# THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNET ON LANGUAGE AND "EMAIL STRESS"

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**Abstract**. *The authors give a short analysis of the influence of Internet language to the lives and different spheres of human activities including the recent researches of "email stress" phenomenon.*

**Key words**: *Internet language, "email stress", communicative behavior, linguistic influence, communication methods.*

*Web is more a social creation than a technical one*

*Thabo Mbeki*

From almost total obscurity Internet swiftly leapt into our lives covered almost all the spheres of human activity, from shop to sex from research to rebellion.

The Internet as an information and communication platform has become essential in our daily life. Existing side by side with other media, the latest mass medium has changed our communicative behavior enormously. (The European English Messenger, 2005). Personal Computer (PC) Internet users know that it is possible to find different kinds of texts in it: fiction, academic writing and mass media - practically all possible existing types of texts. Of special interest is communication between people in the Internet and the different types of Websites. The so-called electronic language has aroused great linguistic and psychological interest and attracts more and more attention of the linguists and psychologists who are really concerned with its possible influence on language and psychology in general.

Linguists are concerned with the influence this system may have on a living language. The Internet, in conjunction with radio and television, telephone communication and printed materials, creates the universal information net, which is called "Cyberspace" and

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all the people using the online communication are "Netizens" in this net (the word is easily associated with "citizens"). The regular users are "Webies", the new ones -"Newbies". The language we use in the net is "Netspeak" [1]

People, unfamiliar with the mechanisms of **Online Communication** and familiar with the conventions of offline communication, think that there can be no analogy of online communication with speech. Chatrooms and the like are too constrained by their response times and the slow speed of typing to be considered as a good analogy of speech. Regarding some broad pragmatic themes (communicative effectiveness, spamming, lurking, emoticons and abbreviations), 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. This is a good example of one way that online and offline communications differ.

Moreover, in the minds of many, Net Discourse is a little more than linguistic vandalism, illiterate online expression where grammar is gone and spelling is superfluous.

However, the language used online is that of real people of great diversity, whose output is largely unedited by proofreaders or publishers. The change of the language affects even people who never log on or use the letters *AWHF* in regular communication to ask "*are we having fun*?", or *TMOT*, that is "*trust me on this*". Unlike a library, the Internet is an interactive and dynamic world.

Giving a linguist's appraisal of Electronic Discourse, the well-known British linguist David Crystal points out that we are on the brink of the biggest revolution in language ever, that Netspeak, this is how he calls online language, is not a monolithic creation, but rather a disparate set of communication methods and types such as e-mail, chatrooms, Internet Relay Chat, World Wide Web pages, Websites etc. He suggests that online language is best viewed as a new species of interaction, a genuine "third medium" (besides the written and oral forms of English), which is evolving its own systematic rules to suit new circumstances. (Crystal D., 2001)

He largely dismisses the common view that online communication is illiterate and dumbed-down language. He agrees that much of it is non-standard, playful, highly deviant in bending the usual rules of language, tolerant of typographic and spelling errors, and full of new words. But he is fascinated by its variety and innovation and takes a very positive view, suggesting that "The phenomenon of Netspeak is going to change the way we think about language in a fundamental way, because it is a linguistic singularity - a genuine new medium". (Crystal D., 2001)

According to Crystal technology bears gifts also for linguistic investigation: Netspeak is a new opportunity for academic study. He outlines the "once in a lifetime" opportunity offered by the emerging communication media. A new academic study of "**Internet Linguistics**" includes, at the very least, a comparative study of the style of different formats and the development of language change within these new media.

Internet has become especially popular in this respect amongst the younger generations who have been brought up "computer literate" and are therefore not discouraged by

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[1] The corresponding derivations: "Netlish" or Weblish (easily associated with English). There are a great number of other names like Electronic Discourse, Interactive Written Discourse, Internet Language, Netslang, Online Communication (Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Virtual Discourse, Net Lingua (or Net Lingo), Internet Language, Netslang etc.

any technicalities associated with it. The online community is recreated solely through the collective use of keyboards. Identity is created entirely through the use of language and typography onscreen. Due to such technique the physical existence is nullified. Relationships are formed between participants in real-time without the prejudicial restrictions that would normally be derived by physical presence, such as age, gender, race, skin color, body language, facial expressions, clothes and so on.

Interlocutors in this medium can only retrieve information about each other from the text itself. Furthermore, this of course may not be an entirely accurate representation of the truth as the medium provides anonymity. Most notably the ability of chatters to **graphically express emotions** (lurking, emoticons) and **simulate speech-phonology** (through phonetic spelling) certainly gives the potential for gesturally and linguistically created social-tension to exist.

There is also clearly a lot of scope for the development of a **prestige language variety**. This could be determined grammatically, through **syntax, ellipses, punctuation** etc, lexically through **relexicalisation** and through **phrasal covert norms**. The missing dynamics of the in-person interactive process, as well as heightened control over the timing and content of utterances means there is a greater sensitivity to how patterns of "speaking" are received. This creates a situation whereby contrary to regular Webchat users (Webies), the new ones (Newbies) will tend to overuse the conventions to which they are becoming accustomed in order to try to accommodate to their audience in the face of Webies.

