

REVIEW OF LANGUAGE AND THE INTERNET

The Biggest Language Revolution Ever Meets Applied Linguistics in the 21st Century

Language and the Internet

David Crystal

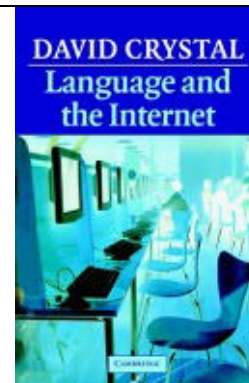
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Reviewed by [Steven L. Thorne](#), Penn State

That the Internet invokes profound opportunities for language educators and students has been long discussed (with some of the better examples published in this very journal). In his 2001 book, *Language and the Internet*, David Crystal only sporadically mentions educational issues or contexts, but this does not diminish the importance or relevance of this book for applied linguists. Crystal, a prolific linguist who has authored numerous scholarly and reference texts on a variety of language related topics, turns his attention in this volume to the language practices visibly mediated by the Internet. In a personal preface to the volume, he mentions that as a prominent linguist, he has often been asked about what effect the Internet has had on language, a question for which he did not have a clear answer. This prompted him to explore a variety of what he terms "Internet situations," each of which comes to form a chapter in this 272-page volume.

Crystal's linguist-eye perspective is just what language educators need in order to understand the broader implications of the complex relations governing language-based communication and the Internet as a set of distinctive modalities. Regrettably, Crystal selects the awkward and overly cute term "Netspeak" to describe the many forms of language visible on the Internet. His selection of this term clearly arises from the ephemeral neologisms common to digital culture in the mid and late 1990s, evidence for which resides in the list of alternatives he considered -- "netlish," "weblish," and "cyberspeak." Though it is a small critique, this text would be improved should he have selected a less quaint term such as simply "computer-mediated communication" (CMC) or "electronic discourse." This small problem aside, Crystal convincingly describes language use and language change within "Internet situations" such as e-mail, synchronous and asynchronous "chat groups" (his term), virtual worlds (MUDs and MOOs), and the World Wide Web. Within each Internet situation, he discusses and, where possible, explicates the development of new graphic conventions such as emoticons and abbreviations, the emergence of novel genres, Internet-derived neologisms, and features of communicative activity that could only have emerged through electronic media (e.g., forms of interaction in synchronous chat, pp. 151-167, and "message intercalation" in e-mail, p. 120.) Below, I review select chapters of this text in greater detail.

Crystal's treatment of e-mail (chapter 3) describes this modality's history, including its fixed discourse elements (the header structure) and various epistolary conventions which were borrowed from earlier textual modalities (notes, letters, memos, postcards). Despite its unglamorous everyday quality for regular users, Crystal reminds the reader that e-mail use emphasizes "clarity of the message on the screen" (p. 110) and has precipitated the now common use of numbered and bulleted lists, a feature rare in earlier written communication. Unlike the memo that preceded it, e-mail is often used as a tool for dialogue and

can include a string of anterior messages. In this sense, a new document is created as each interaction builds upon prior messages. Crystal predicts that over time, e-mail will exhibit a "much wider stylistic range than it does at present, as the medium is adapted to suit a broader range of communicative purposes" (p. 107). Does this "much wider stylistic range," potentially outside of the norms of prescriptivist grammatical and orthographic conventions, present a problem rather than an opportunity for language educators? Crystal responds that e-mail is not a "medium to be feared for its linguistic irresponsibility (because it allows for radical graphological deviance) but as one which offers a further domain within which children can develop their ability to consolidate their stylistic intuitions and make responsible linguistic choices." Addressing language education directly, Crystal argues that "Email has extended the language's stylistic range in interesting and innovative ways. In my view, it is an opportunity, not a threat, for language education" (p. 128). I agree with Crystal's optimism and acknowledgement that the Internet has unquestionably expanded the average range and diversity of specifically graphical (written) communication. I would also extend this line of reasoning to mention that Internet situations are no longer optional communicative modalities, nor is the use of Internet communication tools some sort of proxy or practice environment for subsequent communication in face-to-face or formal writing contexts. Ever increasingly, everyday communication in work, school, and interpersonal domains is Internet mediated. Understanding and acquiring new genres of communication (at the level of style as well as lexicon and register) are critical dimensions of the process of becoming a competent late-modern communicator.

