Language Change or Language Innovation?

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Linguists should pay special attention to those aspects of English which signal possible, impending, or ongoing change in the standard language. Not all kinds of variation will result in changes in standard English: some developments in society are always going to be more influential than others. But sometimes a particular trend stands out above all others, and then it is well worth taking time to reflect on it. The trend which is going to have the greatest impact on the English language during the 21st century is computer-mediated communications, and specifically the Internet.

Key words – language change, language innovation, Internet, Netspeak, bland, compound, conversion, abbreviation, graphology, new spelling conventions.

The actuality of the problem. New technologies, new immigrants, new ways of working, shopping, socializing, increased foreign travel, and new eating habits have all brought new words flooding into English. The Internet and World Wide Web alone 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. The characteristics of the Internet language was the study subject for many scientists. [Crystal] There is a widespread view that as 'technospeak' comes to rule, standards will be lost. David Crystal, for example, in his book "Language and the Internet", argues the reverse: that the Internet has encouraged a dramatic expansion in the variety and creativity of language. Covering a range of Internet genres, including e-mail, chat, and the Web, he reveals how the Internet is radically changing the way we use language.

The purpose of this article is to study some innovations that conquer not only English, but other languages too.

It is quite clear that the lexical knowledge that one has of one's native language does not have the format of dictionary. First, the number of lexical entries in a good dictionary is much higher than that in our individual mental list of words. There are many words that most speakers do not know. Adult speakers of English with a higher education might know up to 50,000 word types, and sometimes more, but it is certainly a smaller set than the whole English vocabulary, which comprises hundreds of thousands of words. This estimate concerns the passive vocabulary, the number of words that you understand. The active vocabulary, the set of words one uses in language production is much smaller.

A dictionary is conservative by nature, and hence it will contain words from the past that nobody uses any more. Each new edition of a printed dictionary will contain new entries, but will also have deleted a number of words from the previous edition that have become obsolete. Our mental lexicon will always be ahead of the dictionary, and contains a substantial number of words that are not listed in dictionaries. New words (neologisms) are coined continuously, and dictionaries always lag behind. Moreover, the editors of dictionaries use a threshold for the listing of words: a new word must have a certain degree or permanence in the language use of more than one speaker before it gets an antry in a dictionary. Language users do not have such a threshold for their mental lexicon.

A second difference between a dictionary and the mental lexicon is that words in the mental lexicon bear a number of relationships to each other. Words with similar meanings or similar phological forms appear to be related in the mental lexicon, as can be concluded from speech errors. In a dictionary, on the other hand, semantic relations between words are usually not expressed directly. We may conceive of the mental lexicon as a multidimensional web of words, with all kinds of connections between those words.

A third difference between a dictionary and a mental lexicon is that the latter also stores information about the frequency with which you come across a word. Linguists may compute the frequency of words on the basis of large corpora of actual language use. Frequency counts indicate how many tokens are found for each word type in a particular corpus.

The statement that languages change is in fact metaphorical in nature. It presupposes that we conceive of a language as an organism that grows, changes, and sometimes dies. This way of speaking suggests that languages have a mode of existence outside their users. This is true to a certain extent, but a language primarily exists in the minds of its speakers. That is why we say that a language has died when its last speaker has died, as has, als, happened often in recent years. So it is speakers that change their language while using it in language perception and production.

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" (Crystal 2001:1).

The arrival of print, the telegraph, radio, and television each gave language fresh dimensions that generated many new distinctive varieties and usages. The electronic medium will have a much greater impact because it presents us with a channel which facilitates and constrains our ability to communicate in ways that are fundamentally different from those found in other semiotic situations. We are used to thinking of English in terms of "spoken English" and "written English". Now we must take on board a new medium, computer-mediated English, where many of the

expectations and practices which we associate with spoken and written language no longer obtain.

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" (Crystal).

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 whuch varieties of Netspeak could be identified – there is the World Wide Web, e-mail, two types of chantgroups (the synchronous type and the asynchronous type), and the domain of virtual worlds (Crystal 2001). 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" (Crystal 2001:4).

Why do language users change their language? In fact, "change" is not always the appropriate word for what is going on. When a language acquires new words through the activities of its users, it would be better to speak of construction or innovation of language [Booij 2005:256]. What does change when new words or new meanings of words get established is the lexical norm of that language, not the system behind it. The main reason for changing the lexical norm of a language is that language users need expressions for new concepts, or new things. One way of meeting this need is extending the meaning of existing words. For instance, the word *mouse* acquired a new meaning as a navigation device for computers.

Of course if you've got emails, and most people have these days, then you will have encountered the word *spam*. Spam flooding your email box with ads or other unwanted messages. But why the word *spam* for this sort of thing? Spam was originally a tinned meat back in the 1930s, a brand name for a particular kind of cold meat. But it became very fashionable when Monty Python, the satirical television comedy series back in the 70s and 80s they had a sketch where just for fun they had spam with every item on the restaurant menu - bacon and spam, egg and spam, ham and spam. It became a real part of the language meaning any unwanted material of any kind and so when the Internet came along it wasn't surprising really that spam became part of that kind of experience. And the evidence that it's become part of the language is not just because of the noun spam which you might expect to see in the internet context but because it's generated other kinds of linguistic expression as well. We've got verbs based upon it, and adjectives based upon it.

Alternatively, 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 (1997) had already noted *e-text*, *e-zine*, *e-money*. Examples include *e-tailing* and *e-talilers* (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*, *infonet*, *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*.

The various types of abbreviation found in Netspeak have been one of its most remarked features: FAQ (frequently asked questions), HTML (hypertext markup language), ISP (Internet Service Provider) and many others. There are dictionaries of such forms now.

Distinctive graphology is also an important feature of Netspeak. Most of the Internet is not case sensitive, which thus motivates the random use of capitals or no

capitals at all. Any use of capitalization is a strongly marked form of communication. Messages wholly in capitals are considered to be "shouting", and usually avoided. Words in capitals adds extra emphasis. There are certain contexts where capitals need to be recognized. A capital letter may be obligatory in a business name. A distinctive feature of Internet graphology is the bicapitalization (BiCaps): AltaVista, PowerBook, PeaceNet, GeoCities.

Spelling practice is also distinctive. New spelling conventions have emerged, e.g. the replacement of plural *–s* by *–z* to refer to pirated versions of software, as in *warez, tunez, gamez, serialz, downloadz, filez.* Nonstandard spellings are used to reflect pronunciation, such as *yep, nope, noooo, kay* (OK). Emotional expressions of shock, regret and the like make use of varying nymbers of vowels and consonants, depending on the ferocity of emotion.

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. For everyone who is interested in English the message is clear: get familiar with the innovative language of the new technology.

Literature

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