

Semantic Change, the Internet: and Text Messaging

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Electronic Communication: Efficiency and Expressivity

Since the 1980s, computer technology and mobile technology have given rise to various forms of text-based, electronic communication: e-mails, newsgroups, chatrooms, and, more recently, blogs (web logs that function as on-line diaries) and text messaging (Short Message Service, SMS). The language used in electronic communication has been described as a hybrid, showing both speech-like and writing-like features, as well as features that are unique to the digital medium and are, to some extent, the result of its technological restrictions. For instance, slow modems, limited bandwidth, costs, small screens, and typing speed are often cited as reasons for the preponderance of abbreviations in text-based electronic communication (cf. Baron, 2000; Shortis, 2000; Crystal, 2001).

The communicative need to use language efficiently within the constraints of the medium is complemented by the users' desire for conceptual and communicative expressivity (on efficiency and expressivity in semantic change cf. Geeraerts, 1997: 102–108). Crystal (2001: 67) has highlighted the “strong, creative spirit” that characterizes the language of Internet users: “The rate at which they have been coining terms and introducing playful variations into established ones has no parallel in contemporary language use.” Linguistic creativity and playfulness can be described as conversational maxims of electronic communication and are most noticeable in recreational contexts (such as chatting and texting; Danet, 2001; Crystal, 2001: 168–170). Other conversational maxims (politeness, relevance, truth) can at times be suspended (or at least take second place; cf. Wallace, 1999: Chap. 3, on deception, masquerades, and lies on the Internet). Innovative in-group language use and a predilection for speech play was already a defining characteristic of those pioneer Internet users who engaged with the culturally still uncharted medium in the early 1980s. Raymond (2003) comments, e.g., on the popularity of form-vs.-content jokes among hackers (a person who enjoys exploring the workings and capabilities of programmable systems) and cites the tradition of ‘hacker punning jargon’ as an example. (‘Hacker punning jargon’ is the *ad hoc* use of intentionally transparent puns: FreeBSD → FreeLSD or IBM 360 → IBM Three-Sickly.)

Some Aspects of Semantic and Lexical Change in Netspeak and Texting

Users of electronic communication, despite their geographical dispersion, form a relatively cohesive, sub-cultural group and have been described as a ‘virtual speech community’ (Paolillo, 1999). Much linguistic work has concentrated on documenting the in-group national and international vocabularies that are used in electronic communication. The six standard categories of semantic change (cf. Traugott, 2000) can be identified in the specialist Internet lexicon (or jargon) that has its roots in hacker usage:

- Broadening/Generalization/Extension: *grep*, a UNIX command meaning ‘Get REpeated Pattern,’ is now used widely as a verb with the meaning ‘to search.’
- Narrowing/Restriction: *banner* (top-centered graphic on a webpage), *to compress* (to reduce data size through the application of a mathematical algorithm).
- Amelioration: *nerd*, *geek* (which have acquired highly positive in-group connotations), *a hack* (a good and clever piece of work).
- Pejoration: *tourist* (an uninvited and usually non-participating guest on a discussion group), *random* (has a pejorative meaning of ‘unproductive’ ‘undirected,’ e.g., ‘he is a random loser’).
- Metaphor: *information superhighway*, *web-surfing*, *nipple mouse*, *gopher* (a software program designed ‘to gopher’ through information).
- Metonymy: *a suit* (someone involved in information technology who habitually wears suits and works in management, distinct from a real programmer or ‘techie’; pejorative), *vanilla* (‘ordinary’ < vanilla ice cream, the default flavor in many countries, e.g., United States, United Kingdom).

Acronyms and abbreviations are a salient feature of what Crystal (2001) has called Netspeak, e.g., IRL ‘in real life,’ AFAIK ‘as far as I know,’ and BFN ‘bye for now.’ Media citations (from movies and computer games) have long been common in the in-group language of hackers and are moving into mainstream Netspeak: ‘all your base are belong to us’ is an expression used to declare victory or superiority (from a 1991 computer game; the citation spread through the Internet in 2001); ‘and there was much rejoicing’ can be used to acknowledge an accomplishment (from the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*). Overlexicalization and the clustering of synonyms is another characteristic feature (e.g., *nick*, *handle*, *screen name*, and *pseudo* are all used to refer to the pseudonyms used by participants in chatrooms or newsgroups), as is the on-going creation of portmanteau neologisms

(*netiquette*, *newbie*, *progasm*, *screenagers*, etc.). There are also conventions for the encoding of prosody and paralinguistic meaning: emoticons (smiley icons such as :-)), the use of capitals (to indicate shouting), and repetition of letters (for emphasis) are used to disambiguate written messages.

