

I can haz language play: The construction of language and identity in LOLspeak

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Abstract. LOLspeak is a complex and systematic reimagining of the English language. It is most often associated with the popular, productive and long-lasting Internet meme ‘LOLcats’. This style of English is characterised by the simultaneous playful manipulation of multiple levels of language.

Using community-generated web content as a corpus, we analyse some of the common language play strategies (Sherzer 2002) used in LOLspeak, which include morphological reanalysis, atypical sentence structure and lexical playfulness. The linguistic variety that emerges from these manipulations displays collaboratively constructed norms and tendencies providing a standard which may be meaningfully adhered to or subverted by users.

We conclude with a discussion of why people may choose to participate in such language play, and suggest that the language play strategies used by participants allow for the construction of complex identity.

Keywords. language play, computer-mediated communication, English grammar, LOLcats, Internet memes

1. Introduction:

oh hai!

In the last decade, the Internet has been established as a fertile domain of language use. While some electronic communication like text and instant messaging have attracted academic study, there is a rich world of linguistic diversity on the Internet that has received scant attention from linguistic researchers. In this paper we provide an initial discussion of LOLspeak, the language style closely associated with the popular, productive and long-lasting Internet meme “LOLcats”. LOLspeak is a playful variety of English that shows complex and multi-faceted manipulation of Standard English for entertaining ends. In this paper we explore some of the main linguistic features of LOLspeak.

First we briefly outline the origins of LOLspeak (§2). We then turn our attention to what LOLspeak is, by first looking at what LOLspeak isn’t (§3.1) and by situating it in terms of “language play” (§3.2). We then give a summary of previous research on LOLcats and LOLspeak (§4) before turning to our own analysis. In §5 we present a “sketch grammar” of LOLspeak, where we examine the phenomenon from a number of structural perspectives. These include orthography and phonetics (§5.1), lexicon (§5.2), morphology (§5.3), syntax (§5.4) and the clausal level (§5.5). We conclude (§6) with a discussion of what might be motivating this language play and look at future applications of our analysis.

2. The origins of LOLspeak and LOLcats:

how teh LOLkittehs waz maded

The history of LOLspeak is inseparable from the LOLcats Internet meme that has captured the popular imagination. LOLcats¹ are images of cats with funny captions in non-Standard English, often referred to simply as “LOLcats” and at other times referred to as “image macros”. As discussed in Braswell, Garay, Saggese & Schiffman (2008), Brillman, Gander & Guillen (2008) and Anderson, House, Locke & Schirmann (2008), LOLcats are one of the cuter tropes to have

¹ “LOL” is an acronym for “laugh out loud” that originated on-line but is now also commonly used in face-to-face interactions.

evolved from the primordial soup of short-lived fads that is the 4chan website². 4chan is an anonymous messaging board with a high turnover of posts, and it is here, on the “Random” (“/b/”) message board³, that “Caturday” began sometime in 2006 or 2007. Caturday (Saturday) was an opportunity to share silly images of cats, a human tendency that existed well before LOLcats. In January 2007, Eric Nakagawa created the *I can has cheezburger* website⁴ (IHC) to share the most entertaining images with his girlfriend. Below is the first image that appeared on the site and also gave it its name:



Figure 1. “I can has cheezburger?” cat⁵.

The popularity of the site exploded and in September 2007 Ben Huh purchased the website (Wang 2009) and has expanded it into an Internet empire of similar image macros, including *I has a hotdog* for images of dogs, *Totally looks like* which compares images of celebrities to people, animals or things they look like, and *FAIL blog* which has images of blatant stupidity or incompetence. Although many

² <http://www.4chan.org/> There is ongoing discussion that we have observed in the 4chan community as to whether LOLcats and many of the other tropes we observe really did originate from 4chan, or from other usenet boards on the Internet. An in-depth study of origins of LOLcat tropes is beyond the scope of this paper, but would certainly be an interesting line of enquiry.

³ <http://boards.4chan.org/b/>

⁴ www.icanhascheezburger.com

⁵ The humour of this macro initially seems to derive from the unexpected, anthropomorphic and clumsily articulated desire of the cat for a cheeseburger, as well as the cat’s comical expression. The humour has been compounded over time due to repetition and recontextualisations using the image and the phrasal template as tropes.

of these sites involve similar tropes to those found on the LOLcats site, they also have their own variations on the theme.

LOLspeak found its popularity in a narrow domain, but has since broadened in its appeal. The spread from 4chan to the ICHC blog and its growing stable of subsidiaries was matched by an uptake in other corners of the Internet. Subcultures took the trope and made it their own, and as such the Internet is peppered with collections like LOLlibrarians, LOLpresidents and even LOLlinguists.

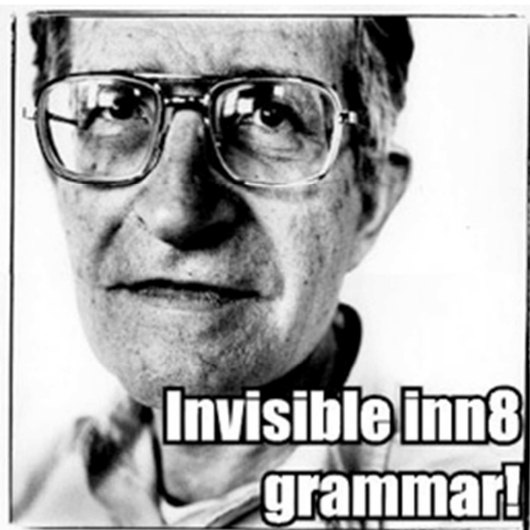


Figure 2. LOLlinguist⁶.

