

Net English: The Language of On-line Communication

As the Internet comes increasingly to be viewed from a social perspective, so the role of language becomes central ... What is immediately obvious when engaging in any of the Internet's functions is its linguistic character. If the Internet is a revolution, therefore, it is likely to be a linguistic revolution.

David Crystal



Ani Nazaryan

It is a well-known fact that language is a historical category and an indispensable part of human existence, it lives and develops dynamically in all the phases of the history together with people and the surrounding world. Socio-technological extralinguistic changes result in intralinguistic modifications. Therefore, it is no surprise that in the present stage of development of Modern English, many non-traditional varieties of speech, substyles and genres are coming into being due to social and technological processes (extralinguistic factors) taking place in the society. Of importance have become not only texts representing the two basic functional styles - scientific vs fictional and other intermediate traditional speech varieties, but also substyles and genres budding off present extralinguistic reality and attracting scholarly attention of functional linguists.¹

Existing side by side with other media, the new discourse type or register of Internet Communication has changed our communicative behaviour enormously.² The so-called Electronic Language³ has aroused great interest and attracts more and more attention of the linguists who are really concerned with the possible influence this system may have on a living language. Generally speaking, at the present phase of its development English is the main language of pop music, books, newspapers, air traffic control, international business, academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sports, international competition and advertising. It has also become the universal language on the Internet though it has no official status as such. Nowadays nobody can dismiss the fact that the wide use and spread of English as the **Lingua Franca** has taken its toll on the Internet, where even the computer code is based on English.⁴ This priority also supports the position of English as a primary language for international communication: a lot of words which were introduced into the English language with the elaboration of computer systems, are borrowed now by other languages (*burble, communications, cyberstyle,*⁵ *emoticons, egosurfing, geek, go Cyrillic, intranet, list Nazi, mouse potato MUD, nerd, Net Police, nooksurfer, on-line, off-line, outernet, homepage, nomepage, nymrod,*

ROM-brain, shovelware, smileys, snail mail, sysop, tetwrist, treeware, user eye-D, webmaster, Zen mail, etc.)

With its numerous major and minor expressions and forms Electronic Discourse has given radical opportunities to develop new stylistic rules. The new forms of interaction seen in Internet exchanges are far more important than changes in vocabulary, grammar, and spelling.⁶ People unfamiliar with the mechanisms of On-line Communication and familiar with the conventions of Off-line Communication (Standard English), think that there can be no analogy of On-line Communication with speech. Chatrooms and the like are too constrained by their response times and the slow speed of typing to be considered as a good analogy of speech. Regarding some broad pragmatic themes (communicative effectiveness, spamming, lurking, paralinguistic cues, virtual phonology, acronymization, relexicalization, addressivity, accentualization), the comparative brevity of On-line Communication, its lack of formality and the inclusion of “framing”, Web pages, e-mail and other mechanisms are too transient or easily modified to be equivalent to the printed word. This is a good example of one way that on-line and off-line communications differ.

The Electronic Discourse, based on the living language - English, has already occupied its “place in the sun” in the functional system of the language. Trying to define its exact place in the system, we can say that despite the fact of including numerous types of texts: fiction, academic writing, advertisements, letters; practically all possible existing types of texts,⁷ Internet Language as a whole can surely be considered a new form of mass communication called **On-line Communication**. In conjunction with radio and television, telephone communication and printed material, it has created the universal information net, called *Cyberspace* and all the people using the Net are *Netizens* (the word is easily associated with “citizens”). The unique language, argo or vernacular used in the net is *Netspeak*⁸ and the corresponding derivations: *Netlish*, *Weblish*, *Netois*, *Net Patois*. There are a great number of other names like *Electronic Discourse*, *Net Discourse*, *Interactive Written Discourse*, *Internet Language*, *Web Language*, *On-line Communication*, *Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)*, *Virtual Discourse*, *Net Lingua* or *Net Lingo*, *Internet Language*, *Netslang*, etc. The regular users are *Webies*, the new ones -*Newbies*. The communicators in Netspeak observe common rules called *netiquette* (a pun on “etiquette” referring to proper behavior on a network).

Changes in communication technology are invariably accompanied by concerns about language because people notice a growth of informality in language use, their concerns center around whether this will cause a general deterioration in the quality of the language.⁹ Moreover, in the minds of many, Net Discourse is a little more than linguistic vandalism, illiterate on-line expression where grammar is gone and spelling is superfluous. Some traditional thinkers even agree that Internet Relay Chat is an **antilanguage**¹⁰, the speech of a community sometimes called **antisociety**. They are right in the way that it is naive to think that in the potentially infinite universe of this new language variety there is no place for antilanguage. There are really text-based virtual realities with exclusively antilinguistic tendencies.

However, the language used on-line is that of real people of great diversity, who

employ different language varieties for purely practical reasons and whose output is largely unedited by proofreaders or publishers. The language of this immense community affects even people who never log on or use the letters *AWHF* in regular communication to ask *Are we having fun?*, *TMOT*, that is *Trust me on this, ru*, that is *Are you?*, say *ppl* instead of *people*, *HAND* instead of *Have a nice day!*, or write *hey can u gimme a lift 2 the party 2nite?* (*Can you give me a lift to the party tonight*) and *ne1 wanna chatto 17/m* (*Does anyone want to talk with a 17 year-old male?*) The common fact that the mode of technology imparts something of its nature to public experience and the extralinguistic reality dictates its new rules and norms to the language, cannot be ignored.

