

NETSPEAK – IS IT THE FUTURE?

The actuality of the problem. The Internet and World Wide Web have generated an expansive new vocabulary with its own website dictionary. The electronic medium presents us with a channel which facilitates and constraints our ability to communicate in ways that are fundamentally different from those found in other semiotic situations. Many of the expectations and practices which we associate with spoken and written language no longer obtain.

The development of the problem. There is a widely held intuition that some sort of Newspeak exists - a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive. The fact that people are conscious of something out there is demonstrated by the way other varieties of language are being affected by it. It is always a sure sign that a new variety has arrived when people in other linguistic situations start alluding to it. There is a widespread view that as “technospeak” comes to rule, standards will be lost. David Crystal, for example, argues the reverse: that the Internet has encouraged a dramatic expansion in the variety and creativity of language.

There is no denying the unprecedented scale and significance of the Net, as a global medium. The extra significance is even reflected in spelling: this is the first such technology to be conventionally identified with an initial capital. We do not give typographical enhancement to such developments as “Printing”, “Publishing”, “Broadcasting”, “Radio”, or “Television”, but we do write “Internet” and “Net” [1, p.1].

We need a name for this new medium. David Crystal calls it *Netspeak*. “I am comfortable with Netspeak, for it falls within a tradition of usage which began with George Orwell’s *Newspeak* and *Oldspeak* in 1984, later developments such as *Airspeak* and *Seaspeak*, and media labels such as *Royalspeak* and *Blairspeak*. It is 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” [1, p.2].

It is worth stressing the point that Netspeak is a medium, not a variety. It consists of many varieties, some of which in turn consist of several sub-varieties. Crystal says that we are able to find five main domains within which varieties of Netspeak could be identified – there is the World Wide Web, e-mail, two types of chatgroups (the synchronous type and the asynchronous type), and the domain of virtual worlds [1]. We can think that this figure of five is soon going to grow as new technologies come to be; but these are the five that are out there right now. The computer-mediated communication is something that is electronic, global, and interactive, and this has given rise to a distinctive type of language, neither spoken nor written. It is not like writing because it lacks one of the most basic features of traditional writing – the fact that a piece of text is static and permanent on the page. Netspeak is not like speech either, firstly, because it lacks the kind of simultaneous feedback you get in face-to-face conversation, or the immediate reaction signals which people make to each other. Secondly, there is no way of expressing the full range of variations in intonation, stress, speed, rhythm, pause, and tone of voice.

There have been efforts to capture these effects in the form of an exaggerated use of spelling and punctuation, and the use of capitals, spacing, and special symbols for emphasis.

Netspeak is not like speech or writing. It is not a hybrid of spoken and written features. "Netspeak is something genuinely different in kind. Electronic texts are simply not the same as other kinds of texts. In particular, they display a dynamism that is lacking elsewhere, in the way texts can be manipulated and changed. And they permit a multiplicity of simultaneous communicative activities that neither speech nor writing could tolerate" [1, p. 4].

We may coin new denoting expressions, either phrases or words. The *e*-prefix is a good example and another index of Netspeak's influence. By now it has been used in hundreds of expressions. The Oxford Dictionary of New Words [2] had already noted *e-text*, *e-zine*, *e-money*. Examples include *e-tailing* and *e-tailers* (retailing on the Internet), *e-lance* (electronic free-lance) and *e-lancers*, *e-management* and *e-managers*, *e-government*, *e-books*, *e-conferences*, *e-voting*, *e-loan*, *e-newsletters*, *e-security*, *e-shop*, *e-list*.

A popular method of creating Internet neologisms is to combine two separate words to make a new word, or **compound**. Some elements turn up repeatedly: **mouse** in such words as *mouseclick*, *mousepad*, *mouse across*, *mouse over*; **click** in *click-and-buy*, *one-click*, *cost-per-click*, *double-click*; **web** in *webcam*, *webmail*, *webliography*, *webmaster*, *webzine*, *webhead* (web addict); **ware** in *firmware*, *freeware*, *groupware*, *shareware*; **net** in *netlag*, *netdead*, *netnews*, *Usenet*, *Netspeak*, *EcoNet*, *PeaceNet*; **hot** in *hotlist*, *hotspot*, *hotlink*, *Hotmail*; **bug** in *bug fix*, *bug tracker*, *bug bash* (hunt for bugs). Similar in function are the use of **cyber-** and **hyper-** as prefixes or combining forms (*cyberspace*, *cyberculture*, *cyberlawyer*, *cyber rights*; *hypertext*, *hyperlink*, *hyperfiction*). Other prefixes include *e-*; **V-** (virtual), and **E** (for a number raised to a power, from mathematics).

Blends (in which part of one word is joined to part of another) can be illustrated by *netiquette*, *netizen*, *infontet*, *datagram*. An innovation is the replacement of a word element by a similar sounding item, as in the use of *e-* (*ecruiting*: *electronic recruiting*; *ecruiter*, *etailing*). Word class **conversion** is also important, usually from noun to verb: *to mouse*, *to clipboard*.

In **conclusion** we can say that modern technologies are sufficient to introduce a huge range of new varieties to the English language (and to other languages also). Computational futurologists are anticipating radical innovation in each of the three traditional domains of communication: production, transmission and reception. All of these will have an impact on the kind of language we use.

Literature

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