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978-0-521-86859-4 - Language and the Internet: Second Edition

David Crystal

Frontmatter

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Language and the Internet

In recent years, the Internet has come to dominate our lives. E-mail, instant messaging and chat are rapidly replacing conventional forms of correspondence, and the Web has become the first port of call for both information enquiry and leisure activity.

How is this affecting language? There is a widespread view that as 'technospeak' comes to rule, standards will be lost. In this book, David Crystal 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, this is a revealing account of how the Internet is radically changing the way we use language. This second edition has been thoroughly updated to account for more recent phenomena, with a brand new chapter on blogging and instant messaging. Engaging and accessible, it will continue to fascinate anyone who has ever used the Internet.

DAVID CRYSTAL is one of the world's foremost authorities on language. He has previously published *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language* (second edition 1997), *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language* (second edition 2003), *English as a global language* (second edition 2003), *Language death* (2000), *The language revolution* (2004), *A glossary of Netspeak and Textspeak* (2004), *The stories of English* (2004), *Pronouncing Shakespeare* (2005), and *The fight for English* (2006). In 1995 he was awarded an OBE for his services to the English Language.

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A note on the second edition

To answer the question at the end of the preface to the first edition: about a third of the sites have changed or disappeared since the book was first published. A general updating was thus very much required. But more important than that have been the changes in the way the Internet has been used since the turn of the millennium. I was not expecting to have to introduce a whole new chapter so soon, but the arrival of blogging and instant messaging has demanded it (chapter 8). This in turn has meant a revision of tables 2.3 and 2.4 in chapter 2, and a rewriting of the accompanying discussion. A further addition has been a discussion of the Semantic Web, incorporated into chapter 7.

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Preface to the first edition

In his book *A brief history of the future: the origins of the Internet*, John Naughton comments:

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.¹

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

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.²

¹ Naughton (1999: 21–2). ² Berners-Lee (1999: 110, 133, 169).

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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

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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 twenty-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 websites 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