26-65

2 *The medium of Netspeak*

The Internet is an electronic, global, and interactive medium, and each of these properties has consequences for the kind of language found there. The most fundamental influence arises out of the electronic character of the channel. Most obviously, a user's communicative options are constrained by the nature of the hardware needed in order to gain Internet access. Thus, a set of characters on a keyboard determines productive linguistic capacity (the type of information that can be sent); and the size and configuration of the screen determines receptive linguistic capacity (the type of information that can be seen). Both sender and receiver are additionally constrained linguistically by the properties of the Internet software and hardware linking them. There are, accordingly, certain traditional linguistic activities that this medium can facilitate very well, and others that it cannot handle at all. There are also certain linguistic activities which an electronic medium allows that no other medium can achieve. How do users respond to these new pressures, and compensate linguistically?

It is important to know what the various limitations and facilitations are. A well-established axiom of communication states that users should know the strengths as well as the restrictions of their chosen medium, in relation to the uses they subject it to and the purposes they have in mind. People have strong expectations of the Internet, and established users evidently have strong feelings about how it should be used to achieve its purposes. However, it is not a straightforward relationship. The evolution of Netspeak illustrates a real tension which exists between the nature of the medium and the aims and expectations of its users. The heart of the matter seems to be its relationship to spoken and written language. Several writers have called Internet

language 'written speech';[1] and *Wired style* advises: 'Write the way people talk.'[2] The authors of a detailed study of an asynchronous chatgroup, Davis and Brewer, say that 'electronic discourse is writing that very often reads as if it were being spoken – that is, as if the sender were writing talking'.[3] But to what extent is it possible to 'write speech', given a keyboard restricted to the letters of the alphabet, numerals, and a sprinkling of other symbols, and a medium which – as we shall see – disallows some critical features of conversational speech?[4] Moreover, as the world is composed of many different types of people who talk in many different ways, what kind of speech is it, exactly, that the new style guides want us to be writing down? The language of geeks (p. 18) has had a strong influence on Netspeak hitherto, its jargon appealing to a relatively young and computer-literate population. But what will happen to Netspeak as the user-base broadens, and people with a wider range of language preferences come online? 'Write the way people talk' sounds sensible enough, until we have to answer the question: which people?

Before we can answer these questions, we need to be clear about the nature of spoken and written language, and of the factors which differentiate them – factors which have received a great deal of attention in linguistics. Table 2.1 is a summary of the chief differences, derived from one general source, *The Cambridge encylopedia of the English language*.[5] Speech is typically

[1] For example, Elmer-Dewitt (1994).

[2] In full: *Wired style: principles of English usage in the digital age* (Hale and Scanlon, 1999). The quotation is part of Principle 5: 'Capture the colloquial' (see p. 83 below).

[3] Davis and Brewer (1997: 2). Ferrara, Brunner, and Whittemore (1991) talk of 'interactive written discourse', and similar locutions can be found, such as 'textual conversation' and 'electronic dialogue'.

[4] The reduced communicative system has been called 'metacommunicative minimalism' by Millard (1996: 147).

[5] Crystal (2003a: 291). Other characteristics of speech and writing have been noted, recognizing the differentiating role of more specific linguistic features, such as personal pronouns and formulaic expression. The word 'typically' is crucial: it has long been known that there is no absolute difference between spoken and written language (Crystal and Davy, 1969); even the notion of a continuum is an oversimplification of the way the variables intertwine (Biber, 1988; and see also the use of this model by Collot and Belmore, 1996). But it proves illuminating, nonetheless, to set typical features in contrast, as a heuristic.