Giving a linguist's appraisal of Electronic Discourse, the well-known British linguist David Crystal points out that we are on the brink of the biggest revolution in language ever, that Netspeak, this is how he calls on-line language, is not a monolithic creation, but rather a disparate set of communication methods and types such as e-mail, chatrooms, Internet Relay Chat, World Wide Web pages, Websites, etc. Looking at features common to most Internet communications, Netspeak is better seen as written language which has been pulled some way in the direction of speech than as spoken language which has been written down. He suggests that on-line language is best viewed as a new species of interaction, a genuine "third medium" (besides the written and oral forms of English), which is evolving its own systematic rules to suit new circumstances. Rather than condemning this new linguistic fact, we should exult at having a chance for academic study, a new opportunity "to once more explore the power of the written language in a creative way" (Crystal, 2001).¹¹

Thus, the universal language of Online Communication is English, or more exactly a collection of languages called "English". A great number of people whose native language is not English proper, know English as a foreign language. They typically use a more or less simplified variant, e.g. excluding most of the idioms of British, American, Australian, Canadian, or other variants of English. Of course, they make mistakes, and sometimes the English used by people as a foreign language on the Internet is almost incomprehensible to anyone else. In addition, on the other hand, people who use English as their native language do not know how to spell difficult words, since they basically know English as a spoken language. English is globally becoming the official language and the common language of educated people. Researchers know English and use it a lot, and often the relevant terminology is more stable and well-known in English. Thus, to maximize the number of interested people that can understand any text, Internet users select English. The maintenance problem is especially important for documents on the World Wide Web - the information system where one crucial feature is the ability to keep things really up-to-date. Consequently, the use of English in essentially national contexts tends to grow too.¹²

Being mindful of the diversity of Internet communities and communication, we consider that linguistic study of this new variety of speech and the effects of it on broader language have become of utmost importance today. Netspeak, different though from other speech varieties of Off-line Communication, has grown into a linguistic medium whose principles and standards are evolving constantly as many millions of readers, or

visitors, ingest the pages with its countless web sites offering information. A new academic study of **Internet Linguistics** includes and will include, at the very least, the study of linguostylistic peculiarities of this new register of English, a comparative study of the style of different formats and the development of language change within these new media.

Notes and References:

1. Functionalism is characteristic of the typologically oriented linguistics, it helps to operate with the help of the corpus of data, it permits to take into consideration the data of other branches of knowledge, which are important for the linguistic study, especially on the interdisciplinary level.
2. See *The European English Messenger*. Vol. 14.1. Portugal: Grafica de Coimbra, 2005.
3. Of interest are also such modern stylistic varieties of speech as political discourse, formal scripted speeches, information talks, papers, the language of sports reports. We see a real renaissance at this point in the form of the on-line diary, web log or "blog".
4. See *English - The Universal Language on the Internet?* 2005. www.google.am
5. The writing style used in most on-line communications is characterized by one or more of the following traits: frequent use of abbreviations, acronyms, and jargon; "street" slang (e.g., using "cuz" instead of "because"); typos, misspelled words, and a general inattention to grammar and sentence structure; a rambling, stream-of-consciousness style.
6. See Crystal D. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
7. Different discourse types are more interwoven and thus the borders between them - much more blurred here than anywhere else.
8. The term was first used by David Crystal in his book "Language and the Internet".
9. According to popular mythology, the Internet will be bad for the future of the English language. Technospeak will rule, standards will be lost, and creativity diminished as globalization imposes sameness. There are those who say that the Internet is an irresistible force churning over the Earth's surface, crushing languages and cultures as it propels English to world domination. David Crystal, one of the foremost authorities on language, argues the opposite, claiming that the Internet is enabling a dramatic expansion of the range and variety of language, and is providing unprecedented opportunities for personal creativity.
10. This is the definition given in Halliday M.A.K. *Language as a Social Semiotic*. London: Arnold, 1978.
11. Trying to avoid ambiguity David Crystal adds: "There is of course, a role for educationalists in teaching children which style is the most appropriate and where". (Crystal D., 2001)
12. The importance of Internet grows rapidly in all fields of human life, including not

only research and education but also marketing and trade as well as entertainment and hobbies. This implies that it becomes more and more important to know how to use Internet services and, as a part of this, to read and write Netlish which replaces the traditional methods of communication. In such a situation The Internet illiterates (opposite to Internet users), may find themselves in an awkward position.

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Այն փաստը, որ արտալեզվական իրականությունն իր կանոններն է թելադրում լեզվին, իր հաստատումն է գտել նոր գործառական դրսևորում համարվող համակարգչային դիսկուրսուն: Ջանգվածային հաղորդակցման այս ժամանակակից ոճաձևը արդեն համարվում է «Համակարգչային լեզվաբանության» ուսումնասիրության առարկան: Առանձնակի հետաքրքրություն է ներկայացնում էլեկտրոնային լեզվի տարբեր դրսևորումների լեզվաոճական առանձնահատկությունների, լեզվի այդ ոլորտում կրած փոփոխությունների և ժամանակակից անգլերենի վրա համակարգչային լեզվի ազդեցության խնդիրների քննությունը: