.

This study shows that MCA is a suitable approach to studying how usernames are perceived and handled by their users. It focuses on the users' own perspectives while bringing to light mechanisms underlying their reasoning and behaviour as they operate their own and one another's usernames.

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