

“It’s a first!”: A Case Study on Identity Expression
through Language on Twitch in a Game of Teamfight
Tactics

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study analyses how gamer-specific lexicon and gamer-specific phrases in chat messages from Teamfight Tactics (TFT) streamer k3soju on Twitch are used to enable the expression of (gamer)identity and membership to the Community of Practice (CoP). Data from k3soju's Videos on Demand on Twitch are analysed in three categories: placement references, abbreviations and emotes. Transcripts and their analyses provide evidence for how language is key to performing a TFT Twitch CoP identity. The case study concludes that player experience in TFT is not sufficient (nor required) to participate in the TFT Twitch CoP and that membership needs to be maintained due to the variable nature of the CoP.

Index	
Introduction	1
Theoretical Framework	2
Community of Practice	2
Language and Identity	3
Gamer-Speak	4
Twitch	4
<i>Emotes</i>	5
<i>Better Twitch TV Emotes</i>	5
<i>Internet Memes</i>	6
<i>Teamfight Tactics</i>	6
Methodology	7
Results and Discussion	8
Placement References	8
<i>Transcript 1</i>	8
<i>Transcript 2</i>	9
<i>Transcript 3</i>	9
<i>Transcript 4</i>	10
Abbreviations	11
<i>Transcript 5</i>	11
<i>Transcript 6</i>	11
<i>Transcript 7</i>	12
<i>Transcript 8</i>	13
Emotes	14
<i>Transcript 9</i>	15
<i>Transcript 10</i>	15
<i>Transcript 11</i>	16
<i>Transcript 12</i>	17
General Discussion	19
Conclusion	21
References	22
Appendix A	25
Legend	25

Introduction

“Do you ever notice how we say ‘ooh?’ a lot when something happens in the game, while Valorant players repeatedly say ‘sheesh’ instead?” is what k3soju said on 26 May 2021 during one of his livestreams while playing Teamfight Tactics. Not only does he differentiate between *us* and *them*, he also comments on how language is the key factor in the differentiation.

Language-based online identity expression and performance is an increasingly popular research field. The complexity of the notion of identity turns it into an interdisciplinary field of research, forcing psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and linguists to work together. In a time where communities can be formed without restrictions of nation-state boundaries or the physical presence in a group, a new area of research has emerged. Research has been conducted on language use on Twitch (Mihailova, 2020; Olejniczak, 2015), but research on language-based online identity expression and performance in a Teamfight Tactics community on Twitch is missing. This online platform has brought about a different way of experiencing gaming. Instead of playing, it shifts focus to spectating a game (Deng et al., 2015). Twitch focuses on monetising content through community creation (2015), which is why it is a suitable environment for socio-cultural linguistic analysis. American politician and activist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez used Twitch for political value (Guardian News and Media, 2020), which implies that this analysis has societal relevance. This ethnography will explore the way in which language plays a role in expressing identity in a community on Twitch, focusing on Teamfight Tactics (TFT). It is a slow-paced strategic puzzling game that allows frequent interaction between streamers and viewers. The question that will be answered is: what role does language play in expressing identity and creating communities of practice in a slow-paced puzzling game like Teamfight Tactics on the online streaming platform Twitch? To answer this question, it is necessary to specify on language with a sub-question: how is gamer-specific lexicon and how are gamer-specific phrases used to express identity in the community of streamer k3soju?

Theoretical Framework

Community of Practice

The community of practice (CoP) refers to groups of people who “share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006, p. 1). The CoP has three crucial characteristics: the domain, the community and the practice (2006). The domain refers to a shared domain of interest within the group. The community is established through members engaging in joint activities and discussions, when they share information (2006). The practice is what distinguishes a Cop from a community, since it is not only an interest that group members share. They are also practitioners of some kind (2006). The practice in this theory is what makes it relevant for research on Twitch communities. Viewers and broadcasters are usually practitioners of the same game and they learn together to become better at it. This is coined as *performance play* by Pellicone and Ahn (2017). Viewers can even become *backseat* gamers, which, similarly to backseat drivers, refers to people telling someone how to play the game while they are playing, with an often negative connotation of interfering without being asked for help (“Backseat Gamer”, 2009). *Backseat* gaming is not to be confused with *tandem* gaming: playing a ‘single player’ game with others (Scully-Blaker et al., 2017). Successful broadcasters with an overcrowded chat will play *for* the audience more than play *along with* the audience (2017). This creates an environment in which a user is more easily accused of *backseat* gaming, since the streamer will not be able to keep up with chat and involve every individual in their gameplay.

The community of practice approach allows researchers to examine the actions of individuals and the structures that they produce and reproduce, resist and subvert in a theoretically adequate way (Bucholtz, 1999). It is thus preferred over the speech community approach, a sociolinguistic approach that reveals how free variation could be attributed to social structure (1999). The speech community approach is too limiting in the context of language and identity, since it does not allow connections to larger social theory (1999). It focuses only on how social settings affect certain linguistic features, such as phonetic variation, but it does not allow for reverse questions on how identity expression affects social structures. Bucholtz (1999) critiques how the speech community approach is inadequate to conduct research in the field of language and gender specifically and how the community of practice approach would be more appropriate. Although this ethnography will not focus on language and gender, the notion of gender can be replaced with the notion of gamer identity, since gender expression is a form of identity expression in the broader sense (Shaw, 2012).

She argues that gamer identity should be treated similar to gender identity and even found a correlation between gamer identity and gender (2012).

