

The Internet: Helping create 'New English' or reinforcing old dominance?

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What happens, linguistically, when the members of the human race use a technology enabling any of them to be in routine contact with anyone else? (Crystal, 2001: 5)

This paper will explore power, language, and the Internet, with a focus on language change. Power and dominance are central to “critical pedagogy.” Paolo Freire (1970) and those involved in critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1996, 1997; Pennycook, 2001) emphasize the need for learning that is personally and socially relevant and that leads to greater self-awareness. Teachers and learners need to realize the power to define who they are, including how they think and communicate. Power inequality is at the heart of concerns about the digital divide. While not everyone may want to be immersed in technology, knowledge about and access to technology are a source of power in today’s digital world.

Linguists and language teachers know that change is part of any living language. Each generation of speakers of a language brings its own new words (neologisms) and language styles. Interaction with people from other areas, whether or not they speak the same first language, also means language change. A new ethnic restaurant in a town brings new food vocabulary. Developments in technology, new inventions, new industrial processes – these all add vocabulary.

English does not have the equivalent of l’Académie Française, which serves as the authority for the French language –and which is not fully successful now in forcing French usage to be as l’Académie thinks is proper. The BBC is no longer a bastion of British Received Pronunciation; its newscasters display a wide range of dialects. American English has always been based on how people speak, not how they should speak. Reference to an English dictionary means referring to what is commonly in use by the large body of English speakers. What this means is that English has few official, overt constraints on change.

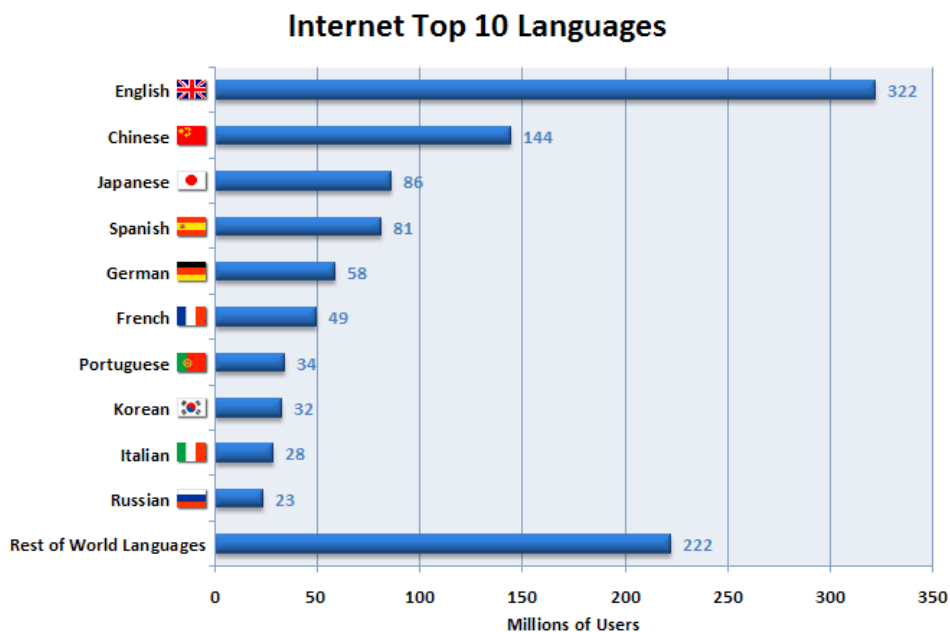
Speakers of English today comprise a very large number of people across the globe. Figures vary, but an estimate that includes both first- and second-language speakers of English is that there are some 1.125 billion people worldwide who use English (Internet World Stats, 2006). Only Chinese surpasses English in the number of speakers. These numbers do not account for how well second-language speakers can actually use the language, however.

Combine the large number of English speakers and no recognized authority for the language, and we have the discussion about just what “English” is. Kachru (1985) describes three types of English varieties: “Inner Circle” from traditional first-language English speaking countries, including the US, UK, Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand; “Outer Circle” from countries where large numbers learned English as an additional

official language, including India and other British Commonwealth countries; and “Expanding Circle” from countries where English is learned as a foreign language without special official sanction. Melchers & Shaw (2003) point out that the distinction is as much political as linguistic, since level of ability to communicate in the language is not part of the distinction between Outer- and Expanding-Circle countries. Within each circle are many forms of English, and even the “Inner Circle” has substantial variation in vocabulary, grammar, and usage regarding what counts as English.