In chapter 5, Crystal addresses group uses of CMC tools of both the synchronous and asynchronous varieties. To help substantiate Crystal's assertion that the Internet has kindled the wide-spread use of bulleted lists, here are the descriptive features Crystal attributes to group CMC use (what he subsumes under the label synchronous and asynchronous "group chats"):

- These modalities encourage an "I" language variety where personal reference and perspective dominate.
- "It" is used to introduce personal comments ("it seems to me...").
- Participants frequently use private verbs such as "think," "feel," "know" (describing activity that cannot be publicly observed).
- Tag or rhetorical questions are used to express personal attitude, views, and to encourage responses from interlocutors.
- Synchronous and asynchronous tools lack (or differentially render) the face-to-face conventions of turn-taking, floor-taking, and adjacency pairing, with implications for rate of topic decay, coherence and cohesion, and simultaneity and overlap of messages.

In reference to the final point and quoting Herring, Crystal acknowledges that CMC environments are "both dysfunctionally and advantageously incoherent" (p. 169). Though numerous features of Internet communication have the propensity to drive language prescriptivists mad with rage, and certainly most everyone has been the producer of an utterance that upon rereading makes us cringe, people adapt language to meet new needs, new situations, and new modalities. This is the heart of language evolution. As new digital communication tools become available, genres of communicative practice will develop that are difficult to predict or possibly even to imagine.

Chapter seven describes language use on the World Wide Web which is "graphically more eclectic than any domain of written language in the real world" (p. 197) and one that "holds a mirror up to our linguistic nature, it is a mirror that both distorts and enhances, providing new constraints and opportunities" (p. 198). In assessing this situation, Crystal suggests that this is because the language of the Web is under no central control, does not respect national boundaries, and thus spawns new communicative genres. Due to the Web's dual function of reception (finding texts) and production (relative ease of producing HTML texts), "people have more power to influence the language of the Web than in any other medium" (p. 208).

In this chapter Crystal also includes an interesting discussion on word processing. In contrast to the flexible orthography and syntax in many CMC contexts, Crystal rightly points out that word processors and some e-mail clients "must surely influence our intuitions about the nature of our language" through the prescriptivist grammar and spell-checkers they include (p. 212). Though certainly useful as indicators of typos or inadvertent grammar errors, Crystal is of the opinion that

a large number of valuable stylistic distinctions are being endangered by this repeated encounter with the programmer's prescriptive usage preferences. Online dictionaries and grammars are likely to influence usage much more than their traditional Fowlerian counterparts ever did. It would be good to see a greater descriptive realism emerge, paying attention to the sociolinguistic and stylistic complexity which exists in a language, but at present the recommendations are arbitrary, oversimplified, and depressingly purist in spirit. (p. 212)

A few pages later, Crystal concludes that "[grammar and spelling] software designers underestimate the amount of variation there is in the orthographic system, the pervasive nature of language change, and the influence context has in deciding whether an orthographic feature is obligatory or optional" (p. 214). His passion to affirm the many language varieties visible over the Internet, and his well-supported arguments against grammatical and stylistic essentialism, provide language educators with the challenge to be balanced in their assessment strategies of communication that occurs in digital environments. For language educators, the Internet provokes the following tension -- to be accepting of creative innovation while also corrective of language use that may fall too far outside of expert speaker norms.

Crystal also tackles the issue of language diversity and notes that roughly one quarter of the world's languages have some Internet presence. For languages with few speakers or little telecommunications infrastructure, he reasonably hypothesizes that "until a critical mass of Internet penetration in a country builds up, and a corresponding mass of content exists in the local language, the motivation to switch from English-language sites will be limited to those for whom issues of identity outweigh issues of information" (p. 220). However, we need not fear total domination by English as the primary medium of digital communication. Especially through wireless networks that bypass the infrastructural problems associated with wires and cables, an increasing proportion of the world's population will participate in the use and production of the Internet. This, Crystal notes, will afford a glimpse at "language presence in a real sense ... sites which allow us to see languages as they are" (pp. 220-221).