Language and Identity

Language is often used in socio-cultural anthropology. Linguistic anthropology is, therefore, in many ways the study of language and identity (Bucholtz & Hall 2004). Socio-cultural linguistics should be conceived broadly and inclusively, because of the complexity of the notion of identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). Bucholtz and Hall (2010) advocate combining multiple analytical strategies, e.g. microanalysis of conversation, macroanalysis of ideological processes and ethnographic descriptions of local cultural practices, since “identity can never be contained within a single analysis” (p. 27).

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) argue that identity inheres in action, not in people. In other words, identity is something you *do* rather than *have*. They emphasise that language is at the centre of identity, since they are both a source and outcome of culture (2004). This is confirmed by Shaw (2013) on gamer identity. Those who identify as gamers can actively choose to perform that identity (2013). To do so successfully, identity must be performed in a way that can be understood and recognised by others (2013). ‘Gamer’ identity is experienced differently by individuals, which is why a proper definition is missing (Shaw, 2012).

Identity, in this way, contributes to the self-defining process of the individual. Bucholtz & Hall (2004) argue that “[s]ocial grouping is a process not merely of discovering or acknowledging a similarity that precedes and establishes identity but, more fundamentally, of inventing similarity by downplaying difference” (p. 371). This is how in-groups and out-groups are established. With his Social Identity Theory, Tajfel (as cited in Joseph, 2004) poses that a social identity can be distinguished from a personal identity, when individuals have knowledge of their membership to a group and add “value and emotional significance to that membership” (p. 76). He emphasises that this is an individual process rather than a quality of the social group (2004). De Grove, Courtois and Van Looy (2014) explain that a social identity is ‘triggered’ or activated in a social context, which suggests that an individual shifts from their personal to their social identity. This shift affects the individual’s perceptions, attitudes, cognitions and behaviours, in which they will conform to group characteristics (2014).

Gamer-Speak

Strong (2018) defines gamer-speak as “gamers’ lexical innovation during gameplay” (p. 43). He recognises three categories of gamer jargon vocabulary: “gaming-specific, genre-specific, or game-specific” (p. 43). He also suggests that the use of gamer-speak reveals information about the speakers, since gamer-speak is usually not taught by the game in its tutorial, but instead learned through experience (2018). Using gaming-speak, therefore, distinguishes experienced players from ‘noobs’ (a gamer-speak term for ‘newbie’), with which they solidify an in-group, and exclude the out-group (2018). Strong (2018) emphasises that not using gamer-speak does not indicate less experience necessarily because of other motivations from the speaker to avoid gamer-speak. He concludes that gamer-speak reinforces two important social structures: it distinguishes gamers from non-gamers and experienced players from new players (2018).

Twitch

When it was founded in 2011, Twitch.tv started as a platform for livestreaming (Phelps & Consalvo, 2020). The platform is primarily known for videogame livestreaming (2020). The general setup involves a broadcaster, a videogame or other activity and an audience (Recktenwald, 2017). The broadcaster is the streamer and the audience generally participates through contributing via live chat. Activities can vary from playing a videogame to broadcasting from a hot tub answering questions from chat (Gonzales, 2021). Twitch has several streaming categories, which broadcasters can use to inform the audience of their content, e.g. the controversial hot tub category (2021).

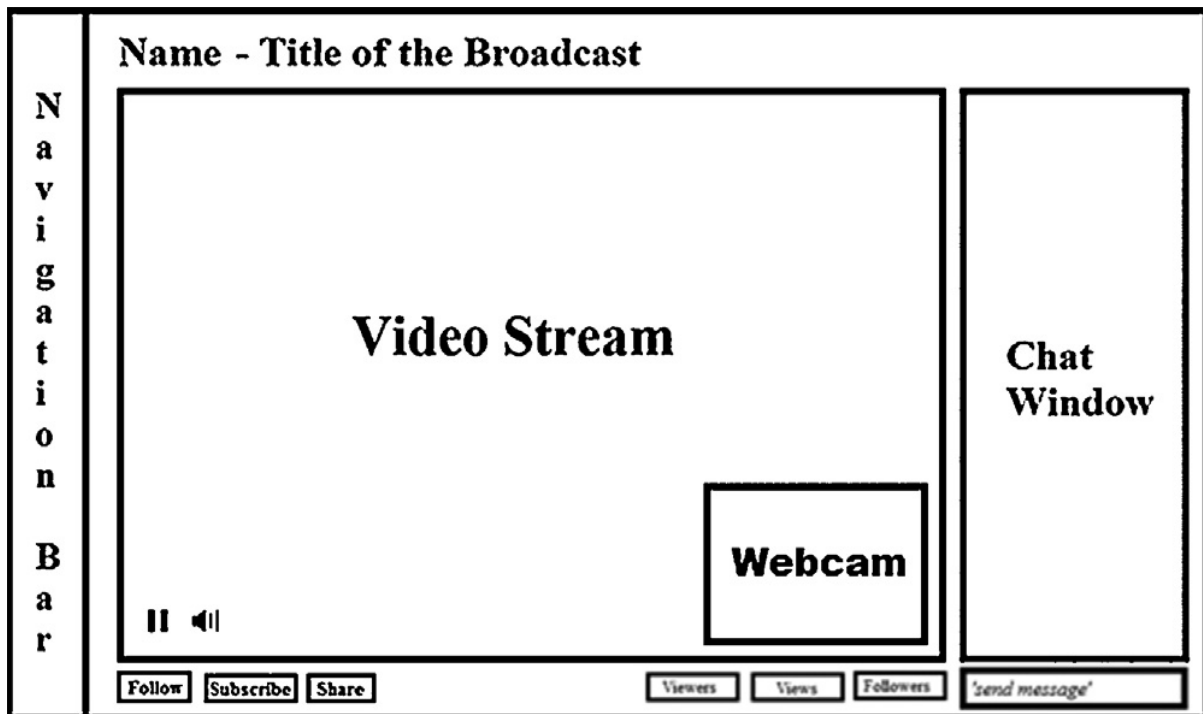


Figure 1. Schematic overview of the broadcaster's page by Recktenwald (2017, p. 3).