LOLspeak has moved beyond the image-caption limits of image macros and has spread even further. To give a very crude statistic that captures the spread of LOLspeak, an Internet search for the iconic LOLspeak string “I can haz” without mention of “cheezburger” still throws up over 18 million hits. One of the most popular and enduring homes that LOLspeak has found outside of the domain of Cheezburgers is the LOLcat Bible⁷. The LOLcat Bible project was established back in July 2007 by Martin Grondin as LOLcats were enjoying their first wave of fame, with the aim of rewriting the *Bible* in LOLspeak. While Grondin was responsible for kicking off the LOLcats *Bible* project, many have contributed to its growth through its wiki-format collaborative structure. Large sections of the *Bible*,

⁶ Photo: Trisha Weir (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/97491454@N00/483236285>)

⁷ www.lolcatbible.com

both Old and New Testaments, have now been ‘translated’ and a book of the collaborative work has been published (Grondin 2010).

3. So what is LOLspeak?: *what teh kittehs sedz?*

Having established the origins and spread of the LOLcat community, we now address the nature of LOLspeak. Many people have attempted to define LOLspeak and its relationship to English by comparing it to other existing phenomena—some with more success than others. Calka (2011b:9) asserts that “the closest approximation would be to imagine English put through an automatic translator into another language and then translated back and spelled phonetically”—an appealing description, but one that ignores the many regularities and patterns of LOLspeak. Others are more dismissive, one web scholar describing it as “the stupidest possible creative act” (Shirky 2010, quoted in Miltner 2011:9). Here we introduce LOLspeak as a phenomenon by first looking at what it is *not* (§3.1) and then turning our attention to what it *is* (§3.2) (see §5 for a more in-depth linguistic analysis).

As something that originated in a written medium, LOLspeak reflects the asynchronous style used in the local discourse context of LOL-based Internet sites. The original image macros and the LOLcat Bible are both non-dyadic communicative styles—along with the asynchronous nature, this meant that people had time to compose their utterances. As Calka (2011b) notes, people now frequently use LOLspeak for extended asynchronous message-board postings within the ICHC domain. This is more dyadic in its communicative structure. We have also observed that people within our social domain are using LOLspeak in synchronous instant messaging and chat situations as well. It would be interesting to see how LOLspeak varies across all these media, but this is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we will be focusing on the asynchronous non-dyadic language found in the images and the LOLcat Bible, which can hopefully be of use for anyone with future plans to expand the domains of this research.

As all of the image-based uses of LOLspeak involve short examples, we will look at some extended prose from the LOLcat Bible project instead, to illustrate the

coherent co-construction present across multiple utterances. Below are the first five verses of Genesis, a paragraph of text that should be familiar to many people:

- (1) a. *Oh hai. In teh beginnin Ceiling Cat maded teh skiez. An da Urfs, but he did not eated dem*
- b. *Da Urfs no had shapez. An haded dark face, An Ceiling Cat rode invisible bike over teh waterz*
- c. *At start, no has lyte. An Ceiling Cat sayz, i can haz lite? An lite wuz*
- d. *An Ceiling Cat saved teh lite, to seez stuffs, An splitted teh lite from dark but taht wuz ok cuz kittes can see in teh dark. An not tripz over nethin*
- e. *An Ceiling Cat sayed light Day. An dark no Day. It were FURST!!!!*

The first thing to note is that it is, even to the non-initiated, identifiable as English. Certainly, there are many non-standard forms and constructions, and possibly some unfamiliar lexical items, but on the whole it is not impossible to figure out what this text is.

3.1 *What LOLspeak isn't*

It is apparent that this style of language takes its inspiration from many sources. The capitalisation and exclamation marks show the language's gaming background, and are also found in "leet" speak, while some shortenings are more reminiscent of text speech. Some sections read like L1 or L2 acquisition errors, or even a creolised English. Although LOLspeak shares features with these and many other linguistic phenomena, none of them quite explain the LOLspeak phenomenon or account for all discernable stylistic choices.

Leet uses numbers and symbols to replace letters, such as LOLsp33k ("LOLspeak") or L337 ("leet"), and "text speak" more frequently uses rebus-like substitutes, such as R ("are") and 4 ("for"). Although LOLspeak certainly borrows some of these features, it does not use them as frequently as leet does.

Some features such as over/under-application of plurals and over regularisation of verb paradigms ("eated" for "ate") do look like language acquisition errors, however the language used in LOLspeak is too complex in all other respects to

assume that users of LOLspeak are only trying to mimic first/second language learners.

It has been put forward (e.g. Dash 2007) that perhaps LOLspeak is a type of pidgin language. This may at first be an appealing proposition (not only because we could then refer to “kitty pidgin”). We can very easily imagine English to be our superstrate lexifying language, but there is clearly no “cat substrate” in this situation. Instead we see LOLspeak emerging purely from a manipulation of English and therefore not appropriately a creole or a pidgin.

Although it is a manipulation of English, it doesn’t fall easily into the category of “play language” that typically involves some kind of manipulation of a linguistic system. In a discussion of play languages, Sherzer (2002:26) notes that systems like Verlan and Pig Latin are “linguistic codes derived by a small set of rules from a language in use in a particular speech community”. The rules required to create successful LOLspeak are more than just a “small set” and are distinct from something like Pig Latin in that they occur at every linguistic level, not just the phonological level. If we want to call LOLspeak a play language we would need to broaden our understanding of what a play language is.

Although LOLspeak displays a range of similarities to other phenomena, what is ultimately so interesting about it is that we see a wide range of underlying norms and tendencies instead of a single defining feature or process.

