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The Cativerse

Why do you have a cat account?
(July 2019 Survey Question)

Because cats are so pawesome that they deserve it! And it's fun to imagine what they would be saying about how they see the world.
(Respondent 62)

When we look at the respondent's answer to the question 'Why do you have a cat account?', we notice linguistic features to study in greater detail: the word 'pawesome' and the phrases 'they deserve it' and 'it's fun to imagine'. Like cats pouncing on their prey, we can jump on the word formation, on the attitude, on the meaning, on the spelling, and on many things more. How people communicate about cats online is really a fascinating treasure trove for linguists and cat lovers alike.

With their half-in, half-out attitude, it is in cats' nature to carefully check out new territory. The cat owners among us know that our cats like to take their time before they go out, often standing on the threshold half inside and half outside. When they are satisfied that no danger awaits them, the cats step fully outside and explore their surroundings.

In this chapter, we follow the cats' approach: we first take only a few steps to get an overview of the book's structure and then enter the cativerse, the feline online world, to get to know more about cats' presence in our real and virtual lives. Social media platforms function as a so-called third place for us to hang out with and meet other like-minded people. Cat-related digital spaces are only one type of third places offered to people out there on the Internet. There is a myriad of other places and communities.

The relationship of cats and humans goes back a long time and has had ups and downs throughout history. We touch on the roles cats have been given by humans and their effect on culture. We also take into account biological and psychological explanations of the effect cats have on humans. Cats function like people magnets, which is what we discover when we consider cats in popular culture, in the media, and in advertising.

Concepts Used in The Chapter

- 🐾 cat-related digital spaces
- 🐾 third places
- 🐾 history
- 🐾 ethology
- 🐾 literature
- 🐾 popular culture
- 🐾 popular media

Terms from the Clawssary

- 🐾 ethology 🐾 Hambspeak 🐾 LOLspeak 🐾 meowlogism 🐾 purrieties

1.1 Cats and Their Role in This Book

With this book, the cativerse has now extended its realm to linguistics because our feline friends perfectly illustrate how we communicate online. The cat-related examples show us what we study as linguists and how we can describe the linguistic features we are interested in. The language varieties, which are called ‘purrieties’ here because they occur in the cat-related digital spaces, provide us with everything we need for our encounter with the fascinating world of language.

Each chapter covers a different linguistic angle to take in our description of how we talk about cats online. In line with the cats’ half-in half-out approach, we find out first what is in store for us and then step deeper into the topic, which is why the concepts used and the words from the clawssary are listed at the beginning of each chapter. At the end of each chapter, we list the resources used for the chapter and suggestions for ‘PURRther Reading’.

This chapter – Chapter 1 (‘The Cativerse’) – sets the scene for the linguistic description of the purrieties we encounter on social

media and introduces us to the digital world of cats. We discuss the underlying reasons for feline success, not only on social media but also in the real world. We look at the historical roles of cats in our cultures, at biological and psychological explanations for the effects cats have on us, and at feline presence in popular culture.

In our approach to language and language variation, we look at different linguistic features: pronunciation, vocabulary, word creation, grammar, spelling, and meaning. Chapter 2 ('The Territory Range of Language') shows that we pronounce the word 'cat' in different ways and use a wide range of words for our cats, which is what we can study with dialectology. Chapter 3 ('Meowlogisms') explains what we do when we create new words and goes into the word formation processes we use to give our words a feline spin. We also look at the reasons why we find cat-inspired words funny. Chapter 4 ('Da Kitzteh') focusses on meaning and grammar by using the examples of LOLcats and LOLspeak. We analyse the spelling, vocabulary, and grammar of LOLspeak.

Chapter 5 ('Virtual Furever Homes') shows us the background of online community building. We look at how we tell and share our cat stories online. Chapter 6 ('Multimeowdality') describes how we use text, audio, and video on social media. Chapter 7 ('Meow and More') leads us to the relationship of language and society and what the way we use language says about us in terms of our social background. The chapter also illustrates how we use language to construct our identity when we are in the cat-related digital spaces.

Chapter 8 ('Going on Pawtrol') describes how to do linguistic research on the Internet. In particular, it shows us how to select the data and how to work ethically, using cat examples from the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Chapter 9 ('Linguistic Scratching Posts') looks at how to analyse the data to describe our cat-related language varieties. It presents the variation in vocabulary, word formation, spelling, and meaning we come across in cat-related digital spaces. Chapter 10 ('Stats withCats') gives us some statistical methods to interpret and visualise the differences in how we use cat-inspired words on different platforms and illustrates social networks with big data tools.

Chapter 11 ('Cattitude and Purrcception') describes how we can analyse, categorise, and interpret the answers of cat account holders when asked for the reasons why they use purrieties and what they think about how we talk about our cats online.

While *Purrieties of Language* is an introductory book to linguistics, it is not a textbook as such. It is like a case study to show us what happens online in terms of language variation. The idea behind the book is to show that linguistics is fun, especially when cats are involved. So, let's go into the cativerse!

1.2 Cats and Their Digital Spaces

Why do you follow cats on social media?

(July 2019 Survey Question)

It makes me happy to see cats from all over the world & the people who love them!

(Respondent 110)

Grumpy Cat, Nyan Cat, and Pusheen – a real cat, a virtual cat, and a toy cat – are among the most famous online stars, whose well-known memes, videos, photos, and GIFs are enjoyed and shared by many of us on social media. Yet, while other cats are not as famous and do not have the merchandise of the big players, many more inhabit the digital world. Today, millions of cats walk the social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, and they have transformed parts of the digital human universe into a cativerse. With these cat-related digital spaces, we have created an online cat park we can take our cats to, which is something we cannot really do in the real world. No longer decried as crazy, we can now meet others like us, talk about our cats, and share our love of cats openly.

The cativerse comprises the digital spaces offered by technology and extends across all the social media platforms. In their ubiquity, cats – or rather the people posting as cats – are present on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, YouTube, 4chan, LOLcats, Tumblr, WordPress, TikTok, and beyond. Cats feature in personal social media accounts, corporate and official accounts, charities, groups, pages, lists, channels, forums, and more. When we enter the cativerse, we immediately meet cats of all shapes, sizes, colours, and ages. We see cats in people's everyday life, cats looking for homes, cats entertaining people, cats simply being cats. And they are all adorable.

In the cativerse, it is common for people to identify themselves to others as cat lovers more or less straight away, for example, by having a cat-inspired username and profile picture, using cat-inspired

language varieties (the purrieties), using cat-inspired hashtags, posting cat pictures and videos, sharing other people's cat photos, posting cat-inspired GIFs and emoji, or other means. The hashtag #CatsOfTwitter immediately categorises a tweet as cat-related, and #TabbyTroop tells others that the post is connected to a tabby cat.

Not only the very famous feline stars but also our 'everyday' cats connect and attract us. As the quote at the beginning of this section illustrates, cat lovers go online to the cativerse to see other cats, to meet other people, to get to know each other, and to have fun.

Moggies and pedigree cats alike have social media accounts, and there are quite a lot of social media-savvy cats in the cativerse. I was surprised by the sheer numbers of cats on Facebook when I opened a Facebook account for my black cat Murrli back in 2012. Just like today, the algorithms of Facebook suggested similar people to follow, and in Murrli's case that meant other cats. Within days of being on Facebook, Murrli had acquired 200 cat friends, all of whom were black like Murrli as it was then a personal quirk of mine to only have black cats as friends. If I had not decided to send friend requests just to black cats, Murrli would have had many more friends on Facebook. To meet fellow black cats, Murrli soon followed the *For the Love of Black Cats (Black Cat Appreciation Page)*, a Facebook page dedicated to the joy of living with black cats and to dispelling the myths about them.

