



LANGUAGE AND THE INTERNET

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Abstract

This article discusses the relation of Internet and language, along with the role of Internet in formation new language units. The author of the article analyses neologisms and the ways and means of their word formation.

Keywords: Vocabulary, term, medium, domain, technology

Introduction

The Internet is one of the most remarkable things human beings have ever made. In terms of its impact on society, it ranks with print, the railways, the telegraph, the automobile, electric power and television. Some would equate it with print and television, the two earlier technologies which most transformed the communications environment in which people live. Yet it is potentially more powerful than both because it harnesses the intellectual leverage which print gave to mankind without being hobbled by the one-to-many nature of broadcast television.

The term ‘Netspeak’ is an alternative to ‘Netlish’, ‘Weblish’, ‘Internet language’, ‘cyberspeak’, ‘electronic discourse’, ‘electronic language’, ‘interactive written discourse’, ‘computer-mediated communication’ (CMC), and other more cumbersome locutions. Each term has a different implication: ‘Netlish’, for example, is plainly derived from ‘English’, and is of decreasing usefulness as the Net becomes more multilingual; ‘electronic discourse’ emphasizes the interactive and dialogue elements; ‘CMC’ focuses on the medium itself. It is perhaps unsurprising to see ‘Netspeak’, as a term, being given some popular currency – following the Orwellian introduction of Newspeak and Oldspeak in 1984, later developments such as Doublespeak and Seaspeak, and media labels such as Royalspeak and Blairspeak. As a name, Netspeak is succinct, and functional enough, as long as we remember that ‘speak’ here involves writing as well as talking, and that any ‘speak’ suffix also has a receptive element, including ‘listening and reading’.



The first of these points hardly seems worth the reminder, given that the Internet is so clearly a predominantly written medium and yet, as we shall see, the question of how speech is related to writing is at the heart of the matter. But the second point is sometimes ignored, so its acknowledgement is salutary. On the Internet, as with traditional speaking and writing, the language that individuals produce is far exceeded by the language they receive; and as the Internet is a medium almost entirely dependent on reactions to written messages, awareness of audience must hold a primary place in any discussion. The core feature of the Internet is its real or potential interactivity. (Crystal David 1998. Language play. Harmondsworth: Penguin) In everyday conversation, terms from the underlying computer technology are given a new application among people who want their talk to have a cool cutting-edge. Examples from recent overheard conversations include:

It's my turn to download now (i.e. I've heard all your gossip, now hear mine)

I need more bandwidth to handle that point (i.e. I can't take it all in at once)

She's multitasking (said of someone doing two things at once)

Let's go offline for a few minutes (i.e. let's talk in private)

Give me a brain dump on that (i.e. tell me all you know)

I'll ping you later (i.e. get in touch to see if you're around)

He's 404 (i.e. he's not around)

He started flaming me for no reason at all (i.e. shouting at me)

That's an alt.dot way of looking at things (i.e. a cool way)

Are you wired? (i.e. ready to handle this)

Get with the programme (i.e. keep up)

I got a pile of spam in the post today (i.e. junk-mail)

He's living in hypertext (i.e. he's got a lot to hide)

E you later (said as a farewell)

Programmers have long needed special vocabulary to talk about their lines of code, and some of this has now spilled over into everyday speech, especially to handle the punctuation present in an electronic address. For example, radio and television presenters commonly add e-addresses when telling listeners and viewers how they might write in to a programme, using at, dot, and forwardslash to punctuate their utterance. Dot com is now a commonly heard phrase, as well as appearing ubiquitously in writing in all kinds of advertising and promotional material.



In fact, written English shows developments well beyond the stage of the literal use of .com. This suffix is one of several domain names (with some US/UK variation) showing what kind of organization an electronic address belongs to: .com (commercial), .edu or .ac (educational), .gov (governmental), .mil (military),

.net (network organizations), and .org or .co (everything else). Dotcom has come to be used as a general adjective (with or without the period, and sometimes hyphenated), as in dotcom organizations and dotcom crisis. It has, however, come to be used in a variety of ludic ways, especially in those varieties where language play is a dominant motif – newspaper headlines and advertising. It has been expanded into other words: a computer hardware store advertises itself as SHOPNAME.computer. Similarly, www became web without worry in a British Telecom advertising campaign. The similarity of com to come has been noticed, and doubtless there are similar links made in other languages. An offer to win a car on the Internet is headed com and get it. A headline in the Independent Graduate on openings still available on the Web is headed: Dot.com all ye faithful. A phonetic similarity motivated a food-outlet advertisement: lunch@Boots.yum. The ‘dot’ element is now introduced into all kinds of phrases: Learnhow.to and launch.anything, are names of sites. The phrase un.complicated introduced an ad for personal finance. One company uses the slogan Get around the www.orld; another has the slogan www.alk this way.

By now the e-prefix must have been used in hundreds of expressions. The Oxford dictionary of new words (Knowles Elizabeth. 1997. The Oxford dictionary of new words. Oxford: Oxford University Press.) had already noted e-text, e-zine, e-cash, and e-money, and in 1998 the American Dialect Society named e- ‘Word of the Year’ as well as ‘Most Useful and Most Likely to Succeed’. Examples since noted include e-tailing and e-tailers [‘retailing on the Internet’], e-lance [‘electronic free-lance’] and e-lancers, e-therapy and e-therapists, e-management and e-managers, e-government, e-bandwagon, e-books, e-conferences, e-voting, e-loan, e-newsletters, e-security, e-cards, e-pinions, e-shop, e-list, e-rage, e-crap, and (Spanish) e-mociron. Awareness of the form, though in the reverse direction, appeared on the side of a London taxi: WatrlooNo Problm– glossed beneath by no-e.anything. A bookmaker developing a Net presence called the firm e-we go.



8 Journalistic headlines and captions often play with terms in search of eye-catching effects, so it is not surprising to find e-motivated lexical formations in specialist newspapers and magazines, as well as in the general press.

How many of these developments will become a permanent feature of the language it is impossible to say. We can never predict language change, only recognize it once it has happened. Finally, the Web offers an unprecedented array of opportunities for both students and teachers. Whatever complaints there may have been in the past, over the lack of availability of 'authentic materials', there must now be a general satisfaction that so much genuine written data is readily available, with spoken data on the horizon. (Indeed, the pedagogical problem is now the opposite – to evaluate and grade what is available, so that students are not overwhelmed.) Another benefit is that the Web can put learners in contact with up-to-date information about a language, especially through the use of online dictionaries, usage guides, and suchlike – though at present these are in limited supply, with problems of access fees and copyright still awaiting solution in many instances. Web sites can provide a greater variety of materials, attractively

packaged, such as newspaper articles, quizzes, exercises, self-assessment tasks, and other forms. As a publishing medium, moreover, the Web offers unprecedented opportunities to students, for both individual and collaborative work. (Bowers, R. 1995. Web publishing for students of EST. In Mark Warschauer)

References

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2. Knowles Elizabeth. 1997. The Oxford dictionary of new words. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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