

# interpreting inter

Nobody knows how many users of the Internet there are. But everybody knows that they are increasing at extraordinary rates.

**From a million users in 1990, the Internet Society has estimated that there were 20 million users in 1993, and 40 million by the end of 1995, with growth increasing at about 10% a month ever since.**

That would make 350 million or so by the end of 1998. Putting this another way: in the five minutes it might take you to read this article, 3000 new Internet users have logged on somewhere in the world.

Linguists have good reason to be delighted with all this. After all, it isn't every day that a brand-new language variety is born – and moreover one that is so readily accessible to study. But what actually happens to language, in a situation of such rapid growth? And especially – what happens to it when it encounters a medium as innovative as electronic interaction? The effects could be dramatic, as they were the last time the language was faced with a revolution in communicative technology – in William Caxton's time. Many then saw printing as the invention of the devil. And many now talk about the Internet, with its lack of moral and legal controls, in the same terms.

There isn't a single answer to the language question because the Internet isn't a single, homogeneous entity. It has three functions. It is a message transmission service – you can send a message to any other Internet user by e-mail. It is a forum for discussion – you can join an online chat group and talk all day to people who share your interests. And it is the World Wide Web – a facility which permits any computer to make its data available to any other computer. From what we know of the way language varieties emerge in other contexts, we would expect different linguistic features to emerge in each of these areas. And that is what has happened.

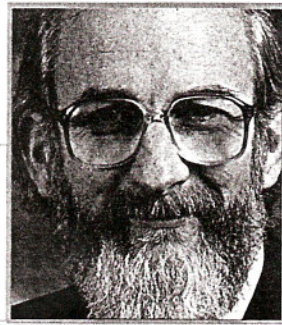
But there is a general principle at work. In the electronic medium, as elsewhere, language use reflects its users. If you are a conservative language user in general, you will be conservative on the Net. If you like being eccentric or idiosyncratic, you will transfer your individuality there. If you speak American English, you will stay American. If you do not speak English at all, you will use your own language. And if you have not learned to read and write, the Internet, for the moment, is of little use to you (but remember 'for the moment' when you get to my final paragraph).

Having said this, some trends are already apparent. The informality and rapidity of e-mail has brought a relaxation of the normal conventions of personal written interaction. It is not necessary to begin with 'Dear' and end with 'Yours' – though many users find it difficult to stop doing so – and dating/address rubrics are missing, as they are supplied automatically by the e-mail format. For the same reason, there may be no signature. I got a one-word e-mail recently which said simply 'Thanks'. I knew it was for me, for it had my name in the 'To' part of the mail box. I knew who it was from, because the 'From' part told me. I knew the context, from previous messages. What more was there to say?

On another occasion, the message said 'Thanx'. That's another feature of e-mail – the readiness to depart from standard rules of spelling and punctuation. Indeed, many users, typing at great speed, do not bother to correct any typing errors they make – a revolutionary convention, if ever there was one, and one whose adoption by educated people has been amazing. Over half the messages I get these days have typos which the sender has not bothered to correct. Although I don't like my own messages to go out in this way, I have no problem ignoring the errors I receive. I do not draw conclusions about lack of education or carelessness, which I might do were I to see them in a traditional letter.

Then there are the novelties which interactive users of the Net have introduced in order to reduce the ambiguities of written language. For example, there is a range of 'smileys' which can be added at the end of a sentence to show how your message is to be interpreted: the original smiley, :-), was used to signal something jocular; since then a whole mini-dictionary of such conventions has been created by Net users, such as the frown :-( and the wink ;-).

What is interesting to the linguist, of course, is why these novelties have turned up now. Written language has always been ambiguous, in its omission of facial expression, and in its inability to express all the intonational and other prosodic features of speech. Why did no one ever introduce smileys there? The answer must be something to do with the immediacy of Net interaction. In traditional writing, there is time to develop phrasing which makes personal attitudes clear; that is why the formal conventions of letter-writing



# language

developed. And when these are missing, something needs to replace them. A rapidly constructed Net message, lacking the usual courtesies, can easily appear abrupt or rude. A smiley defuses the situation. (Incidentally, the same problems can arise with faxes, especially quickly handwritten ones, though as yet smiley-type conventions have not made an impact there.)

These problems are especially critical in relation to the second category of Net-user, the chat-group participant. At least with an e-mail you have the option of reading the message through before you send it. If you are in the middle of a fast-flowing 'conversation' on screen, there isn't time to do that. One would expect, in such circumstances, the development of a battery of easily insertable symbols to express nuances of meaning. And some user groups have developed quite sophisticated abbreviated interaction techniques, in which participants can let others know what their attitude is towards what is being said.

You will have noticed that I put 'conversation' in inverted commas. That was because the nature of the dialogue is so different in user groups. None of the traditional notions of conversation analysis work well, in analysing it. You enter a 'chat' at a random point, not knowing how many other people are involved or who they are. You type in a comment relating to what someone (P) has just said, and you do not know if P will react to it, or even see it (P may have logged off). Others may choose to react to it – and more than one person may react at the same time. New arrivals to the group may react to a point not having seen earlier points P has made. Even the notion of 'at the same time' isn't valid – for the order in which messages arrive is governed by factors completely outside the control of the participants, such as the speed of their computers and the processing capacities of the service providers. None of this is 'dialogue' as we know it.

Then, finally, there is the Web – the largest dimension of the Internet, but the easiest to explain. For what we see on the Web is – ourselves. All varieties of written language are there, including several varieties of transcribed speech (Monty Python scripts, for example). You want examples of legal, religious, scientific, journalistic English? Just do some searching, and you will find online law reports, sermons and prayers, scientific journals, newspapers, and everything else

a stylistician would ever need. The Web holds a mirror up to our (written) linguistic nature.

And if your interest is in a language other than English, you will find that the Internet is increasingly moving in your direction. In the beginning, of course, the language of the Net was entirely English, for it began in the 1960s in the USA, as a defence initiative to provide a decentralized national network capable of surviving nuclear attack. With the Internet's globalization, the presence of other languages has steadily risen. In 1998, a widely quoted figure is that just over 80% of the Net is in English. This will soon be much less, with several hundred languages now online, and many more to come, as communications infrastructure develops in Asia, Africa, and South America. Eventually, the Web will reflect the balance of linguistic power in the outside world.

A final thought, talking of power. One of the unexpected side-effects of the growth of the Internet is that it has proved a boon to the speakers of minority languages. Imagine: you are a speaker of a little-used language, and you want to promote it. Traditional options – a newspaper or magazine article, a radio or TV programme – would be difficult and expensive. But now, anyone with a Net connection can make their language present to the world. Whether you speak English or Irish, the opportunities are equally available, and the cost is exactly the same. Increasingly, minority languages are finding that the Net is giving them a new lease of life.

A cautionary endnote. Treat nothing as final, in the electronic world. Everything I have said in this article could be out of date within a decade. And who can predict what we shall have within a generation or two? For one thing, automatic speech synthesis and recognition will be so efficient that we shall no longer have to type our messages into our computers. We shall just talk. Smileys will be a thing of the past. Or will they? Will people still feel the need for a written version of what they are saying? Even if they don't, one thing is certain: the arrival of electronic speech communication will bring a whole new range of spoken varieties to study. There'll be plenty for linguists to do. ☺