Our online cats have very active social media lives, it seems. While it is clear to us that it is people who talk and interact with each other, we tend to accept the pretence that it is often the cats themselves who post online, who share their photos, who come up with poems, and more. More or less loose networks are formed online where we regularly check our timelines for our online acquaintances and/or visit each other's profiles to exchange news, entertainment, and help.

The interaction in the digital cat spaces is very lively, and cats quickly and easily attract other people posing as their cats. Cats, or rather their owners, have always been very active in posting photos and videos of themselves, describing their daily lives and their adventures, asking for help in health matters, sharing pleas for adoptions, and, sadly, also grieving when cats have passed away.

Since Murrli's joining social media platforms, I have been following and befriending many cat accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, like Cheddar on Twitter, who is a young 'Catnadian' (Canadian) cat sharing his adventures, writing poetry with the

hashtag #CheddarPoetry and actively promoting other kitties looking for ‘fwiends’; or like Henry King Cat, the Siberian cat from Russia with his own accounts on Instagram and Facebook, who communicates in English and Russian and whose photos and videos are taken by ‘meowmy’; or Curious Zelda on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, who has just published her first book, *The Adventures of a Curious Cat*, about a cat’s life with humans, in which she is

explaining in her unique voice how to handle humans, how to communicate with furniture, and most importantly how to live a life curiously.
(Curious Zelda)

One of the original reasons for creating a social media account for Murli was to find out more about the perceived feline dominance of the Internet and then the linguistic features occurring in the cat-related digital spaces. Cat-related digital spaces can be considered so-called third places on the Internet. After the home, which is the first place, and work, which is the second place, people also visit third places, which are neither home nor work. Third places are a sort of shared space for people to visit, to hang out, and to socialise with others, to communicate about a certain common topic, among other things.

In the real world, coffee shops, playgrounds, and social centres function as a third place where regulars and newcomers meet. Checking a cat’s social media feed is equal to checking in to see which other cats are there in the virtual world. Social media is a virtual meeting place enabling, people to interact with each other across geographic and linguistic boundaries regardless of whether they know each other in real life. In the book, I refer to the third places for cat lovers on the Internet as cat-related digital spaces. We come back to third places in Chapter 7, in which we look at affinity spaces, virtual communities, and communities of practice.

After some time in the cativerse, this interest acquired the new note of having fun with the social media postings of other cats. It is, of course, the owners who post in the names of their cats, although, in online cat spaces, the cat as the actor and author of the post has been accepted. In cat-related digital spaces, users tacitly agree on the community practice that the cats and not the humans are speaking and writing. The users, of course, know that humans are interacting with humans, but they like to pretend that the cats themselves have social media accounts and talk with each other.

Based on observation of the social media platforms Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, four types of cats inhabit the cativerse: the for-profit celebrity cats, the for-cause working cats, the individual cats, and cats in collective cat accounts. We do not go into too much detail here because the four types of cats are described in Chapters 5 and 10. To get an idea about what we are dealing with, the list below gives us the basic definitions.

For-profit celebrity cats:

Famous feline stars making money for their owners with their own merchandise

For-cause working cats:

Cats working as community outreach cats for organisations, public institutions and owners who support charitable causes

Individual cats:

Cats sharing their daily lives and adventures on social media platforms

Collective cat accounts:

Social media accounts featuring various cats

The cat-related digital spaces are not restricted to a specific region but extend across geographic and social boundaries. These online spaces differ based on various factors, such as the nature of the social media platform, the way of communicating, the roles given to the cats, the function of the posts, the topics discussed, and the languages used.

A look at the general characteristics gives an introductory insight into the cat connection and into what goes on in the digital spaces. In principle, the appeal of cats is global and goes beyond one language, which explains the multilingual environment of some cat-related digital spaces. Just as real cats are companions for humans all over the world, the social media profiles for cats are a worldwide phenomenon and offer spaces for captions and comments not only in English but in many languages. In Chapter 7, our linguistic exploration of the cativerse takes us to multilingualism.

