

BOOK Review

LANGUAGE AND THE INTERNET

By David Crystal

We're at the beginning of what will likely be the greatest revolution in the use of language since the invention of the printing press, and this book is the first to take a systematic and measured view of the changes so far.

David Crystal, author of numerous books on language and linguistics, has written the first book-length study on the effects the Internet is having on language. In *Language And The Internet*, Crystal provides an overview of the different forms of Internet communication and how language is used and modified in and by those media. Crystal's conclusions are broad and tentative as one might expect of such a large topic and such a new technology, but they are well-reasoned, supported by data, and often quite surprising, bucking the conventional wisdom.

Pundits have often opined that the Internet will be the death of grammar and spelling, that it will destroy thoughtful writing by encouraging sloppiness that is covered by the band-aid of a smiley or emoticon. Or that it will kill other languages, leaving only English as the sole survivor. Crystal carefully takes each of these conclusions apart, showing how people are adapting the tool of language to fit the new technology and enriching language and communication as a result.

Crystal divides the Internet into five broad media, e-mail, asynchronous chat-groups, synchronous chat-groups, virtual worlds and the web. In each he finds that people have adapted language to meet the particular requirements and uses of that particular medium. He calls this new adapted form of language netspeak.

Netspeak occupies a middle ground between speech and writing, sharing characteristics of both. Internet communication is not done face-to-face, as speech is usually

conducted, hence it lacks the facial and body clues that accompany speech. But it also lacks the intonations and aural clues of speech, which makes it different from telephone conversations, which also lacks visual clues. Some forms of netspeak are spontaneous like speech and not revisable, as writing is.

To give an example of how netspeak creates new conventions to overcome these particular difficulties, smileys and emoticons were invented. They take the place of visual and aural clues. They are not required in formal writing because of the time available to carefully choose one's words and to revise and edit. This time is lacking in the immediacy of netspeak and some tool is required to replace those visual and aural clues, hence emoticons.

Scattered throughout the book are wonderful examples of the new terms and coinages that make up the new vocabulary of the Internet. From RUOK, to flames, to e-cash, he gives us a snapshot of a wild and woolly field of online language growth and change.

Crystal's book is not the last word on the subject; rather it's the first.

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