3.2 What LOLspeak is: language play

Now that we have looked at some of the things that we can say LOLspeak *is not*, we can turn our attention to frameworks that account for what it is. In this section we will look at LOLspeak as a type of language play. While “play languages” discussed above involve small sets of rules, “language play” is a broader term encompassing a wide variety of ways people can creatively manipulate language for playful ends.

LOLspeak is above all playful in nature. LOLspeakers do not use grammatically incorrect English because they can’t use Standard English; they are doing it because they are playing with the rules of English. Play is central to our understanding of ourselves as human. As Huizinga discussed in *Homo Ludens*

(1955), play gives us an opportunity to voluntarily step out of real life into a demarcated place and engage in an entertaining activity with its own, often unwritten, rules. This idea of play sounds to us exactly what many who read LOLcats and use LOLspeak do, including the voluntary nature and high levels of metalinguistic awareness, and is central to our understanding of what triggers people's engagement with LOLspeak. The playful manipulation of language has been explored in two recent monographs which both take slightly different angles on this kind of behaviour.

The first is Cook's *Language Play, Language Learning* (2000). Cook looks at language play as a vital component of cognitive development, intersecting with the development of imagination and ideas. The first half of the book looks at how manipulating and playing with language through rhyme, chant, song and other language games helps first language acquisition. Later, he discusses how the manipulation of language has potential for "bringing people together and forcing them apart, distinguishing between those who are in and those who are out" (63). The ability to be simultaneously inclusive and exclusive is fundamental to LOLspeak; those who are "out" may not understand that the joke comes from this manipulation.

The second recent text to address this area is Sherzer's *Speech play* (2002). Although Sherzer gives the phenomenon a slightly different name, he is also interested in the way people playfully manipulate language. Sherzer discusses the way speech play is a metacommentary, both implicit and explicit, on the linguistic systems that are being manipulated, and on the society, culture and interactions those manipulations are indexing (2002:1). Most of the volume focuses on different types of linguistic manipulation, and looks at how these contribute to the poetics of speech.

While both Sherzer (2002:26) and Cook (2002:123) look at language play on multiple levels, they only tend to focus on phenomena that manipulate one level at a time. LOLspeak involves the manipulation of every linguistic level, and for this reason we believe that an understanding of the processes in LOLspeak is an important contribution to an understanding of language play.

Whether calling it speech or language play, both authors are looking at the same phenomenon: the manipulation of the linguistic system for play. They also both acknowledge, in their own focus of study, that although many dismiss language play as frivolous, it has much to tell us about how people use and manipulate language. Indeed, Crystal (1998:222) goes so far as to ask, “Might it be that language play is actually what makes us human?” We have decided to use the term “language play” instead of “speech play” because while we agree with many of Sherzer’s ideas and insights, his work is more focused on the domain of the oral performance of language play, whereas LOLspeak is fundamentally not about “speech” at all, but about language more generally.

4. Work on LOLcats:

hoomanz what studiez teh kittehs

Although LOLcats is, by the standards of the Internet, a long-lived and well-established phenomenon, it has received relatively little scholarly attention, and next to no linguistic analyses. As early as April 2007, Anil Dash noted that LOLcats display some kind of linguistic standard and that it is possible to get LOLspeak “wrong”. This was picked up by Mark Liberman at Language Log (Liberman 2007). In 2008, a group of students worked with Bambi Schieffelin at New York University to look at the origins of LOLcats and their cultural import (Braswell, Garay, Saggese & Schiffman 2008; Brillman, Gander & Guillen 2008; Anderson, House, Locke & Schirmann 2008). These papers track the nascent growth of the LOLspeak phenomenon, some major tropes and the reaction of Internet users to LOLspeak.

LOLcats have also been examined for the on-line community that they foster. Calka has done extensive work looking at a community of people who frequent the ICHC website, called “Cheezland” by community members (Calka 2011a). Calka acknowledges that the use of LOLspeak is one important factor in the maintenance of the on-line community, but does not analyse this language, only exploring when it is used. Miltner’s (2011) recently completed MA thesis explores LOLcats in terms of genre and appreciation. Her work is an analysis of LOLcat-reading focus groups, and, like Calka, explores the community that has evolved

around LOLcats. She touches on LOLspeak, but mainly from the perspective of participants' enjoyment and performance of LOLspeak, and its role in defining who is part of the LOLcat-reading community in-group (Miltner 2011:30-32). Not all of the work has been focused on the community practices that have evolved around LOLcats—Brubaker (2008) looks at the use of captioned text in LOLcats, in comparison to the intertitles in silent film, and how both are used to expand the visual narrative.

Although it was early in the existence of LOLcats that Dash noticed their linguistic sophistication, there has been very little work published that looks in-depth at the linguistic structures present in LOLspeak. One paper that does attempt to understand the linguistic features of LOLspeak is Rosen (2010). Rosen shows that users of LOLspeak have intuitions about what constitutes a valid sentence and points to the diverse range of influences on LOLspeak, including leet and other Internet forms, focusing mainly on matters of orthography and pronunciation. We are also aware of a currently unpublished honours thesis that discusses the grammatical properties of LOLspeak (Hill 2010) and we believe it likely that there are a number of similar unpublished works across the world.