Figure 1 represents an overview of a broadcaster's page (Recktenwald, 2017, p. 3). The chat window is positioned next to the streaming window, which allows for live participation from the audience. Not every broadcaster uses a webcam and the positioning of the webcam may vary per broadcast. The chat function can be toggled on or off by the user of the page, i.e. the audience. The other features that do not involve the streaming window are static features of Twitch. Chat messages include a username and a message, which can contain text and emotes.

Emotes

Emotes are Twitch's take on emoji, which are small images that are used to express emotions and ideas (Mihailova, 2020). Twitch chat has become known for this wide-spread use of emotes, which are platform specific (Recktenwald, 2017). Twitch provides free-to-use emotes, that generally depict faces of successful streamers or staff members (2017). As a way of monetising content, Twitch allows for subscriber emotes, which are streamer-specific and can be used by subscribers exclusively.


Better Twitch TV Emotes

Better Twitch TV (BTTV) is a browser extension that allows for the use of a more elaborate selection of Twitch emotes (Google, n.d.). Users of BTTV can create their own emotes and are thus not restricted by the use of emotes provided by Twitch. They can also see and use

animated emotes. Users in chat who do not have the BTTV extension installed, will not see the BTTV emotes and instead see their command message in text in chat. Since emotes are a prominent feature of Twitch (Recktenwald, 2017), the BTTV is a popular extension among Twitch users. BTTV emotes are included as a category in live tracking the most used Twitch emotes on StreamElements (StreamElements, n.d).

Internet Memes

Much like cultural memes, Davison (2012) argues that “[a]n Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (p. 122). Internet memes are central in both Twitch and BTTV emotes. A free-to-use Twitch emote that appears when typing ‘PixelBob’ in chat, for instance, revolves around the internet meme Bob

Ross and depicts his pixelated portrait: . It involves a piece of culture that is spread online, and is thus an internet meme.

Teamfight Tactics

Teamfight Tactics (TFT) is a slow-paced round-based eight versus eight player versus player auto-battler puzzling game (League of Legends, n.d.). It is a free-for-all (mobile) game. It uses characters (‘champions’) and items from one of the most popular online video games, League of Legends (Robertson et al., 2021), since it is developed by the same company. These champions have an ‘ultimate,’ which is a functionality they gain after they reach certain conditions, and at least one ‘origin’ and one ‘class,’ which indicates they will activate certain traits when combined with other champions from the same ‘origin’ or ‘class’. The champions also have ‘item slots,’ with which they can carry completed items, i.e. two component items combined. These items enhance their performance. The goal of the game is to beat the other players by being the last man standing with the strongest ‘board,’ i.e. strongest champions on the playing field. Placing fourth place or higher, however, is considered a win, because a player will only lose rank points (LP) when placing fifth or lower. Rank points are displayed on leader boards on external websites.

Although subscription data are not public, it can be assumed that k3soju, the streamer of this case study, has a substantial amount of subscribers. On average, he streams four to eight hours per day, five days per week, with over 3,000 viewers participating live every stream. Even more users view his VoDs, which can have somewhere between 30,000 and 200,000 views per VoD.

Methodology

Inspired by the method of Recktenwald (2017), this ethnographical case study will incorporate a descriptive analysis of qualitative data through transcripts of chat messages sent in k3soju's channel on Twitch (k3soju, n.d.). Three categories of language phenomena will be researched to accumulate data on identity expression in language use by viewers of TFT. Transcripts will be made from examples about in-group phrases and lexicon that contain meaningful information for in-group members, but will hold little meaning for out-group members. First, placement references will be transcribed and discussed. Secondly, abbreviations will be transcribed, explained and analysed. Finally, emotes will be scrutinised. This will be done based on subjective, in-group knowledge and observations from the observer, who had been an in-group member of the community for at least six months since 1 May 2021.

Data will be collected from the Video on Demand (VoD) function on the Twitch platform, which allows streamers to record their broadcasts and save them for up to 60 days. The chat function is recorded alongside the broadcast. It will be possible to collect data 'offline,' when the streamer is not livestreaming. They will be collected from k3soju's channel's VoD page (Twitch, 2021, 25 June), since he is a streamer with over 3,000 viewers per stream and maintains an active streaming community. Data will be collected over a period of two months, since this is the limit of the data available through the VoD function on Twitch.

Transcripts will be made from messages in the chat function of the VoD's. Transcripts will be provided with a timestamp that indicate at what point in time the message was sent. Line numbers will be added for referencing. Only colours of usernames will be omitted from the transcript. An example of a transcription line is the following (Twitch, 2021, 24 June):

1. 1:11:34    **DeliciousMilkGG**: HULLO

Beside username and message, the transcript will also include other images, so as to represent the original chat as closely as possible. For example, they will include subscription badges, which are streamer-specific badges that appear for subscribers to k3soju's channel. For a legend on specification of these badges, see Appendix A.






Results and Discussion

In the following section, data will be sorted into three categories of identity expression through language: placement references, abbreviations and emotes. The examples are a limited but representative selection from the data available. The data are not limited to the three categories discussed in this section. The examples below can be found in almost every VoD from 1 May to 25 June 2021 in varying contexts and forms, and are not limited to the specific timestamps.

