1 *A linguistic perspective*

Will the English-dominated Internet
spell the end of other tongues?

Quite e-vil: the mobile phone whisperers

A major risk for humanity

These quotations illustrate widely held anxieties about the effect of the Internet on language and languages. The first is the sub-heading of a magazine article on millennial issues.[1] The second is the headline of an article on the rise of new forms of impoliteness in communication among people using the short messaging service on their mobile phones.[2] The third is a remark from the President of France, Jacques Chirac, commenting on the impact of the Internet on language, and especially on French.[3] My collection of press clippings has dozens more in similar vein, all with a focus on language. The authors are always ready to acknowledge the immense technological achievement, communicative power, and social potential of the Internet; but within a few lines their tone changes, as they express their concerns. It is a distinctive genre of worry. But unlike sociologists, political commentators, economists, and others who draw attention to the dangers of the Internet with respect to such matters as pornography, intellectual property rights, privacy, security, libel, and crime, these authors are worried primarily about linguistic issues. For them, it is language in general, and individual languages in

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[1] Used in an article by Jim Erickson, 'Cyberspeak: the death of diversity', *Asiaweek*, 3 July 1998, 15.
[2] Lydia Slater, in *The Sunday Times*, 30 January 2000, 10.
[3] 'Language and electronics: the coming global tongue', *The Economist*, 21 December 1996, 37.

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particular, which are going to end up as Internet casualties, and their specific questions raise a profusion of spectres. Do the relaxed standards of e-mails augur the end of literacy and spelling as we know it? Will the Internet herald a new era of technobabble? Will linguistic creativity and flexibility be lost as globalization imposes sameness?

There is of course nothing new about fears accompanying the emergence of a new communications technology. In the fifteenth century, the arrival of printing was widely perceived by the Church as an invention of Satan, the hierarchy fearing that the dissemination of uncensored ideas would lead to a breakdown of social order and put innumerable souls at risk of damnation. Steps were quickly taken to limit its potentially evil effects. Within half a century of Gutenberg's first Bible (1455), Frankfurt had established a state censorship office to suppress unorthodox biblical translations and tracts (1486), and soon after, Pope Alexander VI extended censorship to secular books (1501). Around 400 years later, similar concerns about censorship and control were widespread when society began to cope with the political consequences of the arrival of the telegraph, the telephone, and broadcasting technology. The telegraph would destroy the family and promote crime.[4] The telephone would undermine society. Broadcasting would be the voice of propaganda. In each case, the anxiety generated specifically linguistic controversy. Printing enabled vernacular translations of the Bible to be placed before thousands, adding fuel to an argument about the use of local languages in religious settings which continues to resonate today. And when broadcasting enabled selected voices to be heard by millions, there was an immediate debate over which norms to use as correct pronunciation, how to achieve clarity and intelligibility, and whether to permit local accents and dialects, which remains as lively a debate in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth.

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[4] The parallels between the arrival of the Internet and the arrival of the telegraph are explored in Standage (1999).

The Internet is an association of computer networks with common standards which enable messages to be sent from any registered computer (or *host*) on one network to any host on any other. It developed in the 1960s in the USA as an experimental network which quickly grew to include military, federal, regional, university, business, and personal users. It is now the world's largest computer network, with over 300 million hosts connected by the year 2005, providing an increasing range of services and enabling unprecedented numbers of people to be in touch with each other through electronic mail (*e-mail*), discussion groups, and the provision of digital 'pages' on any topic. Functional information, such as electronic shopping, business data, advertisements, and bulletins, can be found alongside creative works, such as poems and scripts, with the availability of movies, TV programmes, and other kinds of entertainment steadily growing. Some commentators have likened the Internet to an amalgam of television, telephone, and conventional publishing, and the term *cyberspace* has been coined to capture the notion of a world of information present or possible in digital form (the *information superhighway*). The potential of the Internet is currently limited by relatively slow data-transmission speeds, and by the problems of management and retrieval posed by the existence of such a vast amount of information (see chapter 7); but there is no denying the unprecedented scale and significance of the Net, as a global medium. The extra significance is even reflected in the spelling, in languages which use capital letters: 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'.[5]