5. A “sketch grammar” of LOLspeak:

grammarz, how we makes it

Now that we have situated the LOLspeak phenomenon in both popular culture and linguistic theory, we will examine exactly what LOLspeak involves. In this section we will look at different linguistic features of LOLspeak: in turn phonetics and orthography, lexicon, morphology, syntax and the clause. Of course it is impossible to fully describe LOLspeak in a short outline, so instead, in each section we will concentrate on what we perceive to be some of the most salient or interesting features. Although we have structured this section like the kind of introductory sketch grammar you will find on many languages, we do of course acknowledge that LOLspeak is a different species altogether. All languages are group-validated norms and tendencies, but these are not as robust for LOLspeak as they are for natural languages. Having said that, there is certainly a feeling

among users that some examples of LOLspeak are “better” than others, as illustrated in the interview extract below:

- (2) JT: *Yeah, you can spot the n00bs.*
 Interviewer: *Yeah, the n00bs. So, how can you spot a n00b?*
 JT: *Wrong font, wrong syntax. Just wrong.*
 AB: *Shouting.*
 (JT, 38, MemeGeek, female; AB, 72, Cheezfrend, female)
 (from Miltner 2011:27)

And the rules, or norms, that prompt these kinds of reactions can also be meaningfully subverted for comic ends, such as in the image below where the cat speaks in an extremely formal register in sharp contrast to the inherent formality of LOLspeak:

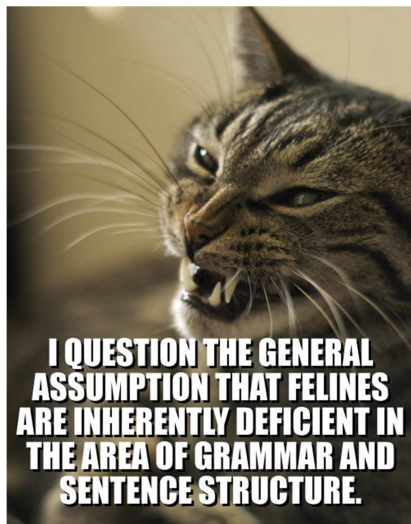


Figure 3. Meaningful subversion of LOLspeak grammar.

It is therefore the nebulous rules and norms that govern “grammaticality” judgements and allow for deliberate subversion that we attempt to capture here. Of course, for every feature of LOLspeak we discuss, it is likely that you will find numerous of counter examples, as such is the nature of language play. LOLspeak is nothing if not creative. There is certainly potential for a quantitative corpus interrogation of LOLspeak, but for this study we have taken a more qualitative approach.

We use the LOLcat Bible as our main reference. There are several reasons for this. As mentioned above, we are interested in this initial stage in focusing on the

asynchronous non-dyadic uses of LOLspeak, as this is where the style originated. LOLcat images have only a small amount of text whose constructions are more limited than those found in the Bible. Also, the Bible is a wiki-based collaborative effort. Individual images on ICHC are rated by viewers, and an argument could be made that a higher rating correlates with better examples of LOLspeak. However, there are too many other factors at play in these ratings (e.g. cuteness of the kitty, font choice, reference to other memes), and this is not a useful measure. In contrast, the LOLcat Bible was created collaboratively, with passages being changed multiple times until consensus was reached. Thus the LOLcat Bible represents the most agreed-upon example of what LOLspeak is. We focus on the early chapters of Genesis, partly for their familiarity, and because, being at the start of the wiki project, they have received the most critical re-editing from contributors.

5.1 *Phonetics and orthography*

Because LOLspeak started in a written medium, it is difficult to separate out features that we would normally divide into the domains of orthography and phonetics in other phenomena. Indeed, what becomes quite apparent about LOLspeak is that what we might consider to be “phonetic” is often motivated by the orthographic conventions. That the orthography has helped shape this example of language play indicates just how central the written form is to LOLspeak. One obvious set of orthographic-based features of LOLspeak is the deliberate incorporation of fast-typing errors. We see two of the most common in the first verse of Genesis:

- (3) Genesis 01:02 In **teh** *beginnin Ceiling Cat maded teh skiez*. An **da** Urfs, but he did not eated dem.

The inversion of the letters in *the* to give *teh* is a common typing mistake, but the mistake has been appropriated as the standard form in LOLspeak. This adds to the joke—what looks non-standard to the outsider is the standard for the group. This orthographic joke has interestingly bled into pronunciation—when people read LOLcats aloud they don’t say “the” [ðə] but instead say [tə]. It should be noted that within one sentence we have two uses of “teh” and one use of “da”, another common replacement for ‘the’—a simplification of the interdental

fricative. This exemplifies the fact that LOLspeak’s “rules” are not as rigid as those of natural languages. The “da” form is not as common as “teh” in LOLspeak—in the first chapter of Genesis alone we have 23 uses of “teh” and only 2 of “da”. So common is this trope that it has moved beyond the determiner “teh” and we find it in other strings of “teh” as well, such as in Genesis 01:24 “otehr” for “other” or Genesis 01:30 “tehre” for “there”.

Another error that has been accepted as a standard form in LOLspeak is the interspersion of exclamation marks with the numeral one.

(4) Genesis 01:03 *It were FURST!!!1*

This is a common error: while typing fast, the finger lifts from the shift key. However, here it is not done as an error, but as a joke to show the person is typing fast, and this joke has turned into the accepted form. Both “teh” and “!!!1” are adopted from leetspeak, originating on Internet gaming chat rooms. The lack of focus on standardised English and fast pace of typing while gaming meant that many errors were eventually codified into the in-group language.

We also find another common leet-origin typing joke in LOLspeak, although it doesn’t occur as frequently. The word “pwn” (“own” or “pown”) is common in leet, in which it is a verb originating from the English “own”, used to show your dominance over another, originally in a gaming domain (“I pwned you in that round”). It started as a common typing error but then was taken up as a standard form. We see some examples in LOLspeak, for example Genesis 01:28 *An p0wn teh waterz*; however it has not made its way to LOLspeak with the same level of popularity as the other forms, probably owing to the fact that it is not particularly thematically appropriate in the LOLcat worldview (see §5.2. below on the LOLcat lexicon).

