

e-English: A Natural Evolution of Our Language?

Erin Grabe

Human communication is in constant flux. Thanks to the internet—the world’s most ubiquitous technology—netgeeks across the globe have created a new language, internet slang, as a testament to this flux, if to no other end than to save keystrokes. The new words, acronyms, abbreviations, and non-verbal symbols comprising this new internet lingo are so rampant that they have started to infiltrate oral communication. Quickly, new titles are being coined for this phenomenon, such as *netspeak* and *e-English*. Linguists like Professor David Crystal claim that this geek speak is adding new dimensions to the English language, broadening its range and expressiveness, and they are encouraging others to embrace it. Studies are being done by scholars like Naomi Baron and Amanda Pawelski to determine who is responsible for its development, proliferation, and frequency of use. In fact, the rise of internet lingo has become such a hot topic that even news organizations like National Public Radio have debated the issue on the airwaves. In the wake of this linguistic wave, an interesting debate has materialized, a debate that warrants (unabbreviated) thought: does the rise of internet speak represent the natural evolution of the English language, or its demise?

Unlike many curious phenomena in the English language, it has been seemingly easy for researchers to pinpoint the origins of *e-English*. Computer networking and internet search tools laid the groundwork for what would become a boom of instant and text messaging, centered around transmitting text (Baron, 2008, p. 13). Ostensibly, a researcher need only analyze the quantity, quality, style, demographic use and frequency with which people text and instant message, then, to adequately explain its origins and development (Crystal, 2008, p. 89-92). However, the picture is perhaps more pixilated than it appears at first glance. The abbreviated language patterns resulting from the recent rise of instant, text-based communication are not an entirely brand new means of human communication. Indeed, a thorough examination of language outside of computer-mediated communication (CMC) reveals similar tendencies that predate mobile phones and personal computers (Crystal, 2008, p. 37). For example, rebuses—pictures used to represent the sounds of words—were used in Ancient Egyptian writings. Their modern, geeky equivalents would be the use of the letter *y* instead of writing *why* or the substitution of an 8 in the common expression *c u l8r* (see you later). These very same tools are found in many languages. For instance, French-speakers are wont to type *7ac* (pronounced “set ah say,” spelled *c’est assez*), meaning *that’s enough* (Crystal, 2008, p. 41). We may skillfully surf our QWERTYs and think

that these devices are clever and new, but, as Crystal points out, we are “only doing what generations have done before us” (2008, p. 41).

In the late 16th century, the phrase *God be with ye* was in common use. Over time, this popular farewell evolved—due in part to its similarity to greetings like *good morning*—into the common farewell in modern English, *goodbye* (Oxford, 2005). Just as a vowel, consonant or whole syllable was omitted to form a contraction in the case of *goodbye*, CMC users create word shortenings to suit their needs such as *aftn* for afternoon or *btwn* for between (Crystal, 2008, p. 47). Deliberate misspellings are also common in CMC, misspellings such as *cuz* (because), *luv* (love) and *thru* (through). David Crystal points out that nonstandard spellings such as these are so much a part of English literary tradition that entries exist in the *Oxford English Dictionary* dating as far back as 1828 (2004, p. 48-49).

However, despite our long-lasting tradition as English-speakers of simply spelling things wrong, it is essential to note that at no point in our history as human beings has communication been so readily available at such a low cost—once your internet or mobile device has been purchased and service contracts signed, of course (Baron, 2008, p. 4). The domestication of these technologies, Naomi Baron asserts, is “challenging our assumptions about interpersonal communication and calling for us to rethink conventional notions about spoken and written language” (2008, p. 5). According to Baron, the fundamental difference between the current CMC movement and other previous forms of widespread communication (remember the landline telephone?) is control over when, where, and how well we communicate (2008, p. 5-6).