[5] In its sense as a global network of computers. When the term is used to refer to a local network, or some local set of connected networks, it is usually given a lower-case initial – though usage is uncertain in both contexts. The abbreviated form, Net, is generally capitalized. Private networks within organizations, or *intranets*, are always lower-case. It is important to note that other networks exist. A chatgroup system, such as the Usenet newsgroups (pp. 136–8), may be carried by other networks than the Internet (such as UUCP). Although the focus of this book is the Internet, its conclusions apply just as

What is it like to be a regular citizen of the Internet, a *netizen*? Those who already spend appreciable amounts of time online need only self-reflect; for those who do not, the self-descriptions of a 'day in a netizen's life' are informative. Here is Shawn Wilbur's, as he describes what a 'virtual community' means to him:

> For me it is the work of a few hours a day, carved up into minutes and carried on from before dawn until long after dark. I venture out onto the Net when I wake in the night, while coffee water boils, or bath water runs, between manuscript sections or student appointments. Or I keep a network connection open in the background while I do other work. Once or twice a day, I log on for longer periods of time, mostly to engage in more demanding realtime communication, but I find that is not enough. My friends and colleagues express similar needs for frequent connection, either in conversation or through the covetous looks they cast at occupied terminals in the office. Virtual community is this work, this immersion, and also the connections it represents. Sometimes it is realtime communication. More often it is asynchronous and mostly solitary, a sort of textual flirtation that only occasionally aims at any direct confrontation of voices or bodies.[6]

And there are now several sites which will advise you of the symptoms to look out for if you want to know whether you are Internet-driven. Here is a short selection from various pages headed 'addicted to the Internet':

> You wake up at 3 a.m. to go to the bathroom and stop to check your e-mail on the way back to bed.
> You sign off and your screen says you were on for 3 days and 45 minutes.
> You placed the refrigerator beside your computer.
> You say 'scroll up' when someone asks what it was you said.
> All of your friends have an @ in their names.
> You tell the cab driver you live at http://123.elm.street/house/bluetrim.html

much to these other nets. For statistics on growth, see Hobbes' Internet Timeline: http://www.zakon.org/robert/internet/timeline/.
[6] Wilbur (1996: 13–14). See also Naughton's account (1999: 143 ff.).

You check your mail. It says 'no new messages'. So you check it
again.
Your phone bill comes to your doorstep in a box.

It is not the aim of this book to reflect on the consequences for
individuals or for society of lives that are lived largely in cyber-
space. My aim is much more modest: it is to explore the ways in
which the nature of the electronic medium as such, along with the
Internet's global scale and intensity of use, is having an effect on
language in general, and on individual languages in particular. It
seems likely that these effects will be as pervasive and momentous
as in the case of the previous communication technologies, men-
tioned above, which gave language printed and broadcast di-
mensions that generated many new distinctive varieties and
usages, from the telegrammatic graphic prominence of newspaper
headlines to the hyperverbal sonic prominence of sports com-
mentaries.

The electronic medium, to begin with, presents us with a chan-
nel which facilitates and constrains 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, as we shall see
(chapter 2), no longer obtain. The first task is therefore to
investigate the linguistic properties of the so-called 'electronic
revolution', and to take a view on whether the way in which we
use language on the Internet is becoming so different from our
previous linguistic behaviour that it might genuinely be described
as revolutionary.