We also see other typographical errors that are common in leet, such as the use of the numerical character “0” for the letter “o” as in “p0wn” above or “w00t” (Genesis 01:19)—these are not necessarily typographical jokes but have become quite standardised in LOLspeak. We also see rebus-like uses of letters and numbers “4” instead “for” (Genesis 01:08), or “ur” for “your” (Genesis 01:06).

As well as the use of non-standard characters that draws from the leet tradition, there is also a tendency towards non-standard capitalisation. These are most commonly nouns, and we find things like “Urfs” (“earth”, Genesis 01:01) and “Day” (“day”, Genesis 01:05) but we find words of other word classes such as “Beholdt” (“behold”, Genesis 01:29). An interesting case is the capitalisation of “An” (and)—a conjunction that is liberally interspersed into the text to give a breathless running feel to the narrative, the capitalisation here emphasising this function:

- (5) a. Genesis 01:01 *Oh hai. In teh beginnin Ceiling Cat maded teh skiez **An** da Urfs, but he did not eated dem*
- b. Genesis 01:02 *Da Urfs no had shapez **An** baded dark face, An Ceiling Cat rode invisible bike over teh waterz*
- c. Genesis 01:05 ***An** Ceiling Cat sayed light Day **An** dark no Day. It were FURST!!!!*

We also see in the last example that “FURST” is entirely capitalised. This is also a common strategy in LOLspeak. Most LOLcat images use an all-capitalised font, but in the Bible the majority of the text is presented in lower case. This gives the opportunity to use caps to add emphasis to a word or phrase, a common strategy in computer-mediated communication. As we see in the examples below, this adds to the humorous portrayal of the over-excitable and erratic personality of a stereotypical cat:

- (6) a. Genesis 01:09 *An Ceiling Cat hadz dry placez cuz kittehs **DO NOT WANT** get wet*
- b. Genesis 01:24 *An Ceiling Cat sayed, i can has **MOAR** living stuff*

While we’ve seen above with “teh” that the orthography of LOLspeak can influence the way that people pronounce it, we also find that some of the orthography is based on the phonetics of English. We see this with the use of “z” (e.g. to denote plurals, 3rd person singular morphemes) where the voiced form is expected but the orthography of Standard English uses “s”:

- (7) a. Genesis 01:02 *teh waterz*
- b. Genesis 01:03 *An lite wuz*
- c. Genesis 01:12 *so, letz there be weedz*

But, of course, being LOLspeak, this tendency can be over-used for playful effect, and thus we find at other points in the data the use of the grapheme usually associated with the voiced fricative extended to the voiceless fricative, as in “shopez” (Genesis 01:02) and “tripz” (Genesis 01:04).

We find other features of non-standard orthography in LOLspeak, which echo the varieties of English we find used in non-Standard domains. For example, we find some features stereotypical of child language acquisition, such as the metathesis in the rendering of “animal” as “aminal” (Genesis 01:24). We also find that often the English velar nasal “ng” is written as “n” so we get “beginnin”, (Genesis 01:01), “nethin” (Genesis 01:04), and “makin” (Genesis 01:06). Along with the over-use of the “s” to “z” transposition discussed above, this is reminiscent of AAVE and other non-standard varieties of English.

This leads to an interesting feature of LOLspeak. For something that started as a written joke, the orthography tends to indicate a strong link to a particular style of speaking. In our interactions with people who engage with LOLcats and LOLspeak, they frequently have a voice in their head as to how a LOLcat speaks. These tend to be high pitched, with strong vowel distinctions and child-like intonation, but not exclusively. In Miltner (2011) we find that several LOLcat fans make mention of the LOLcat accent, for example “I could immediately hear a cat’s voice” (58), but there is no discussion of exactly what that accent might sound like. Given the very evocative nature of the LOLspeak orthography we think it would be an interesting avenue of research to discover just how people realise the LOLcat accent.

5.2 *Lexicon*

LOLspeak also has its own playful lexicon. In this section we will look at three main aspects of the lexicon: words borrowed from leet and other computer-mediated genres, words specific to “cat world” and lexical choices specific to the LOLcat Bible.

Many common lexical items in the LOLspeak vocabulary also have a home in other Internet genres. Items like “p0wn” (Genesis 01:28), “kthxbai” (Genesis 01:31) and “teh” all have their origins in leet and other gaming and chat board groups. Other items are not necessarily from an established genre but have their

place in general Internet humour, such as the comical use of “jazzhands” here, which is humorous due to the juxtaposition of earnest biblical narrative with an evocation of an energetic, slightly outdated and camp outburst:

(8) Genesis 01:13 *An so teh threeth day **jazzhands***

Another rich source of lexical items in the LOLcat Bible are from the ICHC universe. Some of these are the kinds of lexical items that cats in the real world might be drawn to, but here they take on a mythical status. For example:

(9) Genesis 01:26 *An let min p0wnz0r becuz tehy has **can openers***
 “And let men rule (because they have can openers)”

Here the can opener is a sign of power. We also find items like sofas taking on mythical status (as the Bible guidelines note, “a typical domestic cat probably hasn’t seen a desert tent, but they have probably seen a sofa”⁸) and dogs becoming the ultimate enemy.

The ICHC world also contributes items that are not necessarily what we would expect of real world cats, but have taken on special status in this domain. Thus we see an obsession with “invisible” items (“invisible bike”, Genesis 01:02), “cheezburgers” (cheeseburgers), and “kittesh” (kitties, Genesis 01:09). These items are usually common, everyday items that have taken on specific salience for the language community through repeated use.

