

## Language and the Internet

David Crystal investigates the nature of the impact which the Internet is making on language. There is already a widespread popular mythology that the Internet is going to be bad for the future of language – that technospeak will rule, standards be lost, and creativity diminished as globalization imposes sameness. The argument of this book is the reverse: that the Internet is in fact enabling a dramatic expansion to take place in the range and variety of language, and is providing unprecedented opportunities for personal creativity. The Internet has now been around long enough for us to ‘take a view’ about the way in which it is being shaped by and is shaping language and languages, and there is no one better placed than David Crystal to take that view. His book is written to be accessible to anyone who has used the Internet and who has an interest in language issues.

DAVID CRYSTAL is one of the world’s foremost authorities on language, and as editor of the *Cambridge Encyclopedia* database he has used the Internet for research purposes from its earliest manifestations. His work for a high technology company involved him in the development of an information classification system with several Internet applications, and he has extensive professional experience of Web issues.

Professor Crystal is author of the hugely successful *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (1987; second edition 1997), *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995), *English as a Global Language* (1997), and *Language Death* (2000). An internationally renowned writer, journal editor, lecturer and broadcaster, he received an OBE in 1995 for his services to the English language. His edited books include *The Cambridge Encyclopedia* (1990; second edition 1994; third edition 1997; fourth edition 2000), *The Cambridge Paperback Encyclopedia* (1993; second edition 1995; third edition 1999), *The Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia* (1994; second edition 1998) and *The Cambridge Factfinder* (1994; second edition 1997; third edition 1998; fourth edition 2000).

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## Preface

In his book *A brief history of the future: the origins of the Internet*, John Naughton comments:<sup>1</sup>

The Internet is one of the most remarkable things human beings have ever made. In terms of its impact on society, it ranks with print, the railways, the telegraph, the automobile, electric power and television. Some would equate it with print and television, the two earlier technologies which most transformed the communications environment in which people live. Yet it is potentially more powerful than both because it harnesses the intellectual leverage which print gave to mankind without being hobbled by the one-to-many nature of broadcast television.

In *Weaving the Web*, the World Wide Web's inventor, Tim Berners-Lee, quotes a speech made by the South African president, Thabo Mbeki:<sup>2</sup>

on how people should seize the new technology to empower themselves; to keep themselves informed about the truth of their own economic, political and cultural circumstances; and to give themselves a voice that all the world could hear.

And he adds: 'I could not have written a better mission statement for the World Wide Web.' Later he comments:

The Web is more a social creation than a technical one.

And again:

the dream of people-to-people communication through shared knowledge must be possible for groups of all sizes, interacting electronically with as much ease as they do now in person.

<sup>1</sup> Naughton (1999: 21–2).

<sup>2</sup> Berners-Lee (1999: 110, 133, 169).

Remarks of this kind have grown since the mid-1990s. An emphasis, which formerly was on technology, has shifted to be on people and purposes. And as the Internet comes increasingly to be viewed from a social perspective, so the role of language becomes central. Indeed, notwithstanding the remarkable technological achievements and the visual panache of screen presentation, 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.

I wrote this book because I wanted to find out about the role of language in the Internet and the effect of the Internet on language, and could find no account already written. In the last few years, people have been asking me what influence the Internet was having on language and I could give only impressionistic answers. At the same time, pundits have been making dire predictions about the future of language, as a result of the Internet's growth. The media would ask me for a comment, and I could not make an informed one; when they insisted, as media people do, I found myself waffling. It was time to sort out my ideas, and this book is the result. I do not think I could have written it five years ago, because of the lack of scholarly studies to provide some substance, and the general difficulty of obtaining large samples of data, partly because of the sensitivity surrounding the question of whether Internet data is public or private. Even now the task is not an easy one, and I have had to use constructed examples, from time to time, to fill out my exposition. Fortunately, a few books and anthologies dealing with Internet language in a substantial way appeared between 1996 and 2000, and focused journals, notably the online *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, began to provide a useful range of illustrations, associated commentary, and an intellectual frame of reference. The extent to which I have relied on these sources will be apparent from the footnotes.

A single intuition about Internet language is next to useless, given the sheer scale of the phenomenon; and the generally youthful character of those using the medium hitherto has put my personal intuition under some strain, given that I fall just outside the peak

age-range of Internet users (said to be 20-somethings). I am therefore very happy to acknowledge the assistance at various points of daughters Lucy and Suzanne – both professionally involved in the communications world – and son Ben for providing a bridge to the Internet as *they* know it to be, in their generation, and for providing extra data. I am also most grateful to Patricia Wallace, Simon Mitchell, and my editor at Cambridge University Press, Kevin Taylor, for further valuable comment, and to my wife, Hilary, for her invaluable critical reading of the screenscript. It is conventional for authors to express their sense of responsibility for any remaining infelicities, and this I willingly do – but of course excluding, in this case, those developments in the Internet revolution, predictable in their unpredictability, which will manifest themselves between now and publication, and make my topical illustrations seem dated. Nine months is a short time in terms of book production, but a very long time in the world of the Internet. Who knows how many of the Web sites I have used will still be around in a year's time? I hope nonetheless that my focus on general issues will enable *Language and the Internet* to outlast such changes, and provide a linguistic perspective which will be of relevance to any of the Internet's future incarnations.

David Crystal  
*Holyhead, January 2001*