Users write their posts and comments in English and other languages, use purrieties of English, like catspeak purrieties, meowl-ogisms, LOLspeak, and Hambspeak, communicate with emoji, GIFs, memes, photos, and videos, and interact by liking and sharing.

On her social media timelines, Murli made cat friends all over the world and wrote in English, German, and Russian, depending on the

followers ‘she’ was communicating with. I shared photos of Murrli on Instagram and liked and commented on other cats’ photos, mainly on Instagram.

As already indicated above, the phrase ‘crazy cat person’ is no longer derogatory, and people openly showing their love of cats are no longer stigmatised as crazy or strange. It does not come as a big surprise, then, that it is not only private individuals who share their cats’ photos in their accounts or even open social media accounts for their cats but that non-profit organisations and public institutions are also now using cats on social media platforms.

Cats are literally working the digital scene as community outreach and PR officers. These working cats range from political cats, ambassador cats, police cats, railway station cats, and fire department cats to café cats and library cats. There are also university cats who work on campus.

Campus cats are a worldwide phenomenon and, like Rolf at Warwick University (Figure 1.1), Campus Cat Augsburg in Germany, and VSU Cat in Russia, have gathered a large follower base, and judging from the comments and photos, students and staff are always happy to see them. Rolf at Warwick University was part of the campus cat exhibition of 2019 in the University Museum of Groningen, the Netherlands, and features in the e-book officially published by Rolf’s fellow campus cat Professor Doerak. All these university cats are part of the spaces of academics with cats, the digital spaces we are visiting throughout the book.

Murrli, too, was a working cat. She had been designated Spokescat of the Meow Factor, my research blog, and still features in that function on my presentation slides at research conferences and is referred to as ‘supurrvisor’ and ‘purr reviewer’ when it comes to posting on Twitter with the hashtag #AcademicWithCats and checking on the updates by the twitter user Cats of Linguists (@linguisticats).

Unlike Murrli, some working cats are well known and attract the interest of the news media. The official Whitehall cats Larry, Gladstone, and Palmerston regularly feature in the British national press as real cats and as political commentators in the virtual world. Felix and Bolt, the Huddersfield Station Cats, with currently two books written about them, are officially the Senior Pest Controller and the Apprentice. Both cats have featured on British national television.

1.2 *Cats and Their Digital Spaces*

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Figure 1.1 Rolf at Warwick University

The news media love cats, and many cat stories are published. When I did an initial research project on cats in the media, I analysed news stories collected in the one-month period of February 2014. Just to give a scale of the sheer numbers of cat-related news stories, I found 108 English-language news articles on www.news.yahoo.com in that month, and 31 Russian-language articles appeared on just one day on www.news.yandex.ru. The story types typically include unbelievable cats, cruelty to cats, cat companions, feral cats, homeless cats, internet cats, cat heroes, show cats, cats and human health, and cats and business. For the news media, the cat is certainly of value and sometimes even takes centre stage in larger events in current affairs or sports. In the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks in



Figure 1.2 Pawfficer Donut of Troy PD

2015, when Brussels was locked down in the hunt for the terrorists, the news media showed the cat pictures posted on Twitter with the hashtag #BrusselsLockDown. Other news includes cats strolling onto football pitches and tennis courts.

In the United States, the police cat Pawfficer Donut made it into the US news after the 2018 public appeal by Troy Police Department (Troy PD) for more followers on Twitter. Pawfficer Donut (Figure 1.2) is now officially employed as a public outreach cat and a guardian for the community. On the official Facebook and Twitter accounts of Troy PD, Pawfficer Donut keeps in contact with the community and posts updates on school visits and charity events. In the meantime, two other US police cats have appeared on the social media platforms, namely Pawfficer Fuzz and Pawperator Cad, both of whom are on Instagram. The UK, too, has a police cat, namely PC Oscar on Twitter.