Talking techno

Language and the Internet
by David Crystal
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It's hard to imagine any technology surpassing print in its linguistic effects, such as the fixing of spelling and grammar and the creation of standardized national languages that underlie the formation of the modern nation states. Yet the effects of digital technology could be even more far-reaching. After all, the printing press was merely a new means of production, and the 'print revolution' actually depended on a number of later developments as well, such as cheap pulp paper and steam-powered roller presses — not to mention ancillary technologies such as the telegraph and the railroad. The networked computer, by comparison, has worked instant transformations not just in the way documents are produced, but in the way they are composed, disseminated and read. In his engaging and provocative book *Language and the Internet*, the British linguist David Crystal argues that networked computers are already giving rise to a new form of language — Netspeak — characterized by both its vocabulary and its graphical devices, and by communicative conventions that have no analogues in predigital communication.

True, there is a certain overgeneralization in talking about the Internet's language as a single variety. (By analogy, imagine someone coining the term 'printspeak' to refer to a single language variety that covers everything from the articles in *Nature* to the features in the *Sun* or *The New York Post*, not to mention the language of handbills, lawn-mower manuals and rock-concert posters.) And Crystal acknowledges the heterogeneity of Netspeak in separate chapters on the language of chatgroups, e-mail, the web and the 'virtual worlds' called MUDs or Moos, where users enact fantasy roles.

Still, *Netspeak* has some common features that set it apart from other forms of speech. Granted, many of these are marginal or ephemeral: the hacker slang (such as 'bogus' and 'dubiosity'); the coy acronyms (AFAIK for "as far as I know", FWIW for "for what it's worth"); and the 'smileys' — strings of punctuation marks such as :-) and :-(that e-mail writers use to indicate smiles, winks, frowns and the like. (You wonder what Jane Austen would have made of a device that relieved the reader of the need to guess about an ironic intent.) Lexical and orthographic antics such as these have a certain charm, but they are unlikely to survive much longer than the slang of the US CB radio craze of the 1980s.

But other features of Netspeak are likely to be more enduring. As Crystal points out, e-mail imposes a certain brevity on communication, as most people are reluctant to scroll down to read more than a screenful of material. It makes possible a new style of intercalated text and response, as 'indents' pile up in the left-hand margin. And it encourages many writers to dispense with the formalities of a traditional letter: I routinely receive communications from people I don't know that begin with a bare "Hi" and close breezily with "Cheers", an item that North Americans used to regard as strictly an anglicism. (To be sure, this informality may be more marked in the Anglo-Saxon world; even in e-mail, some French correspondents still insist on florid valedictions such as "I dare to hope you will do me the honour of a response".) More than anything else, what sets Netspeak apart is this informality of style, and the new forms of discourse it heralds. As Crystal observes, the situation of Netspeak has as much in common with speech as with traditional writing — it is time-governed and transient, and its utterances "display much of the urgency and energetic force that is characteristic of face-to-face conversation".

As these forms of communication become important elements of public life, they will inevitably shape both the way we use language and the common discourse we carry out in it. For some, the Internet opens up new possibilities for direct democracy, as citizens become 'netizens' exchanging their views in the new 'electronic commons'. But this informality can also have the effect of disenfranchizing some people, as it substitutes for the neutral public language of print a new language that leans more heavily on the implicit norms of the conversation of the Anglo-US middle classes. (A French biologist I know who has published widely in English confessed himself to be at a loss to follow the give-and-take of the conversations on scientific discussion groups on the Internet — "Ce n'est pas l'anglais que nous employons à la Sorbonne!")

But the Internet has already demonstrated a remarkable capacity to surprise us. Just a few years ago, many people thought that the Internet would be a path for the universal triumph of English, a view that Crystal himself endorsed in his earlier book *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). But by now, he acknowledges, the early discrepancies in language use are evening out. The proportions of web pages in languages such as French, Spanish, German and Japanese are increasing rapidly, and even relatively minor languages are achieving a foothold on the web — not surprising, when you consider that the costs of entry are far lower than they are for print.

In the end, the one thing we can be sure of is that the Internet will be a home for lively chatter, whatever it sounds like. As Crystal concludes, "The arrival of Netspeak is showing us *homo loquens* at its best". ■

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Gone — but not forgotten

Agriculture in the United States has changed dramatically since the 1940s. *Changing Works: Visions of a Lost Agriculture* by Douglas Harper (University of Chicago Press, $35, £22.50), documents the shift from small units and a cooperative approach to the industrialized, mass-production systems seen today. Drawing on a host of photographs from the 1940s, the book also illustrates the unstoppable rise of mechanization and automation in the industry.

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