Table 2.1 *Differences between speech and writing (after Crystal, 2003a)*

Speech	Writing
1. Speech is time-bound, dynamic, transient. It is part of an interaction in which both participants are usually present, and the speaker has a particular addressee (or several addressees) in mind.	Writing is space-bound, static, permanent. It is the result of a situation in which the writer is usually distant from the reader, and often does not know who the reader is going to be (except in a very vague sense, as in poetry).
2. There is no time-lag between production and reception, unless one is deliberately introduced by the recipient (and, thus, is available for further reaction on the part of the speaker). The spontaneity and speed of most speech exchanges make it difficult to engage in complex advance planning. The pressure to think while talking promotes looser construction, repetition, rephrasing, and comment clauses (e.g. *you know, you see, mind you*). Intonation and pause divide long utterances into manageable chunks, but sentence boundaries are often unclear.	There is always a time-lag between production and reception. Writers must anticipate its effects, as well as the problems posed by having their language read and interpreted by many recipients in diverse settings. Writing allows repeated reading and close analysis, and promotes the development of careful organization and compact expression, with often intricate sentence structure. Units of discourse (sentences, paragraphs) are usually easy to identify through punctuation and layout.
3. Because participants are typically in face-to-face interaction, they can rely on such extralinguistic cues as facial expression and gesture to aid meaning (feedback). The lexicon of speech is often characteristically vague, using words which refer directly to the situation (deictic expressions, such as *that one, in here, right now*).	Lack of visual contact means that participants cannot rely on context to make their meaning clear; nor is there any immediate feedback. Most writing therefore avoids the use of deictic expressions, which are likely to be ambiguous.
4. Many words and constructions are characteristic of (especially informal) speech, such as contracted forms (*isn't, he's*). Lengthy co-ordinate sentences are normal, and are often of considerable complexity. There is nonsense vocabulary (e.g. *thingamajig*), obscenity, and slang, some of which does not appear in writing, or occurs only as graphic euphemism (e.g. *f****).	Some words and constructions are characteristic of writing, such as multiple instances of subordination in the same sentence, elaborately balanced syntactic patterns, and the long (often multi-page) sentences found in some legal documents. Certain items of vocabulary are never spoken, such as the longer names of chemical compounds.
5. Speech is very suited to social or 'phatic' functions, such as passing the time of day, or any situation where casual and unplanned discourse is desirable. It is also good at expressing social relationships, and personal opinions and attitudes, due to the vast range of nuances which can be expressed by the prosody and accompanying non-verbal features.	Writing is very suited to the recording of facts and the communication of ideas, and to tasks of memory and learning. Written records are easier to keep and scan, tables demonstrate relationships between things, notes and lists provide mnemonics, and text can be read at speeds which suit a person's ability to learn.
6. There is an opportunity to rethink an utterance while the other person is listening (starting again, adding a qualification). However, errors, once spoken, cannot be withdrawn; the speaker must live with the consequences. Interruptions and overlapping speech are normal and highly audible.	Errors and other perceived inadequacies in our writing can be eliminated in later drafts without the reader ever knowing they were there. Interruptions, if they have occurred while writing, are also invisible in the final product.

Table 2.1 (*cont.*)

Speech	Writing
7. Unique features of speech include most of the prosody. The many nuances of intonation, as well as contrasts of loudness, tempo, rhythm, pause, and other tones of voice cannot be written down with much efficiency.	Unique features of writing include pages, lines, capitalization, spatial organization, and several aspects of punctuation. Only a very few graphic conventions relate to prosody, such as question marks and italics (for emphasis). Several written genres (e.g. timetables, graphs, complex formulae) cannot be read aloud efficiently, but have to be assimilated visually.

time-bound, spontaneous, face-to-face, socially interactive, loosely structured, immediately revisable, and prosodically rich. Writing is typically space-bound, contrived, visually decontextualized, factually communicative, elaborately structured, repeatedly revisable, and graphically rich. How does Netspeak stand, with reference to these characteristics?

Speech or writing?

What makes Netspeak so interesting, as a form of communication, is the way it relies on characteristics belonging to both sides of the speech/writing divide. At one extreme is the Web, which in many of its functions (e.g. databasing, reference publishing, archiving, advertising) is no different from traditional situations which use writing; indeed, most varieties of written language can now be found on the Web with little stylistic change other than an adaptation to the electronic medium (see chapter 7). Legal, religious, literary, scientific, journalistic, and other texts will all be found there, just as they would in their non-electronic form. Any attempt to identify the stylistic distinctiveness of web pages will need to deal with the same sort of visual and graphic matters as any other variety of written expression. Here therefore we find a use of language which displays the general properties of writing as described in table 2.1: for example, web page writers typically have no idea who their readers are going to be, and in their guessing, targeting, and feedback-requesting they display the same behaviour as any paper-bound author or organization might. At the same time, some of the Web's functions (e.g. e-sales) do bring it much closer to the kind of interaction more typical of speech, with a consequential effect on the kind of language used, and many sites now have interactive facilities attached, in the form of e-mail and chatgroup facilities. Blog pages can also display many features typical of spoken language.

In contrast to the Web, the situations of e-mail, chatgroups, virtual worlds, and instant messaging, though expressed through

the medium of writing, display several of the core properties of speech. They are time-governed, expecting or demanding an immediate response; they are transient, in the sense that messages may be immediately deleted (as in e-mails) or be lost to attention as they scroll off the screen (as in chatgroups); and their utterances display much of the urgency and energetic force which is characteristic of face-to-face conversation.[6] The situations are not all equally 'spoken' in character. We 'write' e-mails, not 'speak' them. But chatgroups are for 'chat', and people certainly 'speak' to each other there – as do people involved in virtual worlds. Player X 'says' something to player Y, as in this sequence from one study:

> Plate raises his hand and shouts...
> Fork sighs loudly....
> Plate says 'Nope'[7]

These are 'speech acts', in a literal sense. The whole thrust of the metalanguage in these situations is spoken in character.

