The language of chatgroups
Crystal uses the term *chatgroups* as a generic term for world-wide multi participant electronic discourse, whether real time or not, so it includes mailing lists, e-conferences, bulletin boards. From a linguistic point of view, it is important to distinguish the e-mail situation from the chatgroup. In the e-mail are usually involved a pair of named individuals with messages related to a specific question.
Chatgroups involve several people, with message-exchanges often anonymous, dealing with many different and unpredictable issues. Linguistic features and strategies used by chatgroups participants and e-mail users are very different.
Chatgroups can be synchronous and asynchronous. In an asynchronous setting, conversations go to a central address, they are stored in some format and made available to members upon demand. There are many different kinds of discussion groups, from newsgroups, dealing with particular topics, to mailing lists. The variety of style that exists in these groups has been stressed many times.
The aims of a group could be different, some groups are formed to deal with a particular subject, while others are created just to talk. Several groups use moderators to ensure that the conversation will be focused on the subject-matter. Sometimes it is possible to enter as anonymous.
All the systems operate nearly in the same ways. An organization provides a set of group options that individuals choose to join. Then members send their contributions to the group and the system makes these available to all addresses it holds. Messages can be saved in archives and catalogued. The management of each group is in the hands of one person or of a small team (list-owner, editor, postmaster, moderator).
Moderators exercise varying amounts of power. In some groups they can only choose whether a message is relevant and must appear or not. In others, moderators can edit a message as well as filter some of them, cutting all the unwanted material. Issues of censorship arise and there are many discussions about the role of the moderator.
Anyway, moderators belong to individual group within a system. There is no “super-moderator” for a chatgroup system as a whole.

Technologically imposed length constraints are an important feature influencing the linguistic character of chatgroup messages, contributions should be short. Chatgroups are designed to provoke and accept short messages and multiple reactions.
Each contributor leaves a linguistic “footprint”: what he says has a permanent pragmatic effect. In face-to-face conversations they are immediate and direct, while in an asynchronous chatgroup the effect of a message is preserved over an unknown period of time. The message can be used and quoted even years later.

This feature pushes chatgroups in the direction of the written language. The topic-list within a particular group resembles a conventional book index.
Topics are usually classified thematically. When you join a group, you can call up recent or distant postings, there is no chronological beginning-point.

Within a topic, there is a stronger sense of chronological linearity, due to the fact that messages are organized in the order the server received them, but this linearity has got no communicative consequence.
If I send a reply message to A, you don’t know if I read also the other messages sent in the meantime. Furthermore, I don’t know if A will read my response, because he may have logged off by the time or maybe other messages may come in and my message will not be noticed.

Arbitrary entrance-points and an ongoing accumulation of topics make difficult to index the messages.
Readers need to be provided with a thematic “map” of the message-structure of a group. To create a map, some management programs assign to each message an ID, date, topic title and file-number. The required approach has been called *topographic*. Titles make possible to read the map and they are quite similar to the “subjects” of e-mail.
The titles not only identify a particular topic but they also express the intention, attitude of the writer. They usually resemble the newspapers style. Idiosyncratic and ludic headlines attract the reader. The same point applies to chatgroup messages. This an important difference from e-mail: both e-mail writers and chatgroup writers look for responses, but the latter is no surprised if his message fails to elicit an individual reaction, a lack of reply is not taken personally.
As it is important to maintain a practicable route-map of a discussion, certain formulae do recur in titles, focusing on the content (agree with X, Re: X, To X). In this way it is possible to connect the response to the right message even if there is screen distance between them.

So, clear and unambiguous titles are important and they should ensure that their message is related to other relevant messages in a thread.
Here is another difference from e-mail. Usually e-mails are opened regardless of the subject line. The identity of the sender is more relevant than the content, while in chatgroups the topic is much more important than the identity of the writer.

The existence of personal elements in titles means that they take on some character of a greeting. It does not mean that you can find something like “dear Jeff” in a title, but it is quite common to find something like “response to Jeff”.
Of course there is no reference to “Jeff” as a person, but it is useful to refer the response content to the right message. The one-to-many nature of the interaction makes a formal greeting unlikely. Usually people make an explicit reference to a previous message, quoting or paraphrasing it. The quotation performs two roles:

• It conveys the illusion of the messages being next.
• It acknowledges group membership.
Referring to previous messages sometimes performs some of the functions of a greeting. In opening sentences it is also possible to find sentence connectivity, just like in a synchronous conversation (and it is easier to..., or you could just...) and general feedback reactions (great, wow, thanks).

It is interesting to notice that if chatgroup users do not greet, they do close. Usually messages conclude with farewells of some kind.
There is also a tendency to sign the message.
The body of a chatgroup message displays some typical features. Herring states that in chatgroup messages it is possible to find three functional moves: introduction, message body, close. Within the body, she founds three typical elements: a link to an earlier message, an expression of views, an appeal to other participants.
Messages tend to be short. Short responses give a chatgroup interaction a conversational feel, notwithstanding the fact that in face-to-face conversations the turn-taking is not so balanced. In chatgroups interruptions and overlaps are impossible.

Another conversation like feature is the unpredictability of the subject-matter.
A particular topic motivates the interaction. There is nothing to stop a participant from introducing a new topic, but even the new topic must be relevant, if not, a moderator or other participants may criticize.

Another feature of face-to-face conversation shared by chatgroups is the fact that, although all the participants have got different backgrounds, after a while they develop a shared linguistic character in their contributions, a dialect.
Everyone comes to use certain types of grammatical constructions, slang, abbreviations. Usually it is short-lived, a particular locution can be taken up by other participants and be used a lot for a while before it dies away.

Personal and idiosyncratic contributions are privileged and this has got linguistic consequences.
Davis and Brewer noted the overwhelming of “I”, the reliance on private verbs (*think, feel*) and the use of “it” to introduce a personal comment (*it seems to me*). The same features have been identified by Herring in her study.

An important feature is the use of rhetorical questions to express personal attitude or to give extra emphasis to what someone said.
Crystal believes that the language of asynchronous messaging is a mixture of informal letter, essay, spoken monologue and dialogue. Notwithstanding its similarity with face-to-face conversation, it lacks some of its properties. Errors or inadequacies of expression cannot be corrected and if someone sends a later message to correct something, there is no guarantee that it will be read.
There are some problems linked to the medium. It may occur that many messages come in at once, all of them expressing more or less the same thing. There are many repeated concepts and banalities. The asynchronous chatgroup is a medium that promotes redundancy. People do not know what others have said until their messages appear on the screen, so duplicated subject-matter occurs quite often.
But the medium offers also the possibility of equal participation. Shy people or people who could not have the opportunity to express themselves on a particular topic, have the chance of doing it.

Classroom conferences for example help students to know each others and facilitate the exchange of ideas.
The peer-group factor characterizes asynchronous chatgroups in general. People join a group because they know they are talking to people that are just like them. They are assumed to be equal and judged only on the basis of their messages. Accordingly it is language the main means of establishing group membership.
Crystal thinks that the asynchronous chatgroups language will emerge as a distinct variety of language.