Placement References

The first category of identity expression through language is placement reference. Placement references are phrases that refer to the placement of the player, which can range from first to eighth place. Placement references in TFT can be used to express either frustration or joy. They are most commonly used when a player believes that they will win or lose. The phrase is ‘it’s a first’ or ‘it’s an eighth,’ or a variation on that. In transcript 1, someone in chat greets the streamer by saying ‘1st or 8th today trustttt’ in line 2. Another example of placement reference is in line 5: ‘going 8 8 8.’




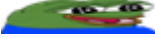
Transcript 1 (Twitch, 2021, 5 June)

1. 9:45  **iBoomerang**: hello soju whats good
2. 9:46  **dandi09_**: 1st or 8th today trustttt
3. 9:47  **wetjungler**: hello 
4. 9:51  **longdragon_1634**: Good morning soju
5. 9:51 **typing_with_one_hand**: its just painful to watch noobowl go 8 8 8 these days

The two users display different ways of using placement references. In line 5, the user refers to another streamer losing frequently by ‘going 8 8 8.’ It is most likely used as an exaggeration, in that the other streamer was not winning games by placing fourth place or higher, but also not literally placing eighth in three consecutive games. In line 2, a variation of placement reference is used. By adding ‘today,’ the user expresses that today would either be a good or a bad day, instead of referring to an actual placement in a game. Placement reference can thus be used as a way to express something good (first) or bad (eighth). The variation in line 2 suggests that the user is aware of the less standard way of using the phrase, with which they demonstrate in-group knowledge of the TFT Twitch CoP.

Another placement reference is used in transcript 2, when a composition item (‘comp’ in line 3) is referred to as ‘an 8th.’







Transcript 2 (Twitch, 2021, 4 June)

1. 1:57:02 **Rizencorsair**: What is good against abom?
2. 1:57:05 **decarb930**: 
3. 1:57:06  **Audiomander**: this sins comp item is an 8th
4. 1:57:07  **Yokoloto**: item
5. 1:57:08 **decarb930**: 
6. 1:57:11 **UncleDutchh**: There is music in the background?modCheck
7. 1:57:12 **Logro_Kill**: WTF is this build

Line 3 displays a different use of placement reference, similar to line 2 in transcript 1. Instead of predicting the streamer's placement, the user expresses their dislike for an item on the streamer's board. In other words, they think that this item is bad. Placement has become irrelevant in this context, since the user is not predicting that the streamer will lose the game because of this item. In this context, the user is *backseat* gaming, in that they are telling the streamer that they should have made a different decision. The user presents knowledge of a less common way of using placement reference, with which they display in-group knowledge of the TFT Twitch CoP and conform to group characteristics, and thus exhibit their social identity (De Grove et al., 2014).

Transcript 3 has another two examples of placement referencing. Although it is written phonetically in line 2, 'Isssaaaa forrrst' also means 'it's a first.' Furthermore, 'IS A FIRST,' in line 6 is another variation on 'it's a first.'

Transcript 3 (Twitch, 2021, 3 June)


1. 3:57:45 **crabbix**: THIS IS WHY HE'S CHALLENGER
2. 3:57:46  **jrockk**: Isssaaaa forrrst
3. 3:57:46  **playlocalfeedglobal**: MY STREAMER
4. 3:57:46  **signaturr**: so fucking chad
5. 3:57:46  **hiluap**: why does he always walk to the bottom of the screen
6. 3:57:46 **DedeDeBoa**: IS A FIRST.
7. 3:57:48 **lemelemexd**: holy chad
8. 3:57:49   **Capitalyst**: Im gonna spend all my points from this one laughin'
9. 3:57:49 **rhino4w**: STABLEIZED POG

Line 6 is used by a user to express their excitement for the streamer apparently winning. More messages are sent per minute and more capitalised text is used, since the chat users seem to be excited for the streamer to win. Line 6 is a variation on 'it's a first.' It is a play on phonetics. Due to the frequency of the use of placement references, the streamer sometimes alters the pronunciation of the phrase. Line 2 displays a distinct variation on the placement

reference, which is also inspired by streamer pronunciation. Both users actively choose to write ungrammatically, and instead phonetically, which suggests that they perform their identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004) by conforming to in-group behaviour.

Another placement related phrase is ‘20/20.’ It has no connection with 20/20 vision, which is how an out-group member might interpret the reference. In-group knowledge is necessary to understand this phrase. It does not directly refer to the placement of one specific game, but rather to twenty games. ‘20/20’ refers to a list of the last twenty games played per player that appear on an external website that collects and tracks data from TFT.

Transcript 4 (Twitch, 2021, 1 June)

1. 4:36:33 **HumiIde:** 
2. 4:36:34  **PozdraviteKevu:** Udyr top dps 
3. 4:36:36  **Potentials:**  @WitherBross
4. 4:36:36  **officialjetlag25:** 20/20 no pivot
5. 4:36:36  **AmulG:**  
6. 4:36:37 **john_97k:** gg

In transcript 4, a chat user uses the phrase ‘20/20 no pivot’ in line 4, with which they mean to express that, in the last twenty games (or even future games), the streamer did not (or will not) pivot into another team composition to win their game, assuming that it is what made or would make the streamer win. It is a placement reference because it is either an observation on how the streamer has won in the past games, or a suggestion on how the streamer can win in the future. In-group knowledge of the TFT CoP on Twitch is required to understand this phrase, given the reference to a specific feature of an external website, which suggests that even TFT players who do not watch TFT streams would not understand this phrase. By using the phrase with specialised in-group meaning, the user displays advanced in-group knowledge of the TFT Twitch CoP.