Due to the popularization of CMC, through which millions of people are typing billions of messages every day, internet vernacular has begun to crop up in oral communication (Ulaby, 2006). This trend received an onslaught of bad hype towards the beginning of the 21st century as linguistic purists claimed that the use of text language was becoming indistinguishable from proper English by younger generations, though David Crystal finds little to no evidence to support this claim (2008, p. 151). Citing sporadic examples in teenage schoolwork where an abbreviation or two has crept in, Crystal counters with direct acknowledgments from a number of teens that there is a time and place for using text language—and academic writing is not one of them (2008, p. 152-153).

Does the origin of the headlines slamming geek speak lie in the fact that they were all typed with one finger? Though internet lingo is used by people of all generations, it is truly the younger generation, namely, the one that grew up with computers, that has catapulted text abbreviations into the spoken word (Pawelski, 2008, p. 2-3). The reluctance to accept this linguistic trend’s validity may be nothing more than an older generation’s inability to bridge a generational gap. Through a direct study Pawelski found, though, that the number of users of the internet that embrace internet lingo is highest in the young, lowest in the middle-aged and, surprisingly, curves back upward in the elderly (Pawelski, 2008, p. 12-13). Susan Herring, a professor at Indiana University, reminds us that language can draw “a generational line in the sand” and separate “an in-group from an out-group” (Ulaby, 2006). It is not uncommon to hear a teenager say *book* instead of

cool, because in mobile messaging the keys for the respective words are found in the same location. Similarly, a fly on the wall in a high school hallway may hear the expression *I less than three you* because a less than symbol (<) followed by a number 3 in CMC forms the shape of a heart: *I <3 U* (Ulaby, 2006). To put it bluntly, perhaps the younger generation might like to think that with such code, they will keep their territory free of incursions by their elders.

If words are symbols that have been mutually agreed upon to represent or convey a certain meaning, then, as symbols, they may be left open to interpretation, revision, or evaluation.

This task is often performed by linguists skilled in etymology because without a common understanding of a word, its meaning may be lost in translation from one ear to the next. Knowing that words morph and that our online communications will only continue to evolve, we should not be so eager to write netspeak off. Often when a word or definition is tinkered with by non-linguists, the unskilled toiling over the language is met with criticism. Such is the case, it seems, with language developing via computer-mediated communication.

E-English is not new, nor is it just for the young and American. The phenomenon would be much easier to dismiss were it an American fad, akin to the utterances of Bart Simpson. Various methods for keeping messages brief or instilling emotion into them have already been thought up. This language surge is instead an international movement that boasts the participation of the whole technologically-advanced world in the creation of a new slang based on electronic communication. Though the younger generation may make up the majority of CMC language-originators, the elderly—wishing to stay hip—are more common users of weblish than, say, their offspring. In other words, the generational gap seems to span the middle-aged, joining the youngest and the oldest.

Though internet lingo may have initially appeared to save keystrokes, it has evolved into a method of inserting colloquialisms into the way we type. It stands to reason, then, that if the way we speak has influenced the way we type, then the way we type can do the same for speech. Linguists, scholars, teachers and parents believe that a clear-cut line between our communication patterns needs to be drawn between formal academia and informal interactions. As a method of individuals relating to one another, CMC was not born to replace English. Students inserting internet lingo into formal interactions may quickly be corrected by their professors. The correction then becomes a part of the teaching process and not necessarily the death rattle of language as we know it.

Is it time to add Netspeak 101 to English as a second language courses? Rather than make that leap, it seems more appropriate to establish a solid foundation for the English language first. Without that, the frequently evolving and individually tailored netspeak would be lost anyway on the clueless. When computers first adorned a vast percentage of people's homes it was not uncommon to hear people remark: "I don't need to know how to spell. I have spell check." If that is true, then perhaps it is also true that we do not need to learn how to speak because we have a shortcut for that in the form of netspeak. As a means of expression, an extension of our language or a shortcut to informal notes and

updates within mass social media, netspeak has its place. Provided there is a strong basic understanding of “proper” language first, this slang may be akin to cadence in poetry or the conciseness of a telegram. To adopt an evolutionary platitude, it is a linguistic survival of the fittest. Though in constant flux, e-English is fit—and by no means on the verge of extinction.

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Nominating faculty: Professor Maura Smale, Library 1201, Department of Library, School of Arts & Sciences, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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