But there are several major differences between Netspeak and face-to-face conversation, even in those electronic situations which are most speech-like.[8] The first is a function of the technology – the lack of simultaneous feedback. Messages sent via a computer are complete and unidirectional. When we send a message to someone, we type it a keystroke at a time, but it does not arrive on that person's screen a keystroke at a time – in the manner of the old teleprinters (an exception is described on p. 209). The message does not leave our computer until we 'send'

[6] Face-to-face interaction is regularly abbreviated to *f2f* in Netspeak. It is also referred to as *facetime* (i.e. time spent offline) or *facemail* (i.e. the process of talking f2f). Ihnatko (1997: 69) defines *f2f* as 'Time spent physically standing in the room with someone and talking with them. Most netters intend to try this out some time.'

[7] Marvin (1996: 10).

[8] The notion of a continuum between different types of communication is presented by Baron (1984: 120; 2000: 22): emphasizing spatial and temporal factors, she identifies a serial relationship between: face-to-face conversation – videophones/teleconferencing – telephones – computers/word-processing – writing. Her approach rejects a dichotomous view of 'speech vs. writing', arguing that spoken language often has some characteristics of written language, and vice versa. No stylistician would deny this, while recognizing that a presentation such as table 2.1 nonetheless has expository usefulness.

it, and that means the whole of a message is transmitted at once, and arrives on the recipient's screen at once. There is no way that a recipient can react to our message while it is being typed, for the obvious reason that recipients do not know they are getting any messages at all until the text arrives on their screens.[9] Correspondingly, there is no way for a participant to get a sense of how successful a message is, while it is being written – whether it is being understood, or whether it needs repair. There is no technical way (currently: see chapter 9) of allowing the receiver to send the electronic equivalent of a simultaneous nod, an *uh-uh*, or any of the other audio-visual reactions which play such a critical role in face-to-face interaction. Messages cannot overlap. As a result, recipients are committed to experiencing a waiting period before the text appears – on their screen there is nothing, and then there is something, an 'off–on' system which well suits the binary computer world but which is far removed from the complex realities of everyday conversation.[10] The same circumstances apply even in two-way protocols, such as the systems which split a screen to allow the messages from two participants to be seen side-by-side; it may appear from the layout as if such dialogues are providing simultaneous feedback, but it is not really there, because of the temporal delay.

The second big difference between Netspeak and face-to-face conversation also results from the technology: the rhythm of an Internet interaction is very much slower than that found in a speech situation, and disallows some of conversation's most salient properties. With e-mails and asynchronous chatgroups, a response to a stimulus may take anything from seconds to months, the rhythm of the exchange very much depending on such factors as the recipient's computer (e.g. whether it announces

[9] This is an especial problem in an electronic conversation when one of the participants wants to send a long message; as Marvin (1996: 6) notes, 'In face-to-face conversations, a listener waits for an ending to a speaker's long statement, and stays alert for opportunities to speak, perhaps inwardly thinking, "When will this person *stop*?" In typed conversations of the MOOs [p. 181], a long statement requires a long wait on the part of the reader, during which the reader wonders, "When will this person *start*?"'

[10] Nonetheless, participants in chatgroups and virtual worlds interactions have become adept at minimizing this problem: see chapters 5 and 6.

the instant arrival of a message), the user's personality and habits (e.g. whether messages are replied to at regular times or randomly), and the circumstances of the interlocutors (e.g. their computer access). The time-delay (usually referred to as *lag*) is a central factor in many situations: there is an inherent uncertainty in knowing the length of the gap between the moment of posting a message and the moment of receiving a reaction. Because of lag, the rhythm of an interaction – even in the fastest Netspeak encounters, in instant messaging, synchronous chatgroups, and virtual worlds – lacks the pace and predictability of that found in telephonic or face-to-face conversation (see chapters 5 and 6). Even if a participant types a reply immediately, there may be a delay before that message reaches the other members' screens, due to several factors, such as bandwidth processing problems, traffic density on the host computer, or some problem in the sender's or receiver's equipment.[11] Even 'instant' is relative.