Placement references are used in varying ways. Notably, the only static element is the omission of the word ‘place’ in all placement references, despite semantic expectations. By using placement references, users conform to group characteristics and behaviour to perform their identity as members of the TFT Twitch CoP.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations are a prominent feature of TFT Twitch CoP language. They are used in different ways by users in chat to express their knowledge of the game, which in turn marks their belonging to the CoP. Abbreviations are frequently used for in-game items that can be used to progress in the game. Abbreviations, however, are also used in other ways, e.g., in referring to team compositions.

In transcript 5, a chat user expresses their preferred team composition in line 4. ‘Abom’ is used here to refer to ‘abomination,’ a TFT specific game related word.





Transcript 5 (Twitch, 2021, 2 June)

1. 2:41:14  **potatooyyy**: Play sett
2. 2:41:14  **ChemFury**: DO IT
3. 2:41:14  **22damnkev**: dragonslayer sharpshooter
4. 2:41:19  **mikebolado**: 4 brawler + 4abom easy Win
5. 2:41:19 **PxzzaTime**: 
6. 2:41:19  **Hyperio667**: 
7. 2:41:20  **Nightbot**: 
8. 2:41:20  **crumsley**:...

‘Abomination’ is the ‘origin’ of certain champions. Pairing three champions with the ‘abomination’ origin activates a beneficial trait that could increase the power of a player’s ‘board.’ Knowledge of the abbreviation alone is not enough to understand the message. Without this knowledge, ‘abom’ will be incomprehensible to out-group members. By using the abbreviation, the user in line 4 displays not only knowledge of the concept of abomination, but also their knowledge of the commonly used abbreviation within the CoP.

Multiple users use abbreviations that relate to in-game items in transcript 6. ‘RFC’ in line 1 refers to an item called ‘Rapid Firecannon.’




Transcript 6 (Twitch, 2021, 31 May)

1. 9:01:06 **Blinngard**: RFC BIS 
2. 9:01:09 **Clownszer**: you hit teemo 2 and the game is wrap 
3. 9:01:09  **epicdeath4**: I bet on bot3 
4. 9:01:11 **TheSuccler**: @niscotg abom spat is rly good and cav spat is insane on some units

In line 4, ‘spat’ is short for ‘spatula,’ an item component and ‘cav’ refers to ‘cavalier,’ a ‘class’ trait of a champion. The combination of ‘abom’ and ‘spat,’ however, refer to completed items instead of ‘origin’ of a champion. The same is true for and ‘cav spat’ and its item reference instead of ‘class’ reference. These ‘spatula’ items, when combined with another component, form special items that will create an ‘origin’ or a ‘class’ that can be put on any other champion that lacks the item’s ‘origin’ or ‘class.’ This indicates that the combination of these abbreviations alters the meaning of the abbreviation slightly, by referring to an item instead of a champion. In line 4, the use of abbreviations indicate that the user is knowledgeable of their meaning. In line 1, the user uses two consecutive abbreviations. ‘RFC’ refers to an item in TFT; ‘BIS,’ however, is short for ‘Best In Slot’ and is used in other gaming communities (originally from *World of Warcraft*, a massive multiple online role-playing game) to refer to the best piece of gear that can be equipped in a specific slot (“BiS”, 2009). Although this item is not a piece of gear, ‘BIS’ is still used here as gaming-specific gamer-speak (Strong, 2018). The user thinks the item is the best item to make. With this, they display knowledge of both TFT-related jargon and a more widely used gaming expression. Furthermore, the user in line 1 performs two identities simultaneously, i.e. ‘gamer’ in a general sense and TFT player/observer specifically, with which they demonstrate belonging to multiple in-groups, i.e. CoPs (Wenger, 2006).

In transcript 7, two users make use of multiple abbreviations. ‘GA’ is short for ‘Guardian Angel,’ which is another buildable item in TFT. ‘Diff’ is short for ‘difference,’ a more general Twitch-meme (Davison, 2012) in which people call out what made the difference in either winning or losing. For example, when someone calls ‘player diff(ERENCE),’ they would suggest that the player is more (or less) skilled than their opponent depending on whether they are winning or losing.








Transcript 7 (Twitch, 2021, 14 May)

1. 3:30:05 **mr_gab0908**: GA DIFF
2. 3:30:06  **Iceboxxxxxx**: ??????
3. 3:30:06  **outro_panama**: what? no
4. 3:30:07  **prpgnda_**: ???
5. 3:30:07  **Mortdog**: no, u were just low
6. 3:30:08  **kombo92**: 
7. 3:30:08 **Kudra99**: yea its bug
8. 3:30:10  **Txinhowow**: BT FIDD i think
9. 3:30:10  **Nightbot**: BT DIFF

In line 8, another user uses ‘BT FIDD i think’ which is a play on ‘diff.’ The Nightbot in the next message confirms this by repeating their message without the play on spelling. As the name suggests, Nightbot is a bot that supports a streamer by responding to chat, either through commands or by repeating popular phrases like in the example above. This confirms that ‘BT DIFF’ is a frequently used phrase in the chat of this particular streamer, since a Nightbot is tailored to a streamer’s chat. Similar to the user in line 1 of transcript 6, the users in transcript 7 in line 1 and 8 demonstrate, with their knowledge of these abbreviations, that they belong to the TFT Twitch CoP and to the more general Twitch community. This could be interpreted as gaming-specific gamer-speak, but only because Twitch is mostly known for streaming gaming content, by which it is (possibly mistakenly) assumed that Twitch users are gamers.

In transcript 8, a user in chat asks the audience for help by using abbreviations. They use ‘@chat’ in line 1 to address the chat as a whole directly. This is an integrated chat function, and is similar to how mentions on Twitter work (Twitter, n.d.).