Participants use all types of shortened forms simply to combat the limiting conditions of the medium itself. The use of syntactically-reduced forms: acronyms, symbols, word-clippings are therefore purely for practical reasons – they reduce the time and effort necessary to communicate. Users therefore tend to produce utterances of an average of 6 words. Respect is given to those who can communicate the most information, whether direct or implied in the shortest amount of time. The mainstream lexis is reformed into hybrid, heteroglossic, exclusively narrow, covert norms, (**relexicalisation** as defined by Halliday M.A.K., 1978 and **overlexicalisation** as defined by Werry C.C., 1996) good examples of which are acronyms simulating laughter: *lol* (laughing out loud, is used to express general laugh), *lmao* (laughing my arse off, is reserved for something very amusing), *rotflol* (rolling on the floor laughing out loud, is used for something wild crazy and very amusing), and others like *omg* (oh my god), *gtg* (got to go) and so on.

Having a look at the above examples and not even going deep into the Computer-Mediated Communication, traditional thinkers will immediately agree that Internet Relay Chat is an **antilanguage** (as defined by Halliday M.A.K., 1978) and not the speech of an immense community (sometimes called **antisociety**) that employs different language varieties for purely practical reasons. (Stevenson J., 2005)[2] Many people may not like this and they may be quite right but the fact is that the mode of technology imparts something of its nature to public experience; the extra linguistic reality is dictating its new rules and norms to the language.[3]

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[2] According to Jon Stevenson technological expertise is stigmatized through pejorative terms like *geek/nerd/techy* in real life, whilst online it's the ultimate status symbol.

[3] In the famous words of English professor Herbert Marshall McLuhan, "The medium is the message"

From psychological point of view as a new environment Internet can have a potent effect on our behavior. It is a place where humans sometimes are acting and interacting rather strangely. Based only on newspaper headlines one who has never ventured online might think that Internet is overpopulated by people with psychological disorders, bizarre ideas and questionable motives and normal folk had better tread more cautiously. Yet, decades of research on human behavior in many different spheres show how minor tweaks in the environment can cause those "normal" people to behave differently. People who rate themselves as 100% cool can lose their cool in certain situations. Someone who scores high on kindliness and someone who generally behaves courteously towards people in person might lash out aggressively in a heated Internet flame war (an online argument that gets really nasty).

The very interesting information in this regard was recently published by Telegraph Media Group referring to the researches from Glasgow and Paisley universities who found that more than a third of workers are suffering from so called "email stress" as they are swamped with messages.

Lead researchers Karen Renaud, a computer scientist from Glasgow University and psychologist Judith Ramsat of Paisley University surveyed almost 200 workers and found that more than a third – 34 per cent – check their inbox every 15 minutes and 64 per cent look more than once an hour. But monitoring software revealed that they looked more often, with some workers viewing their emails up to 40 times an hour.

"Our survey indicates the astonishing extent to which emails is embedded in our day-to-day lives," they found. More than a third – 34 per cent – said they felt stressed by volume of emails and the need to reply quickly. A further 28 per cent said they felt "driven" when they checked their messages because of the pressure to respond. Just 38 per cent of workers were relaxed enough to wait a day longer before replying.

Miss Renaud said: "Email is the thing that now causes us the most problems in our working lives." She advised workers to set aside a few dedicated times a day for reading emails to cut stress.

American psychologist **Sherry Turkle** came to very interesting conclusions in this field. It seems that during the observation of the behavior of people in the multi-user virtual environment she managed to make a significant step forward for the whole psychological science. Everybody in this environment can play the role of a virtual person. They can then communicate with each other (chat) and construct their own environments. Many people create more then just one virtual person there, often with different characteristics. The behavior of every person is in reality driven by **several different personalities**, which we are able (in opposite to schizophrenia) to realize. We can change them in the way that is similar to the way we change the tasks in windows on a screen of a computer. Psychoanalysis will probably have to accept this fact and build the real image of a person from several different points of view. The results of another American psychologist **Howard Gardner** are very similar. He continued in previous research of human intelligence and came up with the proposition that we can't see the intelligence as one integral unit.

Psychological research reminds that the environment in which humans are behaving can and does affect the way they behave. Under the right circumstances almost everyone will do things that they themselves consider quite uncharacteristic. One of the first surprises for researchers investigating online behavior was how disinherited people sometimes became and how their temper seemed to flare more easily as they interacted with

other people. Preliminary research suggests that greater Internet use is associated with increases in loneliness and depression and also reductions in family communication and social involvement. These are warnings that even too much of a good thing might not be beneficial, especially when every home, classroom and business is heavily wired up. However many corners of Internet are filled with people who are willing to invest considerable time to help others in need. An enormous network of support groups flourishes online. The Internet is particularly useful for certain kind of support groups such as involving those who feel stigmatized by the society and who are reluctant to share their concerns with people in their community and even family. Online they can talk quite intimately with caring others who share their problems without risking real-life censure.

To sum up, it can only be added that no force can hinder the present social and technological progress and the Internet is a vivid result of such developments and achievements. In spite of combating and denying it, the society in general and the educationalists and psychologists in particular should do their best to teach the younger generations the traditional norms of behavior and speech and only on this firm basis the letters can be free in their choice to make use of any type of communication though considered to be harmful.

From linguistic point of view Net Lingua is much like slang: one must know when and where to use it. From psychological point of view it should be borne in mind: the subject we are in contact with is not a living creature but computer and technologies do influence human behavior in their direction.

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## UTICAJ INTERNETA NA JEZIK
## I "STRES OD ELEKTRONSKE POŠTE"

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*Autori daju kratku analizu uticaja internet jezika na živote i različite sfere ljudskih aktivnosti uključujući i nedavna istraživanja fenomena "stresa od elektronske pošte".*

Ključne reči:    *Internet jezik, "stres od elektronske pošte", ponašanje pri komunikaciji, lingvistički uticaj, metode komuniciranja.*