Considerable debate is taking place now about in English language teaching about the need to move away from giving privilege to “Inner Circle” varieties. Instead, there are calls for “World English.” This would be some form that takes the range of world Englishes and finds the essential features for intelligibility as a base level and for complex communication at an advanced level. Members of the ELT community who take a critical pedagogy perspective are willing to embrace the inclusiveness of World English and to accept the loss of dominance for Inner Circle varieties. Still, it may be quite a while before parents and schools move away from the mystique of the native speaker. It is still all too common for well-trained and experienced local teachers from Outer and Expanding Circle countries to be displaced by untrained Americans, Australians, or Britons.

Shifting to the Internet, English has been and still is the most commonly-used language online, with nearly double the number of users of Chinese, the second most common language (see Figure 1).



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Figure 1. Internet Top 10 languages, from Internet World Stats (2006).

In terms of number of websites, English also holds sway with over 68% of the total websites around the world in English (Global Reach, 2004). In 2007, an estimated 53%

of the total Internet addresses issued around the world, and by extension the number of different servers, were in the United States (Domain Tools, 2007). This gives English, and particularly the US varieties of English, substantial dominance on the Web.

Technological innovation, as mentioned earlier, is one influence on language change. Crystal (2001), among others, has pointed out the new registers of English that are emerging as a result of Internet use. Research is ongoing in this area, with work by Herring (1996), Baron (1998, 2000), and Lee (2002), as well as a number of others. One major question being explored is how different Internet-based interaction types, including email, the Web, synchronous chat, asynchronous discussion groups, and audio/video interaction with text chat on the side, are intersections of writing and speech. A trend to informality cuts across different Internet situations (to use Crystal's term [2001:6]). Business email still incorporates polite forms and follows many business letter conventions, though there may not be the same kind of formal opening and closing as in a printed letter. Business email writers are generally quite aware that their messages are, potentially, important documents that could win a promotion or result in being fired. Academic web sites retain many elements of more formal writing, as well, with citations and bibliographies not uncommon. Informal email, personal websites, and most other Internet situations move further from the conventions of formal writing and incorporate more elements of speech. Most importantly, there are currently few widely-accepted conventions governing language use on the Internet. Businesses, schools, chat monitors, and discussion groups set individual standards. Most of these are based on the lowest common denominator, referencing basic "netiquette" (see, for example, Lonnie Turbee's Netiquette for the Student List Project) and behavior to avoid (e.g., "no flaming").

The most distinct new forms of language seem to be on synchronous channels of communication, such as text-based chat and instant messaging (text-based chat with just one person). Chat with multiple simultaneous participants poses a variety of technology-induced challenges for communication. A comment from person A on one topic can be followed by a response from person B, whose response brings up a new topic from person C, then the response to person B's comment from person A, etc. With more than four people, the comments overlap to a point where, in face-to-face speech, someone may want to call for a return to a single conversation. That kind of call for order rarely occurs in chat. Instead, participants seem to read in different ways in order to make sense of the overlaps. Another technical element that adds to the unusual communication in chat is "lag" – a time delay between when a message is sent by an individual and when it is visible to everyone else. The amount of lag depends on how many people are involved in the chat and on the speed of each individual's connection to the Internet. The result can be that B's response to A shows up on A's screen long after C's comment, A's response to C, and D's initial comment. As Crystal puts it, "The fact that messages are typically short, rapidly distributed (lag permitting), and coming from a variety of sources (any number of people may be online at once) results in the most distinctive characteristic of chatgroup language: its participant overlap" (2001, 157).

Between lag and overlap, the speed with which a message can be typed and sent in a chat session is thus very important. Crystal (2001) points out the lack of attention to grammar,

punctuation, and spelling; and the use of abbreviations and orthographic changes based on sound (for example, CU l8r for “see you later”). More than just convenience in typing is going on here, however. Chat language over time has developed its own set of abbreviations that are unintelligible to the uninitiated, such as BTW for “by the way” and IMHO for “in my humble opinion.”