Transcript 8 (Twitch, 2021, 29 May)

1. 6:09:41  **bentham2077**: @chat is IE JG or JG JG better on vel'koz?
2. 6:09:49  **hongli_**: ie jg is more dmg
3. 6:09:51  **tinguini**: !scores
4. 6:09:54    **jdwoo**: ie jg
5. 6:09:56 **zeusq8i**: HTF Velayy is 8 HP!!
6. 6:09:58 **OrangeSkux**: jg jg for sho
7. 6:09:58  **hongli_**: but jg jg is doable if you don't hit

The user uses multiple abbreviations with ‘@chat is IE JG or JG JG better on vel'koz?’ in line 1. In the next messages (line 2, 4, 6, and 7), other users answer the first user’s question with their own abbreviations. ‘IE’ is short for ‘Infinity Edge’ and ‘JG’ is short for ‘Jeweled Gauntlet,’ two completed items that can be built by combining two component items. The user in line 1 asks about what combination of items would create the most damage output from Vel’koz, a spell damage focused champion. ‘IE’ increases a champion’s critical strike damage and chance, while ‘JG’ enables the ‘ultimate’ of a hero to critically strike, which means that the item combination has a special synergy when placed on a champion. ‘JG JG’ would be stacking two of the same items on a champion without the special synergy. In some situations, on some champions, the latter might be more powerful. Thus the user in line 1 asks for confirmation on what is the case for this champion. In line 1, they display knowledge about the special synergy, which indicates that they adequately use these abbreviations. The


response of the others in line 2, 5, 6 and 7 also demonstrates the users' in-group knowledge about the TFT Twitch CoP. Although in-group members will be able to understand the conversation, the use of these abbreviations causes out-group members to be excluded from the conversation.

Without in-depth knowledge of the game, the above examples of abbreviations are incomprehensible. New members of the TFT Twitch CoP will be required to learn not only their meaning, but also how combinations of abbreviations can alter meaning. The variable nature of the game with its different sets of champions and items requires members to actively take part in the CoP in order to keep up to date with the latest relevant abbreviations. This suggests that the use of abbreviations is a way for users to perform their identity as in-group members of the TFT Twitch CoP, by excluding outsiders who lack that knowledge.









Emotes


Emotes are frequently used in Twitch chat (Recktenwald, 2017). They revolve around internet memes (Davison, 2012). There are TFT-specific emotes that contribute to identity expression of chat users.

Transcript 7 displays a reply from the user 'Mortdog,' who is the lead game designer for TFT, active member of the community, and streamer of the game. He plays a significant role in the TFT Twitch CoP because of his unique position in the company that created the game. He has turned into a TFT specific internet meme, fulfilling the role of a God, since he has the power to make changes to the game. His name can therefore be used as a verb, e.g. 'getting Mortdogged,' which usually means that the player is unlucky in their game.

Someone has created an emote out of Mortdog's face: . To understand the meme (Davison, 2012) of the emote, a certain knowledge of this specific set of TFT is required, since in set 5, a new feature was introduced: shadow items. They are similar to the original items, but with a border around them, as can be seen around the Mortdog emote. To use this emote, users must type in 'shadowMortdog' in chat, and for it to appear, the Twitch extension Better Twitch TV (BTTV) needs to be installed in the users' browser (Google, n.d.). Transcript 9 was edited to present the use of the emote, which continued another 18 seconds after the end of this transcript.


Transcript 9 (Twitch, 2021, 14 May)










1. 3:30:07 🍀👤🎁 **Mortdog:** no, u were just low
2. 3:30:08 🧑 **kombo92:** 
3. 3:30:17 **BakedKebab:** 
4. 3:30:17 🇬🇧 **Kotuu_:** 
5. 3:30:17 **feyhida_e:** Innovate 
6. 3:30:18 **impling:** 
7. 3:30:19 🇧🇷 **TeggaRL:**  too low
8. 3:30:19 🧑🇧🇷 **gloomygl:**  ADAPT
9. 3:30:20 🧑 **mini_mae:** 





The use of this emote is a response of the users to Mortdog being present in the chat. Users recognise the presence of the game designer, but the emote is also used as a meme in line 5 and 8, because of their combination with the words ‘Innovate’ in line 5 and ‘ADAPT’ in line 8. These words are TFT specific internet memes in themselves. They are used as suggestions for a streamer to become a better player, except they connote intentional *backseat* gaming and are thus used sarcastically. Since *backseat* gaming is used intentionally here, it marks the users as knowledgeable members of the TFT Twitch CoP, although it does not reveal their skill level. The combination of these memes and the emote  further empowers this connotation since the emote generally represents bad luck. The use of the emote is not set. Only in-group members of the TFT Twitch CoP will know and use the emote in these varying ways.

More examples of TFT-community specific emotes can be found in transcript 10. All of the emotes follow the trend of Twitch emotes depicting faces filled with emotion of (usually) prominent streamers and staff members (Recktenwald, 2017).

Transcript 10 (Twitch, 2021, 1 May)











1. 8:12:24 **ilovewetdoggie:** CRINGE CHAT WFC WTF?
2. 8:12:29 🇬🇧 **TanjiroKamadoy:** 
3. 8:12:33 **velicanvlad:** R U OK ?