With regard to derivational morphology: the *e* prefix and the *bot* suffix (from 'robot') have established themselves as productive morphemes (*e-loan*, *e-government*, *e-cards*, *e-books*, *annoybot*, *mailbot*, etc.). In inflecting languages, such as German, a new and productive lexical class has emerged in the context of chat communication: nonfinite verb-last stems. These are used by participants to describe actions that are performed in the context of the conversation. The action descriptions are inserted in asterisks: **away sei** ('*away be*'; the full German infinitive of 'to be' is *sein*), **schnell zu dir renn** ('*quickly run to you*'; the full German infinitive of 'to run' is *rennen*; cf. Schlobinski, 2001). Verbal stems (*schluck* 'swallow,' *gähn* 'yawn') have long been used in comics and also colloquially in German youth language. In English, on the other hand, action descriptions such as **nod** and **sigh** are structurally ambiguous and not necessarily identifiable as stems; moreover, inflected forms such as **shakes hand** are not unusual in English chat communication (Werry, 1996).

The lexical structure and character of nicknames ('nicks') is another aspect of the linguistics of Netspeak. In terms of semantic preferences, Bechar-Israeli (1996) identified six main semantic fields from which nicks are drawn: self-descriptors (<shydude>, <Dutchguy>, <irish>); technology (<Pentium>); real-world objects (<froggy>, <tulip>, <cheese>); play on words and sounds (<kukyMNSTR>, <whathell>); famous characters (<Elvis>, <Barbie>); and sex and provocation (<fuckjesus>, <sexpot>).

The language of text messaging/texting, which has become a popular form of interpersonal communication from the mid-1990s, is partially based on Netspeak, but shows a more radical use of abbreviations (e.g., 'it's prty low 4 sum 1 2 dump their b/f or g/f by sms' 'it is pretty low for someone to dump their boyfriend or girlfriend by sms'; special conventionalized abbreviations are also used in SMS, e.g., SWDYT 'so what do you think?'). The trend toward letter reduction (mostly achieved through a technique called 'consonant writing') and a generally telegraphic style have usually been interpreted as a response to the limited number of characters (max. 160) per message, and the small and awkward keyboard. They have since developed into a characteristic feature of the genre. It is not yet clear how technological innovations, such as predictive text software (which

'guesses' words after only a few key strokes), and market-related changes, such as the introduction of flat rates (rather than charging users per character), have affected (and will affect) the language of texting.

The Meanings of LOL: Semantic-Pragmatic Change in Electronic Communication

A well-known type of semantic-pragmatic change is subjectification, that is, the overall tendency for speakers/writers to construct new meanings on the basis of conversational implicatures reflecting speaker attitude or intention (cf. Traugott, 2000). In Internet Relay Chat (IRC), subjectification of meaning can be observed in the case of the popular abbreviation LOL/lol. The original propositional meaning of LOL is 'laughing out loud' and as such it can be used in response to, for example, a successful joke or an amusing story. This usage is indicated by metalinguistic comments such as 'I type it in after something funny is said . . . and I am laughing.' However, LOL, which has the structural advantage of shortness (i.e., it can be typed quickly), has been recruited and conventionalized by IRC users to express a range of discursive and interpersonal meanings (on laughter as a contextualization cue in spoken conversations; cf. Adelswärd and Öberg, 1998).

(1) LOL can be used as a discourse marker. This usage is illustrated in Example 1 (from a German chatroom, #Berlin), where <mib> closes his turn (a factual question addressed to another participant) with LOL, inviting a response from the addressee. The meaning of LOL in this example can be glossed as 'I have finished my turn, please answer my question.' (The spelling in Examples 1–4 is that of the original transcript and has not been corrected by the author of this paper.)

Example 1: #Berlin (8/7/2002)

<mib> kommst du eigentlich zum rl-treffen? ('will you come to the rl ('real-life')-meeting')
<mib> lol

(2) LOL can also be used as a supportive back-channel and as a means of establishing rapport between participants (emoticons can take on similar pragmatic and interactional meanings; cf. Crystal, 2001: 38). The following extracts come from two South African chatrooms (#Afrikaans; #India) and a German chatroom (#Berlin). In Example 2, <perfume_girl> uses LOL as an interpersonal modifier to soften her rejection of <Pyro>; her use of LOL fulfills pragmatic functions of hedging and face-saving. In Example 3, LOL is used in the context of

a virtual drinking game. It functions as an emphatic textual marker and creates emotional and interactional coherence (cf. Herring, 1999). In Example 4, <toxisches ei> ('toxic egg') uses LOL (as well as a positive emoticon) in response to the comment by <lPhylaxlschule!>. The use of LOL is followed by supportive spoken-language discourse markers (*naja*, *hmm*).