Also observable in the LOLcat Bible are lexical items that are specific to this domain. Some of these are items that originate from ICHC but have taken on special meanings within the Bible. Examples of this include “Ceiling Cat”—originally an image macro but subsequently taken up by the LOLcat Bible community as their analogy for God (e.g. Genesis 01:01). Extending from this we have Basement Cat (Satan) and Happy Cat (Jesus)—both are characters from ICHC that have been taken up in the LOLcat Bible. Cheezburgers also take on a specific meaning analogous to “blessings” in the original text.

In some cases we find the maintenance of lexical items found in the original biblical text—but often with orthographic or morphological manipulation. Such uses are often isolated and do not extend across the text. For example in chapter

⁸ <http://www.lolcatbible.com/index.php?title=Guidelines>

one of Genesis we find “firmmint” (firmament (01:08)) and “Beholdt” (01:29). Such uses, although they are generally one-offs, show that speakers are able to manipulate their lexical use to make timely and amusing references to established genres.

5.3 Morphology

In this section we will look briefly at both nominal and verbal morphology. For nominal morphology we will focus on the use of plural marking, and for verbal morphology we will look at tense marking and person agreement. We will also look at the regularisation of ordinal numbers before looking briefly at what we will call “Biblical” morphology. Similar tendencies can be observed in the manipulation of established English morphology regardless of whether it is nominal or verbal.

The use of plural morphology in LOLspeak is conspicuous in its irregularity. We find examples of pluralising mass nouns, such as “stuffz” (Genesis 01:04), “waterz” (Genesis 01:09) and “fuudz” (Genesis 01:30), however we have yet to come across an example of the absence of plural marking where we would expect it in Standard English. Thus there appears to be more of a tendency for pluralising non-plurals than the other way around. We even find within the one short section of text that the same noun alternates between being marked for plurality and not. The word “earth” is always singular in the original biblical text, however this is inconsistently pluralised in the LOLcat version (not to mention inconsistently capitalised and inconsistently spelt; the plural suffix itself is also inconsistently spelt):

- (10) a. Genesis 01:01 *Oh hai. In teh beginnin Ceiling Cat maded teh skiez An da **Urfs***
 b. Genesis 01:02 *Da Urfs no had **shapez***
 c. Genesis 01:10 *An Ceiling Cat called no **waterz** urth and **waters** oshun*
 d. Genesis 01:17 *An Ceiling Cat screw teh on skiez, with big nails An stuff, to lite teh **Urfs***
 e. Genesis 01:29 *An Ceiling Cat sayed, Beholdt, the **Urfs**, I has it*

Some of these are possibly showing a tendency to pluralise in the proximity of other pluralised nouns, but the use of the plural cannot be said to be completely motivated by environment.

In verbal morphology the first feature we will look at is tense marking. The LOLcat Bible is a text that uses a lot of past tense narrative structure, which makes it a fertile corpus for examining common past tense strategies in LOLspeak. What we find is that there is a tendency to over-extend the regular past tense suffix “-ed” in lexical verbs (but not copulas). We thus find that some irregular verb forms are regularised in the past tense:

- (11) a. Genesis 01:01 *but he did not **eated** dem*
 b. Genesis 01:07 *An Ceiling Cat **sayed**, i can has teh firrmint wich iz funny bibel naim 4 ceiling*
 c. Genesis 01:08 *An Ceiling Cat **doed** teh skiez with waterz down An waterz up*

The verb phrase *did not eated dem* above also shows double-marking of past tense. This mirrors the common double-marking of past tense observable below, where the irregular past tense forms are used with a standard past tense marker:

- (12) a. Genesis 01:01 *Oh hai. In teh beginnin Ceiling Cat **maded** teh skiez An da Urfs*
 b. Genesis 01:02 *Da Urfs no had shapez An **haded** dark face*
 c. Genesis 01:04 *An Ceiling Cat **sawed** teh lite, to seez stuffs*
 d. Genesis 01:09 *An Ceiling Cat **gotted** all teh waterz in ur base*

Like many of the phenomena we describe here, there are forms that don't follow these tendencies. Below are two irregular verbs that remain so. Interestingly the second one is “sed”, which we frequently see modified, as discussed in the example from Genesis 07:07 above where it is regularised, as well as frequent other examples:

- (13) a. Genesis 01:02 *An Ceiling Cat **rode** invisible bike over teh waterz*
 b. Genesis 01:28 *An Ceiling Cat **sed** them O hai maek bebehs kthx*

That we have the same verb with a different past tense form speaks to the flexibility of these tendencies in LOLspeak, and the motivation for choosing one form over the other is something we can only speculate about. Perhaps it was because the authors felt there was too much repetition and desired novelty and innovation, which is a major motivation for LOLspeak.

Finally, just to capture the variety of playful language manipulation that we see present in LOLspeak, we have a double marked regular past tense verb:

- (14) Genesis 01:27 *So Ceiling Cat **createded** teh peeps taht waz like him*

Another common feature of the verbal morphology is that we see a strong tendency for irregular person agreement between nouns and verbs in the present tense. Here we find that the verb suffix “-s” that co-occurs with 3rd person singular nouns is often extended to use with other persons. Of course many of these irregular forms of this style come in the form of the common phrasal template “I can has X” but we see others as well. In the section of the LOLcat Bible we have looked at, the examples are limited to 1st person singular and 3rd person plural:

- (15) a. Genesis 01:03 . *An Ceiling Cat **i can haz** lite? An lite wuz*
 b. Genesis 01:12 *An Ceiling Cat sawed that weedz ish good, so, **letz** there be weedz*
 c. Genesis 01:18 *An tehy **rulez***
 e. Genesis 01:26 *An let min p0wnz0r becuz tehy **has** can openers*
 f. Genesis 01:27 *So Ceiling Cat createded teh peeps taht **waz** like him*
 g. Genesis 01:29 *An Ceiling Cat sayed, Beholdt, the Urfs, I **has** it, An I **has not** eated it.*

We also find 3rd person singular nouns with verbs that are not marked with the “-s” suffix:

- (16) a. Genesis 01:05 *It **were** FURST!!!!*
 b. Genesis 01:15 *It **happen**, lights everwear, like christmass, srsly*
 c. Genesis 01:23 *Ceiling Cat **tack** a wile 2 cawnt*

The above examples demonstrate that both copula verbs and lexical verbs have manipulated person agreement. Recall that the extension and manipulation of past tense forms applied only to lexical verbs, and not to copulas.