4. 8:12:33  **Mr_potatoso**: A LOT 
5. 8:12:46 **spadaquinn**: lmaooo
6. 8:12:48  **f1r3_270_**: 
7. 8:12:48  **milfschnitte1234**: it is doomed
8. 8:12:49  **TanjiroKamadoy**: 
9. 8:12:49  **beats_above**: 


Both  and  only work with the BTTV browser extension when typing ‘monkaSoju’ and ‘RAT,’ respectively. They depict faces of two TFT streamers, including k3soju’s. They hold no meaning for any Twitch chat user outside of the TFT community, because they are unknown faces to most other Twitch users. In line 2,  is used to express the user’s emotion. They consciously choose to use the TFT specific emote, instead of the more general Twitch emote equivalent ‘WutFace’ . With this decision, the user deliberately identifies with the TFT Twitch CoP.


Line 4 in transcript 11 has a moving emote that exclusively appears for users with the BTTV extension. It is an animated colour changing dancing shark that appears by typing ‘agonD.’



Transcript 11 (Twitch, 2021, 3 May)

1. 59:40  **Megamanp3**: what is this music
2. 59:42  **Stealthy4u**: this music is fire
3. 59:42  **Chewcha**: NO SHIT its shadow blue lb 
4. 59:48 **chanbenn**:    [colour changing]
5. 59:50  **Gandhi_M8**: bot 4 
6. 59:50  **Leitezilla**: Invoker













The emote is TFT-community specific, since AgonTFT is a TFT streamer who created shark-themed emotes for his subscribers. The shark was converted into a free-to-use BTTV emote and is even sold as a plushie. The emote is often used to express the need to dance or refer to the music of the streamer, which is also the case in transcript 11. The more widely used









BTTV equivalent is ‘catJAM’ . It is an animated image of a cat and it scores 14 in the top


100 most used BTTV emotes (Streamelements, n.d.). Instead of using a significantly more popular emote, the user in line 4 expresses their TFT-community identity by choosing  over a more widely understood emote.

In transcript 12, a user in chat uses  in line 5. This emote appears when ‘KEKW’ is typed in chat while using the BTTV browser extension. It is a play on the popular  ‘KEKW’ emote that follows in the next messages, which scores 59 in the top 100 most used BTTV emotes (Streamelements, n.d.).

Transcript 12 (Twitch, 2021, 25 May)



1. 5:38:41  **thebigdeck**: If you top 4 I’ll eat an apple
2. 5:38:45 **xn_grabus**: bg
3. 5:38:46  **CrayZcast**: no ga kayle tho
4. 5:38:47 **dneedgg**: bg
5. 5:38:48  **keenzzz72**: heimer doesn't even break the shield 
6. 5:38:52 **sercharles24**: board good 
7. 5:38:55   **Zyakis**: the heimer 2 ult did no dmg
8. 5:38:56 **ZeptarZGreat**: 
9. 5:38:56    **Nightbot**: 丁 卅 卂 丁 巧 卂 卂 毛 卂 山 乃 尺 卂 

The TFT specific emote  is the face of TFT streamer k3soju and is often used in the same way as the BTTV original emote, namely to laugh at the person to whom the message is directed. This is also the case in line 5. A contrast can be seen between performances of identity of the users in line 5 and 6, where the user in line 6 expresses sarcasm by using a non-TFT-specific emote , with which they identify with a more general Twitch community, and the user in line 5, who deliberately chooses to express their TFT Twitch CoP identity by using . The Nightbot then reacts to several messages containing  with a personalised font (most likely arranged by the streamer) in line 9, which suggests that this popular BTTV emote is often used in k3soju’s channel. Incidentally, it can be argued that, by using  in line 6 and 8, the users do not distance themselves from a TFT Twitch CoP identity by conforming to a more general Twitch community, because of the frequency of use of  in the streamer’s channel. Using  over  does not exclude users from a TFT Twitch CoP necessarily.

With the exception of , all of the above examples contain emotes that have a more general Twitch community equivalent. The use of the TFT-specific emotes are a way for users in k3soju's chat to distinguish themselves from other Twitch-users and to express their identity as TFT Twitch CoP members.

General Discussion

Users in chat display knowledge of both TFT-related jargon and a more widely used gaming expressions. They appear to identify as TFT players and gamers, which supports the idea that identity is something you *do* (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Identity changes with context. It is social and it applies to the individual rather than the social context as Tajfel (as cited in Joseph, 2004) described.

The phonetical placement references in transcript 3 in line 2 and 6 are inspired by pronunciations of the streamer. The streamer, in turn, was influenced in his pronunciation by other streamers of TFT. Other streamers' influence can also be seen in the use of  and . This suggests that, although this ethnography focuses on k3soju's chat, the TFT Twitch CoP is not exclusive to his channel. Furthermore, the decision for the users to write phonetically suggests that typing 'it's a first' (and thus omitting 'place,' to conform to the CoP) to identify with the TFT Twitch CoP was not enough of a performance for them. With these phonetic variations, the users strive to imitate the streamers' verbal performances of identity expression despite being limited by text messages.

In transcript 8, line 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7 are representative examples of users in chat learning together, which is what distinguishes a CoP from a community (Wenger, 2006). This learning is not limited to chat users only, since interactions between streamer and chat can also involve a learning process. Coaching sessions are not uncommon in TFT streams, where one streamer invites another to coach them through a game. This enables a unique *tandem* play *along with* the coach, while simultaneously playing *for* an audience (Pellicone & Ahn, 2017; Scully-Blaker et al., 2017). None of the above transcripts were derived from coach sessions, however.

Transcript 6, line 1 contains an abbreviation originally used in League of Legends. Since TFT uses champions and items from League of Legends, abbreviations from overlapping items and champions were transferred to the TFT Twitch CoP. For new members of the CoP, this can be an additional challenge if they have no knowledge of League of Legends. An example of that is missing in the transcripts above, but it is based on the in-group knowledge of the observer.