The linguistic consequences of evolving a medium in which
the whole world participates – at least in principle, once their
countries' infrastructure and internal economy allow them to
gain access – are also bound to be far-reaching. We must not
overstate the global nature of the Internet: it is still largely in the
hands of the better-off citizens of the developed countries. But it
is the principle which matters. What happens, linguistically,
when the members of the human race use a technology enabling

any of them to be in routine contact with anyone else? There has been much talk of the notion of a 'global village', which is at first sight a persuasive metaphor. Yet such a concept raises all kinds of linguistic questions. A village is a close-knit community, traditionally identified by a local dialect or language which distinguishes its members from those elsewhere: 'That's not how we say things round here.' If there is to be a genuine global village,[7] then we need to ask 'What is its dialect?', 'What are the shared features of language which give the world community of users their sense of identity?' And, if we cannot discern any unifying dialect or language, or a trend towards such a unity, we need to ask ourselves if this 'global village' is anything more than a media fiction. Similar questions might be asked of related notions, such as 'digital citizens', 'the virtual community', and the 'Net generation'. The linguistic perspective is a critical part of this debate. As Derek Foster puts it, reflecting on the notion of a virtual community, 'the fullest understanding of the term is gained by grounding it in the communicative act itself'.[8] So the second task is to investigate whether the Internet is emerging as a homogenous linguistic medium, whether it is a collection of distinct dialects, reflecting the different backgrounds, needs, purposes, and attitudes of its users, or whether it is an aggregation of trends and idiosyncratic usages which as yet defy classification.

Internet situations

In a setting where linguistic differences are likely to loom large, the concept of a *language variety* will be helpful. A variety of language is a system of linguistic expression whose use is governed by situational factors.[9] In its broadest sense, the

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[7] McLuhan (1962: 31), and elsewhere.   [8] Foster (1996: 35).
[9] Within linguistics, several terms have been used, over the years, for talking about language which varies according to situation, such as *speech community*, *register*, *genre*, *text*, and *discourse type*, each of which operates in its own theoretical frame of reference

notion includes speech and writing, regional and class dialects, occupational genres (such as legal and scientific language), creative linguistic expression (as in literature), and a wide range of other styles of expression. Varieties are, in principle, systematic and predictable. It is possible to say, with some degree of certainty in a given language, how people from a particular region will speak, how lawyers will write, or how television commentators will present a type of sport. Notions such as 'British English' or 'Liverpool English', 'legal French', and 'sports commentary' are the result. To change an important element in any situation is to motivate a change in the language people use there, if they wish to behave conventionally – whether the change is from one region to another, from law court to the street, from home to pub, from one listener to many, or from face-to-face to distant conversation. Sometimes the features of a variety are highly constrained by the situation: there are strict rules governing the kind of language we may use in court, for example, and if we break them we are likely to be criticized or even charged with contempt. In other situations there may be an element of choice in what we say or write, as when we choose to adopt a formal or an informal tone in an after-dinner speech, or a combination of the two. But all language-using situations present us with constraints which we must be aware of and must obey if our contribution is to be judged acceptable. Factors such as politeness, interest, and intelligibility govern what we dare to introduce into an after-dinner speech, and such criteria apply in all situations. 'Anything goes' is never an option – or, at least, if people do decide to speak or write without paying any attention to the sociolinguistic expectations and mores of their

(see Crystal and Davy, 1969). As Internet linguistics develops, more sophisticated models will be needed to capture all elements of the variation found. For the present book, which is only a 'first approximation', I have avoided a more complex terminological system, and used the term *variety* without further qualification for all kinds of situationally influenced language. I also sometimes refer to *genres* within a variety. Within the Internet literature, terminology also varies a great deal when discussing the different kinds of Internet situation, such as *environment*, *interactive setting*, and *virtual space*.

interlocutors, and of the community as a whole, they must expect to be judged accordingly.[10]

The distinctive features of a language variety are of several kinds. Many stylistic approaches recognize five main types, for written language:[11]

