

Telling your boss you will 'brb': The infiltration of Netspeak Vocabulary and Spelling in our Formal Language

Never before in the entire history of human history has one invention brought us such a wealth of new and endless possibilities as with the introduction of the internet. However, as always with the arrival of innovative technology, it stirs up our opinions with regard to where the internet may potentially lead us, language-wise that is. Will the internet ultimately cause the English language as we now know it to shrivel and cease to exist indefinitely? Or will embracing the internet merely enrich our language and are any concerns expressed by language experts overly careful? With opinions varying widely on the issue, I will tentatively explore whether the introduction of Netspeak into the English language is likely if ever to have an effect on our standard written language due to the use of it on social media platforms and IM (instant messaging) software such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Skype.

Our present-day society still greatly values correct spelling, standard vocabulary and language 'etiquette' in formal writing whether in email messages or in plain written letters, as can sometimes be inferred from people's reactions to spelling errors. That said, it is important to recognize that a lot of information we convey to one another uses speech, and that our writing is little more than a symbolic representation of what we say. The early stages of the internet naturally saw far less interactive and audio-visual content as software such as social media platforms such as Skype, Youtube, Twitter and Facebook had not been developed yet. Yet at present, with the enrichment of these platforms, but also the introduction of tablet computers, smartphones other mobile devices, written language on the internet still holds an important position. This is because people use text – i.e. a search terms – to look for specific web content, whether it be audio, video or plain text. From the perspective of marketers, therefore, texts, e.g. blogs, articles and product information are still key to successfully selling a product online. Aside from the mainly one-way forms of communication in the form of online texts as blogs and articles, with the arrival of web 2.0, the internet has seen the development of other means of conveying textual information, including the popular MSN, Skype, WhatsApp, et cetera. Language expert David Crystal has termed the type of English that has evolved from using these platforms 'Netspeak' (Crystal), which is typically characterized by the use of abbreviated phrases or words such as 'LMAO or LOL'. In the next

paragraph I will take a closer look at how chat platforms such as WhatsApp, MSN and Skype may play a role in affecting written English.

The language used in many Instant Messenger or IM applications today varies widely from the language on the internet in for example a blog article or on a commercial website. Netspeak (Crystal) as linguist David Crystal has coined it may perhaps be typically used by people who use IM applications to informally communicate with their peers, friends or acquaintances. In his review of Crystal's book, Thorne does however regret the term 'Netspeak' and refers to it as "awkward and overly cute" (Thorne), by which he might be referring to the injustice done to Netspeak as a serious object of study. But now how could Netspeak affect other forms of written discourse? Nazayran states that "(...) the comparative brevity of online communication, its lack of formality and the inclusion of "framing", Web pages, e-mail and other mechanisms are too transient or easily modified to be equivalent to the printed word" (Nazayran). It then follows that Netspeak may have developed because the way we communicate on the internet is much more similar to the way we interact in face-to-face conversations, which may have required interlocutors to device ways to express themselves much more quickly (i.e. abbreviations) and non-verbally (i.e. smileys, icons). Other forms of discourse, for example letters of application and recommendations, will probably not be influenced in the very near future as Netspeak is still commonly regarded as unserious and too informal for these purposes. Yet it might not be unthinkable that abbreviations of Netspeak will seep into our more formal language use, perhaps similar to how today we use ASAP abbreviating 'as soon as possible'. Additionally, the younger generation of people who once were the first ones to start using Netspeak in an informal context are now in the age range of 25-35 and possibly infiltrating in increasingly highly-educated management positions, which might lead to better acceptance of Netspeak in formal contexts.

To conclude, Netspeak is currently mainly restricted to informal online interaction, but perhaps with the generation of people who first came to use it moving into higher jobs, and as our interaction takes place more and more on the internet, increasingly we will find more Netspeak terms mixed or filtered into our more formal written language.

Works cited

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