The ordinal numbers counting the days of creation in the first chapter of Genesis are regularised so they all take the “-th” suffix:

- (17) a. Genesis 01:08 *so wuz teh **twoth** day*
 b. Genesis 01:13 *An so teh **threeth** day jazzhands*

c. Genesis 01:19 *An so teh **furth** day n00t*

d. Genesis 01:23 *An so teh...**fith** day*

Regularisations such as these in LOLspeak are a playful way for speakers of English to show their metalinguistic awareness of irregular forms by regularising them.

One morphological phenomenon that seems relatively exclusive to the LOLcat Bible is what we term “biblical morphology” (e.g. “doeth”). In Genesis 01:16 (example 18) we find a very non-standard verb form:

(18) Genesis 01:16 *An Ceiling Cat **doeth** two grate lightz*

This is an archaic 3rd person present tense form, and in this context a “hyperarchaism” (e.g. Janda *et al.* 1994:87). Its use here is a nod to the rather stuffy register of the traditional biblical translations. The ability to utilise domain-specific archaic morphological forms like the example above is a nice illustration of the playful and creative nature of LOLspeak, as well as of the high levels of linguistic awareness and mastery among users.

A final general characteristic of LOLspeak is the preference for analytic morphology—part of what gives rise to those ideas discussed in §3.1 that LOLspeaking–LOLcats are English second-language or “kitty pidgin” speakers (Dash 2007). We see this preference especially in comparative and superlative structures (e.g. “teh most big” (Genesis 01:16)).

5.4 Syntax

As well as the number of orthographic, lexical and morphological processes observable, we also find that there is manipulation at the syntactic level. There are perhaps fewer common syntactic variations, however, and some of these interact with the morphological level. In this section we look at the syntax of question structures, negation strategies and the ellipsis of syntactic items.

One of the most common and easily observable syntactic manipulations of LOLspeak is the structure of questions. Unlike Standard English, there is rarely any subject–auxiliary inversion in the sentence structure for question forms in LOLspeak:

(19) Genesis 01:03 *An Ceiling Cat sayz, **i can haz lite?***

In the creation of negative structures, auxiliaries often disappear completely, and “not” is typically replaced by the simpler “no”—another behaviour stereotypical of anecdotal accounts of first and second language acquisition.

- (20) a. Genesis 01:02 *Da Urfs **no** had shapez*
 b. Genesis 01:03 *At start, **no** has lyte*
 c. Genesis 01:21 *An see monstz, which wuz like big cowz, except they **no** mood*

Double negatives such as *not tripz over netbin* (Genesis 01: 04) are common, these tapping into classic features of non-standard dialects like AAVE.

Finally, we see in LOLspeak a tendency towards the ellipsis of grammatical elements that are syntactically obligatory in Standard English. The ellipsis can involve a component of a noun phrase or verb phrase that is obligatory in Standard English: in the examples below we see that nouns we would expect to have a determiner in Standard English do not require one in LOLspeak:

- (21) a. Genesis 01:02 *An Ceiling Cat rode **invisible bike** over teh waterz*
 b. Genesis 01:08 *i can has teh firrmint wich iz **funny bibel naim 4 ceiling***

We also see the omission of even more basic elements in a sentence, in the first two examples the omission of a dummy subject and in the third example of the verbal element:

- (22) a. Genesis 01:03 *At start, no has lyte*
 b. Genesis 01:10 *Iz good*
 c. Genesis 01:15 *It happen, lights everwear, like christmass, srsly*

These omissions are not frequent enough to demonstrate a strong dispreference of subjects or other elements of syntax in LOLspeak, but they do indicate that it is certainly more flexible in these matters than Standard English.

5.5 Clause

Unlike most of the LOLcat images, which consist of only one or two sentences, the LOLcat Bible gives us extended text where we can observe more clausal phenomena. In this section we will start by looking at phrasal templates, a

phenomenon we find in both in ICHC captioned images and the LOLcat Bible. We will then go on to look at appropriation and manipulation of other narrative genres.

One of the most salient features of the LOLspeak clause is the reliance on phrasal templates. These work at all syntactic levels, which is why we have chosen to put them in this discussion of the clause. A phrasal template is where all the elements are consistent except for a slot where people can chose to put their own element. These are a common trope across the Internet and indeed in human language. They have also been referred to as “snowclones” (originally on website Language Log, in a discussion of “the some-assembly-required adaptable cliché frames for lazy journalists”⁹).