Most of the abbreviations in transcript 5, 6, 7 and 8 are game-specific gamer-speak (Strong, 2018). Although 'BiS' is originally game-specific gamer-speak, it has evolved into gaming-specific gamer-speak, as can be seen in transcript 6. Other examples of gaming-

specific gamer-speak are ‘bg’ in transcript 12 and ‘dmg’ in transcript 8. Genre-specific gamer-speak include words like ‘board’ and ‘build’ (transcript 2 and 12, respectively), since they are also used in other auto-battlers. Furthermore, transcripts in the three categories, although representative, are not exclusive examples for those categories. This indicates that the data are rich and there is overlap in the transcripts between categories, e.g. transcript 12 also contains a game-specific abbreviation and transcript 6 has a placement reference in combination with an abbreviation ‘bot3’ in line 3, etc.

TFT-specific emotes can be used to express emotions and ideas, which is in line with how emotes are used more generally on Twitch (Mihailova, 2020). Notably, none of the transcripts display subscriber-only emotes, specific to the streamer’s channel. The majority of data display the use of BTTV emotes, which are free to use by anyone with the extension installed. This could be due to the popularity of k3soju’s stream. Although he has a substantial amount of subscribers, in the data, a majority of non-subscribers contribute to the chat. This suggests that being a subscriber has no influence on in-group membership of the TFT Twitch CoP. Furthermore, BTTV emotes can be created by anyone, which means that they are highly customisable. The fact that TFT-specific equivalent emotes have been created and are preferred over the more generally used BTTV emotes by some users, indicates that there is a need for members in the TFT Twitch CoP in-group to distinguish themselves from outsiders.

To be a member of the CoP, knowledge of the TFT Twitch community as a whole is required. As can be seen in the analysis of transcript 4, a distinction should be made between the TFT CoP and TFT Twitch CoP, since TFT is a (mobile) game that can be played by people who do not use Twitch. Conversely, it is possible to be an in-group member of the TFT Twitch CoP without playing the game and thus being part of the TFT Twitch CoP, which can be seen in the analysis of transcript 7. Not only players, but also observers will be able to understand the ‘diff’ abbreviation, as long as they are in-group members of the TFT Twitch CoP. The more generally used internet term *lurker* is applicable here, which refers to someone who only observes and does not participate (“Lurker”, 2003). This is a unique feature of the CoP, since participation is not required to be able to learn. This could be due to the nature of Twitch as a platform and the way it shifts focus from playing to spectating a game (Deng et al., 2015).

Conclusion

In order to understand chat messages sent in k3soju's channel on Twitch, comprehensive knowledge about the game TFT, Twitch as a community, gamer-speak and internet memes is required. Prior knowledge of the game League of Legends and being familiar with gamer-speak will ease the learning process of new members to the TFT Twitch CoP, while in-group members are required to keep up to date with the latest TFT set and BTTV emotes, in order to understand the latest gamer-speak and internet memes.

The livestreams of k3soju are a TFT Twitch CoP, since, by participating in the community, members are learning together. Placement references are used according to the TFT Twitch CoP characteristics. Together with abbreviations and emotes, they are used as a performance of gamer-identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Shaw, 2012). More specifically, placement references, abbreviations and emotes are used by users to display their knowledge and belonging to the TFT Twitch CoP. Placement references are used by users in chat varyingly, with the only consistency of omitting the word 'place.' Abbreviations are used as gaming- and game-specific gamer-speak (Strong, 2018). TFT-specific emotes are used to express emotions and ideas (Mihailova, 2020). By using TFT-specific language, users express their identity as TFT Twitch CoP in-group members, while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from out-group members, and even excluding out-group members from conversations. Therefore, language is key in participating in the TFT Twitch CoP of streamer k3soju.

Observations in this case study were made by a member of the TFT Twitch CoP who had been in the in-group for at least six months since 1 May 2021. These observations are subjective. For future research, members of the TFT Twitch CoP could be interviewed on personal experience to validate the observations. Since the nature of the Twitch platform is highly intercultural, research could be conducted on second language acquisition of English on Twitch, which could be a valuable addition to research in second language acquisition in gaming. Furthermore, future research could be conducted on, for example, a comparative study of two TFT streamers and their chat users, or the multimodal interaction between a TFT streamer and their chat. Since the data are rich, future research could focus on other categories than the three discussed in this case study. Follow-up research on language use on Twitch by Olejniczak (2015) could be conducted on how this develops in streamers that broadcast in their native language other than English. Further research could also be conducted on the difference between gaming-stream CoP language and reality-stream CoP language on Twitch.

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Appendix A

Legend


The following is a clarification on badges that can appear before usernames in the transcriptions.

Subscriber only badges:


 = Subscriber (up to three months)

 = 6-Month Subscriber

 = 9-Month Subscriber


 = 1-Year Subscriber


Prediction badges for users that have made a prediction of the outcome of the game:


 = Predicted Blue (1)


 = Predicted Pink (2)


Twitch badges:


 = Moderator, a user in chat with privileges in order to keep the chat in check.

 = Verified, indicating a verified account from e.g. a streamer.


 = 25 Gift Subs, the user has gifted 25 subscriptions from this channel to others.


 = Turbo, a paid subscription to Twitch itself that gives the user perks when using Twitch.

 = GlitchCon 2020, a user has participated in a Twitch chat during this event.

 = GLHF Pledge, a user has taken the pledge for inclusive gaming on an external website.

 = Prime Gaming, a user has linked their account to their Amazon Prime account.

 = cheer 1, cheered with 1 bit, a currency bought with real money to support channels.

 = cheer 100, cheered with 100 bits.

 = OWL All-Access Pass 2019, a user has bought an Overwatch E-sports event pass.