

Linguistic Creativity Online: A Cross-Cultural Study of Special Internet Language Varieties

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Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been claimed to promote unbridled linguistic creativity, especially as regards typography and orthography – a claim reflected, for example, in the notion of “Netspeak” (Crystal, 2001). Belief in this claim has inspired concern on the part of journalists, parents, and educators that young people will learn, and be reinforced in, substandard writing practices (cf. Thurlow, 2006), on the one hand, and celebration on the part of some cultural theorists of the playful, iconoclastic nature of the internet (e.g., Danet, 2001), on the other. At the same time, there is growing empirical evidence that nonstandard typography and orthography (henceforth ‘typhography’) online is more limited in scope and less creative (i.e., original, diversified) than is popularly believed, at least in mainstream internet environments (e.g., Kapidzic, 2010). Assuming that there is some truth to the claims about “Netspeak”, the questions then become: Where, why, and in what ways is CMC linguistically creative?

This talk seeks answers to these questions in non-mainstream online communities that self-define around the goal of linguistic creativity. Specifically, it reports on an ongoing group project to analyze what we call special internet language varieties (SILVs) in four cultural contexts: Leetspeak (U.S.), Padonki (Russia), Fakatsa (Israel), and Martian Language (Taiwan and China). SILVs are playful typhographic variants of the standard language that have arisen in sub-cultural online contexts such as gaming, hacking, and in CMC modes that involve frequent in-group interaction and a desire on the part of the users/creators to make their writing humorous, decorative and/or obscure. Phase I of the project identified and classified the linguistic strategies employed in these varieties, some of the most common of which are conventionalized misspellings, substitution of letters with numbers and symbols, and mixing of graphical features from different writing systems. In this talk, the focus is on Phase II, the contexts of use and pragmatic functions of SILV characteristics. After researching the available background on each variety, a wide search was made of the public internet for the contexts in which each is used, and the uses were classified using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Preliminary results suggest that even in communities where linguistic innovation is a shared goal, as in the case of these SILVs, nonstandard typhography is limited in actual interaction to emblematic uses -- user handles and conventionalized expressions -- and ironic metareferences to the variety itself. An explanation for this is proposed in terms of the effort involved in generating novel and/or complex typing variants, which can be prohibitive, especially in real-time CMC. In concluding, we consider the implications of these findings for claims about linguistic creativity on the internet, taking into account that many SILV features have spread into the internet mainstream in their respective languages, and for the ability of even selective use of linguistic creativity to symbolize group identity.

¹ Authors are ordered alphabetically

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