Example 2: #Afrikaans (8/7/2002)

- [1] <perfume_girl> sorry oom ('uncle')
- [2] <perfume_girl> better luck next time
- [3] <perfume_girl> lol
- [3] <Pyro> ek is skat ry ('I am super rich')
- [3] <perfume_girl> if u know what i mean
- [4] <Pyro> help dit? ('does this help')
- [5] <perfume_girl> lol
- [6] <perfume_girl> nee ('no')
- [7] <perfume_girl> sorry
- [8] <Pyro> damnit

Example 3: #India (26/7/2002)

- [1] <Renzo_ReXXXeL> what did he say?
- [2] <PsYcHoMiKe> ehehe
- [3] <MizHOttie> lets drink!
- [4] <Miz_KeWL> LOL!
- [5] * Miz_KeWL downs it!
- [6] <MizHOttie> LOL!
- [7] <MizHOttie> lol, wat he say

Example 4: #Berlin (19/8/2002)

- [1] <lPhylaxlschule!> beio uns ist der gk deutsch
schwerer als der lk deutsch ('here (at our school)
O-level German is more difficult than A-level
German')
- [2] <toxisches_ei> lol :D
- [3] <toxisches_ei> naja
- [4] <toxisches_ei> hmm

In the examples given above, LOL no longer has a clear propositional meaning. It appears to be 'dese-manticized' or 'bleached' and is used as an interactional device that allows individuals to claim the floor, to express a range of interpersonal meanings (hedging, face-saving), and to provide supportive back-channeling and textual cohesion in the ongoing conversation.

(3) LOL can also occur as an adverb (expressing connotations of affection; cf. Example 4) and has developed a number of variants (*lolol*, *lololololo*, *lölchen* 'little lol' in German chats, *ol*, *olo*).

Example 5: #Berlin (17/7/2002)

- [1] <[c]hrono> mib du bist so lol :) ('mib you are so lol')

(4) Finally, the propositional meaning of LOL is increasingly and creatively deconstructed by Internet users, and a range of alternative meanings have been promoted in various on-line forums: 'lists of links,' 'lots of love,' 'lots of luck,' 'love on-line,' 'little old

lady,' 'lovingly ornamented long-johns,' 'leagues of lemmings,' 'love of libraries,' etc.

Conclusion: Diversity of Usages

There is a constant tension between global and local practices in electronic media, and although the influence of, in particular, American English is paramount, local usages and variations persist (Danet and Herring, 2003). This refers not only to the large numbers of non-English-speaking Internet users who have developed their own jargons and usages, but also to those who do not participate fully in the subcultural linguistic practices of Netspeak. The degree to which individual users employ the innovative vocabulary of Netspeak and other highly marked in-group writing practices (e.g., consonant writing, emoticons, and abbreviations such as LOL) depends not only on the degree of their integration into the virtual speech community (Paolillo, 1999), but also on the genre (e.g., business e-mail vs. IRC) and the identity they wish to project within a particular communicative context (cf. also Crystal, 2001 on differences in language use across various 'Internet situations').

See also: Discourse Markers; Discourse Semantics; E-mail, Internet, Chatroom Talk: Pragmatics; Languages for Specific Purposes; Language in Computer-Mediated Communication; Neologisms; Semantics of Prosody; Slang; Sociology; Subcultures and Countercultures.

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Semantic Change: Bleaching, Strengthening, Narrowing, Extension

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Introduction

Like most terms in historical linguistics, 'semantic change' has been used to refer to both processes and results. Depending on the researcher's view of semantics, it has also been used to denote changes either in reference to the external world (object, cultural norms, etc.) or in a linguistic-internal sense, including ways in which pragmatic implicatures and inferences may become semanticized (coded) over time. Of all areas of linguistic change, semantic change is most subject to public comment and prescriptive attention. This is partly because semantics is codified in dictionaries, partly because of the ostensibly referential properties of some words, and most especially because meaning is subject to preemption by particular interest groups (cf. claims to the meaning of *Yankee* and, more recently to *gay* and *terror*) and even legislation (cf. the recent definitions of *harassment* as including 'hostile work environment').

Although in the past semantic change was often considered unsystematic, recent work has suggested that significant systematicities and unidirectionalities can be identified, especially crosslinguistically. These are usually considered from one of two complementary

and mutually informing perspectives. The semasiological approach takes the form (hereafter *f*) as constant, ignoring phonological and other changes, and focuses on shifts in the senses associated with *f* (e.g., from *grasp* 'clutch' to 'understand'). The onomasiological approach takes abstract things or concepts as constant and focuses on recruitment to or loss of *fs* from the domain; for example, UNDERSTAND has come to be expressed by *grasp*, *understand*, and *comprehend* (itself ultimately derived from Latin *prehend*-'seize'). (Note: It is customary to represent abstract meanings in capitals, as in the previous example.)

Sometimes semantic change is treated as equivalent to lexical change. However, the latter concerns word formation, borrowing, and a number of morphological and phonological factors in addition to semantic change and will not be considered here.

Categories of Semantic Change

Early work on semantic change (e.g., Bréal, 1900/1966; Stern, 1931/1968; Ullmann, 1957) identified a recognized standard set of categories of change. The six listed next are the most important. (The following abbreviations are used: > means 'becomes' or, better, 'is assigned the new meaning' because the language itself does not change but, rather, speakers and hearers use languages in different ways over time;