

Language and the Internet

by David Crystal

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This book about the language used on the Internet analyses four basic domains: e-mail, chatgroups, virtual worlds, and the Web. Each of these is, of course, quite distinct, but they all share the property of being new and evolving, and this provides an opportunity not just to describe the linguistic features of these new forms of communication but also to gain an insight into how innovation can take place to accommodate the demands and improvisations of constantly changing modes of human interaction. In addition, the new media, especially texts on the Web, raise important issues of ownership and authenticity, both of which are discussed in some detail.

There are many areas of interest in the innovative ways language is used on the Internet, not just in the familiar development of abbreviations such as *btw* ("by the way"), *imho* ("in my humble opinion") and *cul8r* ("see you later"), but also in the manner in which extensive shifts in existing usage can be observed. For example, one might naively believe that chatgroups just represent a form of on-line conversation, with the same rules of turn-taking and courtesy applying, but Crystal shows that very different conventions are adopted, partly to prevent the potential chaos that might otherwise ensue with the interspersed contributions of many participants, some of which may exhibit substantial time-lags. One such convention is that deviation from a topic is often strongly discouraged, so there are special ways to force participants back to the original topic (by using an *ob*-prefix), while in contrast, regular topic shift in an ordinary conversation is standard behaviour, with anyone at liberty to say "That reminds me ..." and then set off on a completely new track (p. 147).

This book is timely. It is interesting to note that in Crystal (1995), an extraordinarily wide-ranging overview of so many aspects of the history, structure and use of English, there is no mention of the Internet and the language of e-mail is covered in just one page, so this new book provides a valuable insight into domains that were almost completely overlooked because they were either non-existent or in their infancy just a few years ago. However, although the book is both timely and exceptionally carefully researched, the dynamic nature of the media means that much of the material may already be out of date, a point that Crystal himself acknowledges (p. 224). Furthermore, as he is not quite young enough to participate actively in most chat-rooms and virtual gaming worlds, he relies for his analysis of these domains almost entirely on other sources published during the 90's, so much of the material may be even further out of date than the publication date suggests. Nevertheless, the investigation is always thorough and

interesting, and as some of the modes of communication he discusses may be passing fads in any case, it does not really matter if his analysis represents a snapshot of the state-of-play during the late 90's rather than current practice, for they provide fascinating insights into how language can be adapted amazingly quickly to accommodate the demands and opportunities of a fast-changing world.

One widespread concern nowadays is whether the spread of the Internet is increasing the domination of English throughout the world, to the detriment of so many other languages. Crystal offers an optimistic outlook in this respect, emphasizing that although initially nearly all Internet materials were in English, nowadays the volume of material in other languages is steadily increasing, both in absolute terms and also in percentage, and he believes that the Internet can actually provide resources to help save minority languages, by enabling widely separated people to communicate with each other, and also by providing easily-accessible written texts and recordings. It is undoubtedly true that about half the world's languages are under immediate threat of extinction, but this was the case before the arrival of computers, and the Internet might actually provide facilities that can help to save some of them.

One other recurring question about Internet language is whether its toleration and encouragement of abbreviations is leading to the degradation of language usage, especially with SMS-style contractions creeping into the writing of students and creating real problems for teachers whose job it is to develop expertise in more formal styles of language. Crystal once again takes a very positive, optimistic view on this issue, regarding such innovation as evidence of our linguistic creativity. Language has always changed, and if it is adapting at an ever-increasing pace now, this is just evidence of how wonderfully imaginative we humans can be. So, instead of persisting in futile attempts to stamp out such innovative usage, maybe we, as teachers, need to devote our energy to raising awareness among our students about different styles of writing and the adoption of appropriate usage according to the situation. In documenting the complex language use found on the Internet, this book may help many of us to appreciate the sophistication of linguistic practices outside the domains we are familiar with, and by fostering such knowledge, it may give us the means to deal with these issues more effectively.

This book chronicles the emergence of new styles of communication that are often characterised by innovative and colourful ways of presenting material, and it is therefore somewhat ironic that the book itself should

itself rely entirely on plain text, with no screen shots of web pages or images of the environments that occur in virtual worlds. Indeed, this is a little surprising, as so many other books by the same author (e.g. Crystal 1995, 1996) are full of illustrations, cartoons, and imaginatively presented text. However, the reliance of this book on a traditional style of presentation does not actually interfere with the clarity of the material, for the text is always lively, informative, and well-researched, and in many ways it is reassuring that even in the modern world, it is not necessary for a book to be packed with colourful pictures for it to convey its message attractively. In some ways, therefore, the success of this book in using a traditional style to discuss modern developments in communication reinforces the contention that a variety of styles of writing can continue to coexist quite comfortably.

References

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