In the eighth and final chapter, "The Linguistic Future of the Internet," Crystal surmises that computer mediated communication may become an obsolete notion as Internet information and communication functionality migrates to other tools, notably mobile phones and personal digital assistants at the moment, but also hand held units that will combine Internet access with digital photography and video, fax, and traditional media like radio and television. He suggests that technology developments will have two broad impacts: (a) new modalities and their effects on the nature of language and speech community and (b) new modalities bringing languages and speech communities into contact with one another. As speakers of distinct language varieties come together for an increasing number of purposes, automated speech transcription and translation tools will likely improve and become ubiquitous. As noted above, however, the more commonly spoken languages will likely remain far better served by the private sector services that will support such development.

Crystal does discuss language education issues in this final chapter and remarks that second language education and applied linguistics have been leaders in the use of the Internet for specific purposes. Examples include asynchronous projects at intra- and interclass levels and "key-pal" international partnerships (the topic of this LLT special issue). Synchronous tools and what Crystal terms "virtual world" environments (MUDs and MOOs) facilitate real-time communication which may assist with "the promotion of rapid responses," but cautions that the truncated forms of language found in chat environments may "represent only a small part of the grammatical repertoire of a language" (p. 235). As

mentioned, Crystal also emphasizes the "authentic materials" and "genuine written data" that is available via the Web. With all Internet technologies, Crystal warns that it is the teachers who must be aware of the diversity of Internet speech communities, to know the relation between modalities and expected genres of communication, and to be familiar with the nomenclature of the Internet itself. Well in line with the language ideology he reiterates throughout the book, Crystal does not take a prescriptivist approach and suggests that we embrace language change, including the flexible orthography, grammar, and style common to the many varieties of "netspeak." However, he also points out that language educators should be aware of the complex pragmatic competence L2 learners will need to evaluate the appropriateness of language used on e-mail and chat groups. "The bending and breaking of rules," which form the heart of ludic behavior, present "a problem to those who have not yet developed a confident command of the rules per se" (pp. 236-237).

Certain omissions are apparent in the book, but anyone writing about contemporary uses of technology knows that it presents a moving target. In other words, it is not possible to predict even near-future technology use with much accuracy. Crystal's book was published in 2001, however, and includes references from 2000. It is mildly surprising that he does not address what can only be described as the "Instant Messenger phenomenon." Instant Messenger (IM) has become the leading synchronous CMC tool for undergraduate populations (see Thorne, 2003) and was tremendously popular even in the late 1990s. Per my experience using this text in applied linguistics courses, non-linguistically focused or trained individuals have found his prose, linguistic descriptions, and argumentation to be clear and inspiring. Very usefully, Crystal discusses and takes examples from widely referenced linguistic, CMC, and Internet Studies research. This aspect of the book should prove useful to foreign and second language educators who wish to glean a synoptic overview of the vast research on CMC and Internet Studies.

In the final analysis, *Language and the Internet* is a review text providing a useful and well-referenced overview of Internet-related research. Commensurate with other books written for such purposes, this volume provides few new or striking insights to Internet Studies enthusiasts. This said, Crystal has written an engaging volume that language educators will find practical as they grapple with questions of how Internet-mediated language may, and perhaps ought to be, different from language use in other modalities. As such, this book is important for applied linguists who wish to understand the broader background of language use and language change via the Internet, which he describes as "a linguistic singularity -- a genuine new medium" (p. 238). Invoking Berners-Lee, the acknowledged developer of the Internet, Crystal reminds us that the Internet is less a technological fact than a social fact, and "its chief stock-in-trade is language" (p. 236). Brace yourself, for as Crystal notes, and I concur, "we are on the brink of the biggest language revolution ever" (p. 241).

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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