Instant messaging -- a new language?

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For many adults over the age of 30, the former groupings of letters would seem incoherent, but for a newer generation of technologically-savvy young adults it can say a lot.

"Instant messaging, or IM, is not just bad grammar or a bunch of mistakes," says Dr. Pamela Takayoshi, Kent State University associate professor of English. "IM is a separate language form from formal English and has a common set of language features and standards."

Takayoshi, Kent State associate professor of English Dr. Christina Haas and four Kent State undergraduate researchers examined the language of instant messaging. Using IM conversations produced by college students, the group analyzed and identified nonstandard features of the IM language, or the places where writers had used language features which varied from Standard Written English.

They found that what looked like nonstandard features of written language were, actually, the standardized features within the IM language. The language of instant messaging was found to be informal, explicit, playful, both abbreviated and elaborated, and to emphasize meaning over form and social relationships over content.

"When we look at the kinds of technology young people are using today," says Haas, "we see that many of those technologies — IM, blogs and Facebook — are writing technologies. Even the phone is used for writing now."

Currently, the Kent State team is extending their analysis of IM to the popular Web site Facebook.com to determine whether the site's language is similar or different to instant messaging standards.

Source: Kent State University