The most well known phrasal template in the LOLcat universe is ‘I can has X’, where ‘X’ can be any inserted element, and has been made famous in the name of the website ‘I can has cheezburgers’. We see frequent uses of this phrasal template in the text of Genesis:

- (23) a. Genesis 01:03 *An Ceiling Cat sayz, **i can haz lite?***
 b. Genesis 01:14 ***i can has lightz** in the skiez for splittin day An no day*
 c. Genesis 01:24 ***i can has MOAR living stuff***

On ICHC we often find that a phrasal template will enjoy a brief flare of popularity before fading in the general consciousness. There are, however, a number of major phrasal templates in the LOLspeak inventory that have found a place in the norms of the LOLcat Bible. Some of these, like “I am in your X, Ying your Zs” have their origins in leetspeak, but others, like “I can has X” above, appear to be indigenous to the LOLspeak world. Here are three of them, their usages and—unsurprisingly—the ways they are manipulated.

- (24) *Do not want X*
 a. Genesis 01:09 *An Ceiling Cat hadz dry placez cuz kittehs DO NOT WANT get wet*
 b. Genesis 01:11 *An Ceiling Cat sayed, DO WANT grass*

⁹ <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000350.html>

- (25) *X has not/ did not eated Y*
- a. Genesis 01:01 *but he did not eated dem*
 - b. Genesis 01:20 *But Ceiling Cat no eated dem*
 - c. Genesis 01:25 *An Ceiling Cat doed moar living stuff, mooes, An creepies, An otebr animuls, An did not eated tehm*
 - d. Genesis 01:27 *he maed tehm, min An womin wuz maeded, but he did not eated tehm*
 - e. Genesis 01:29 *An Ceiling Cat sayed, Beholdt, the Urfs, I has it, An I has not eated it*
- (26) *I am in your X, Ying your Zs*
- Genesis 01:06 *im in ur waterz makin a ceiling*

In analysing clausal features, it is also worth paying attention to the way the narrative is constructed and unified. We see throughout the text the use of the capitalised “An” form, discussed briefly in §5.1 above. This form is sometimes used as a clause-internal conjunction, as seen in this example from verse 1 but it is more often used at the start of the clause:

- (27) Genesis 01:01 *Ceiling Cat maded teh skiez An da Urfs, but he did not eated dem*

While many verses of the original Biblical text do start with “and”, the LOLcat Bible has extended this to the start of almost every clause. This creates a more coherent feel to the text as each clause runs into the next and, with the reduction of the consonant cluster to a single consonant, also captures a child-like enthusiasm in its narrative style.

Finally, we wish to briefly discuss the ability to mimic and manipulate other linguistic genres in LOLspeak. While so much of what we have discussed above has been about how LOLspeak differs in comparison to Standard English, it is worth reflecting briefly on what features of the original text the authors of the LOLcat Bible have maintained. With so much manipulation the text is still recognisable as the first verse of Genesis, and the use of some key elements assists in this.

Below we see that key elements of the original text have been captured, although with a slight LOLcat slant:

- (28) a. Genesis 01:01 *Ob hai. In teh beginnin Ceiling Cat maded teh skiez An da Urfs, but he did not eated dem*
- b. Genesis 01:03 *An Ceiling Cat sayz, i can baz lite? An lite wuz*
- c. Genesis 01:22 *An Ceiling Cat sed O hai, make bebehs kthx*
- d. Genesis 01:24 *An Ceiling Cat sayed, i can has MOAR living stuff*

It is interesting to note that while the authors of the LOLcat Bible are aware of the conventions of other genres, it is not a wholesale appropriation of these conventions but a light-hearted nod that stays true to the norms and tendencies of LOLspeak, such as those that we have discussed in this section.

6. Conclusion:

kthxbai! Srsly

We have discussed the ways in which in-group members of the on-line LOLcats community creatively manipulate English in a variety of ways in the creation and production of LOLspeak. LOLspeakers show high levels of competence at simultaneously playing with multiple linguistic processes (implicating orthography and phonetics, morphology, syntax, clauses) and we believe that an examination of these processes will provide an important contribution to our understanding of language play, and of creative linguistic endeavours more generally.

An understanding of the role of LOLspeak and of other attendant phenomena practiced by LOLcats community members provides a new contribution to research on the establishment and on-going maintenance of communities and in-groups, particularly in on-line contexts. LOLspeak is also perhaps unusual in the ready availability of eager metacommentary from community members themselves, as we discovered when we posted the conference talk that this paper is based on (Gawne & Vaughan 2011) on vimeo.com¹⁰. The talk has had over 47,000 views and eventually even found its way to ICHC¹¹ (receiving a rating of 4.5 out of 5 cheezburgers), where the comments themselves provide a rich corpus ripe for analysis, as suggested by AngelPlume:

¹⁰ <http://vimeo.com/33318759>

¹¹ <http://icanhascheezburger.com/2011/12/09/funny-pictures-videos-linguistics-lolspeak/>

- (29) *Aifinks dey sbud luuk nawt onleh at capshunz adn publishd wurks byke teh lolcat biblol, but awlso at teh commints, cuz dats wayr we showz teh mostest creatibity and individulollity in ovr innerakshunz. Srsly.*

“I think they should not only look at captions and published works like the LOLcat Bible, but also at the comments, because that’s where we show the most creativity and individuality in our interactions.”

(AngelPlume 9/11/11¹²)

As a future direction for LOLspeak research, we would suggest that using a framework of identity to account for the motivations behind the phenomena observable in LOLspeak is a fruitful avenue of investigation. The process of how LOLspeak contributes to in-group cohesion, while simultaneously constructing a “cat” identity and the identity of a savvy Internet user could be analysed using a framework of indexicality (e.g. Ochs 1992, Bucholtz & Hall 2008) to explore the obvious semiotic links between the micro-linguistic behaviours observable in LOLspeak, particular stances and styles, and broader social categories and identities. Such an approach would allow for a more complete picture of how language play within a community of practice (i.e. the LOLcats community) can contribute to identity construction and in-group cohesion.

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¹² *ibid.*

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