- *graphic* features: the general presentation and organization of the written language, defined in terms of such factors as distinctive typography, page design, spacing, use of illustrations, and colour; for example, the variety of newspaper English would be chiefly identified at this level through the use of such notions as headlines, columns, and captions.
- *orthographic* (or *graphological*) features: the writing system of an individual language, defined in terms of such factors as distinctive use of the alphabet, capital letters, spelling, punctuation, and ways of expressing emphasis (italics, bold-face, etc.); for example, American and British English are distinguished by many spelling differences (e.g. *colour* vs. *color*), and advertising English allows spelling modifications that would be excluded from most other varieties (e.g. *Beanz Meanz Heinz*).
- *grammatical* features: the many possibilities of syntax and morphology, defined in terms of such factors as the distinctive use of sentence structure, word order, and word inflections; for example, religious English makes use of an unusual vocative construction (*O God, who knows . . .*) and allows a second-person singular set of pronouns (*thou, thee, thine*).
- *lexical* features: the vocabulary of a language, defined in terms of the set of words and idioms given distinctive use within a variety; for example, legal English employs such

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[10] Allowances can sometimes be made – as with some kinds of psychiatric disturbance and linguistic pathology, or the utterances of very young children.
[11] For the application of a model of this kind to several varieties of English, see Crystal and Davy (1969).

expressions as *heretofore*, *easement*, and *alleged*, as well as such phrases as *signed sealed and delivered* and Latin expressions such as *ex post facto*.

- *discourse* features: the structural organization of a text, defined in terms of such factors as coherence, relevance, paragraph structure, and the logical progression of ideas; for example, a journal paper within scientific English typically consists of a fixed sequence of sections including the abstract, introduction, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

'Whatever else Internet culture may be, it is still largely a text-based affair.'[12] Spoken language currently has only a limited presence on the Internet, through the use of sound clips, songs, films, and video; but the use of speech will undoubtedly grow as technology develops, and it will not be long before we see the routine use of interactive voice (and video) dialogues, speech synthesis to provide a spoken representation of what is on a screen or to give vocal support to a graphic presentation, and automatic speech recognition to enable users to interact verbally with sites (see further, chapter 8). In addition to the above five types, therefore, we need to recognize two more:

- *phonetic* features: the general auditory characteristics of spoken language, defined in terms of such factors as the distinctive use of voice quality, vocal register (e.g. tenor vs. bass), and voice modality (e.g. speaking, singing, chanting); for example, in TV commentary, different sports make use of different vocal norms (e.g. the loud enthusiastic crescendos of football vs. the hushed monastic tones of snooker).
- *phonological* features: the sound system of an individual language, defined in terms of such factors as the distinctive use of vowels, consonants, intonation, stress, and pause; for example, regional accents are defined by the way they make

[12] Wilbur (1996: 6).

different use of sounds, and distinctive pronunciation is
also a notable feature of such varieties as newsreading,
preaching, and television advertising.

Grammatical, lexical, and discourse features of course play a
distinctive role in all spoken varieties of a language, as they do
in the written. A television commentary is not distinctive solely
in its pronunciation, but in its use of grammar, vocabulary, and
general organization as well.

So the initial question for the person interested in Internet
linguistics to ask is: is the Net a homogenous language-using
electronic situation, likely to generate a single variety of language,
defined using such variables as those listed above? Will all users of
the Internet present themselves, through their messages, con-
tributions, and pages, with the same kind of graphic, ortho-
graphic, grammatical, lexical, and discourse features? To answer
these questions we need first to establish how many different
situations the Internet contains. We then need to describe the
salient linguistic features of each situation, and to identify varia-
tions in the way they are used. This will help us talk more precisely
about the strategies that people employ and the linguistic attitudes
they hold, and thus enable us to begin evaluating their beliefs and
concerns about Internet language. Some of these situations are
easy to identify, because they have been around a relatively long
time and have begun to settle down. Some are still in their infancy,
with their situational status totally bound up with emerging
technology, and therefore subject to rapid change: an example is
the linking of the Internet to mobile phone technology, where the
small screen size immediately motivated a fresh range of linguistic
expression (see p. 262). Given the speed of technological change,
doubtless new situational variables will emerge which will make
any attempt at classification quickly outdated. But, as of the
beginning of 2006, it is possible to identify seven broad Internet-
using situations which are sufficiently different to mean that the
language they contain is likely to be significantly distinctive. Two
of these were hardly in evidence when the first edition of this book
was being written. A lot can happen in five years.