One more socio-psychological element is “cyberculture” (Dery, 1993, cited in Strate, Jacobson, & Gibson, 2002: 12). Strate, et al. call it “The unique culture associated with CMC and online interaction” (2002: 12). Cyberculture was originally associated with hackers, and much of it maintains a certain irreverent, playful, and anti-establishment quality. New words, phrases, abbreviations, and emotive spellings (“hehehe” for laughter, “welllll” to indicate thinking, and the like) are freely coined in this creative atmosphere.¹ Nicknames are widely used in chat, serving as a kind of virtual mask. While Deborah Healey may hesitate to say something that could be embarrassing, her online persona “DeEll” may have no such qualms. Crystal points out that “Chatgroups are the nearest we are likely to get to seeing writing in its spontaneous, unedited, naked state ... [They are] evidence of the remarkable linguistic versatility that exists within ordinary people (2001: 170).

Add wide access internationally to the Internet to this brave new world of largely ungoverned Internet communication, and the possibility for language change becomes very large. Interaction among the peoples of the world is going on today at a previously unimaginable level in speed, quantity, and diversity of people involved. Li (2000) found code-mixing in his corpus of email messages from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where Chinese speakers inserted English words occasionally into Chinese email messages and Chinese (pinyin) into English messages. Li felt that the use of email was encouraging greater informality in writing, both in Chinese and in English, though the Chinese writers were more formal than a comparison group of British academics. Gao (2006) describes the change in the Chinese language used online, predominantly by educated young people, in his examination of “contact and convergence between computer-mediated communication in Mainland China, particularly the Englishization of the Chinese language” (p. 307). He points to syntactic and lexical influences from English in the online version of Chinese, though mentions that some of the syntactic changes may also be coming from Cantonese.

However, several strong forces are in play, pulling language change in different directions. It is true that the sheer volume of English online and from the US in particular means that people everywhere have extensive exposure to that variety. Add the global reach of US entertainment: TV, movies, music, and this variety has the potential to be very influential linguistically. At the same time, a very large number of L2 English speakers are communicating with each other, pulling English away from a US-centered standard. As Kachru (1997) points out with reference to Outer Circle varieties in

¹ This is not unique to English online interaction; I have seen similar shortening, emotive spellings, etc. in Spanish on an asynchronous discussion list for Spanish-speaking teachers. Examples include jajajajaj (hahahahah), holaa (helloo)

particular, “The initiatives in planning, administration, acquisition, and spread of English in Asia are primarily in the hands of Asians” (p. 69).

The third influence is the Internet’s vernacular – “chatspeak” – that adds pressure of its own to shape the global form of English. In my own exploration of chatspeak, I’ve seen an interesting dichotomy between learners of English – my students and those on English language learning sites such as Dave’s Café - and some of the English teachers who have come to my institution for teacher and technology training. Perhaps because their focus is practicing and they are using asynchronous discussion lists, these language learners rarely use the typical abbreviations and free-flowing style typical of chat. The teachers are another story. In their email interactions with me and on asynchronous discussion lists, a number of the teachers frequently use lowercase “i” and “u” as well as other typical chat abbreviations.

Yet another wrinkle is the as yet unknown effect of an increasing amount of oral interaction online, with audio blogs and audio/video chat. Call Centers providing telephone-based help with anything from software installation to financial documentation are already located in a range of countries. The person who answers the telephone may or may not use the same form of English as the caller. Exposure to call centers, plus the emerging capability of the Internet, could add pressure to redefine what English sounds like.

This is an interesting time for English, linguistically. Exposure on the Internet and via mass media to a range of varieties of English, the allure of the culture of cyberspace, and greater awareness of dominance issues all contribute to a change in what “English” is. As English teachers, we have a special role in helping create a new, globally-aware definition of English and of who English speakers are. With the growth of information flowing in multiple directions, perhaps even Americans could become better at understanding forms of English different from their own.

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