All lags cause problems, but some are much worse than others. A low lag is of the order of 2–3 seconds, a delay which most participants tolerate – though even here some people find their tolerances tested, for 2–3 seconds is significantly greater than that found in most conversational exchanges. Anything over 10 seconds will certainly generate frustration, often prompting people to make remarks about the lag itself – references might be made to the 'lag monster' or to 'lag wars'. The frustration is on both sides of the communication chain. From the sender's point of view, the right moment to speak may be missed, as the point to which the intended contribution related may have scrolled off the screen and be fast receding from the group's communal memory. And from the recipient's point of view, the lack of an expected reaction is ambiguous, as there is no way of knowing whether the delay is due to transmission problems or to some 'attitude' on the sender's part. Unexpected silence in a telephone

[11] For a discussion of theoretical approaches to the effects of limited bandwidth on communication, reducing the number of available cues, see Cherny (1999: 21).

conversation carries a similar ambiguity, but at least there we have well-established turn-taking manoeuvres which can bring immediate clarification (*Hello?*, *Are you still there?*). The linguistic strategies which underpin our conversational exchanges are much less reliable in chatgroups. Colin may never get a reaction to his reply to Jane because Jane may never have received it (for technical reasons), may not have noticed it (because there are so many other remarks coming in at the same time), may have been distracted by some other conversation (real or online), may not have been present at her terminal to see the message (for all kinds of reasons), or simply decided not to respond. Equally, she may have replied, and it is *her* message which has got delayed or lost. When responses are disrupted by delays, there is little anyone can do to sort such things out.

The larger the number of participants involved in an interaction, the worse the situation becomes.[12] Delays in a conversation between two people are annoying and ambiguous, but the level of disruption is usually manageable, because each person has only one interlocutor to worry about. If a simple e-mail situation is affected by serious delay, feedback via phone or fax is easily providable. But when an electronic interaction involves several people, such as in chatgroups, virtual worlds, and e-mails which are copied repeatedly, lag produces a very different situation, because it interferes with another core feature of traditional face-to-face interaction, the conversational *turn*. Turn-taking is so fundamental to conversation that most people are not conscious of its significance as a means of enabling interactions to be successful. But it is a conversational fact of life that people follow the routine of taking turns, when they talk, and avoid talking at once or interrupting each other randomly or excessively. Moreover, they expect certain 'adjacency-pairs' to take place: questions to be followed by answers, and not the other

[12] Also, the wider the spread of participants, culturally speaking, the worse the problem becomes. Some cultures are more used to silence as a communicative force, and are more tolerant of delays (e.g. Japanese); others operate on a very short fuse (e.g. American and British). See Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985).

way round; similarly, a piece of information to be followed by an acknowledgement, or a complaint to be followed by an excuse or apology.[13] These elementary strategies, learned at a very early age, provide a normal conversation with its skeleton.

When there are long lags, the conversational situation becomes so unusual that its ability to cope with a topic can be destroyed. This is because the turn-taking, as seen on a screen, is dictated by the software, and not by the participants:[14] in a chatgroup, for instance, even if one did start to send a reaction to someone else's utterance before it was finished, the reaction would take its turn in a non-overlapping series of utterances on the screen, dependent only on the point at which the send signal was received at the host server. Messages are posted to a receiver's screen linearly, in the order in which they are received by the system. In a multi-user environment, messages are coming in from various sources all the time, and with different lags. Because of the way packets of information are sent electronically through different global routes, between sender and receiver, it is even possible for turn-taking reversals to take place, and all kinds of unpredictable overlaps. The time-frames of the participants do not coincide. Lucy asks a question; Sue receives it and sends an answer, but on Ben's screen the answer is received before the question. Or, Lucy sends a question, Sue replies, and Lucy sends another question; but on Ben's screen the second question arrives before Sue's reply to the first. Or Lucy, not yet having received Sue's reply, reformulates her question and sends it again; Sue replies to both; Ben then receives the sequence in the order Q1, R2, Q2, R1. The situation may be further complicated if Sue (or anyone) decides to give answers to two questions from different participants, sending them together. The possibilities for confusion, once orderly turn-taking is so disruptable and adjacency-pairs are so interruptable, are enormous. The number of overlapping interactions that a screen may display at any one time increases depending on

[13] For an introduction to conversational exchanges in discourse analysis, see Stubbs (1983).

[14] See Murray (1989).

the number of participants and the random nature of the lags. In a typical scenario, the situation is at best confusing to an outsider, as the extracts in chapter 5 illustrate (p. 163), it being extremely difficult to keep track of a topic (a *thread*). There may be difficulty even in a two-way instant messaging exchange. What is surprising is that practised participants seem to tolerate (indeed revel in) the anarchy which ensues. (The reasons for this are discussed at the end of chapter 5.)

Issues of feedback and turn-taking are ways in which Netspeak interaction differs from conversational speech. But Netspeak is unlike speech also with respect to the formal properties of the medium – properties that are so basic that it becomes extremely difficult for people to live up to the recommendation that they should 'write as they talk'. Chief among these properties is the domain of *prosody* and *paralanguage*[15] – phonological terms which capture the notion of 'it ain't what you say but the way that you say it' – as expressed through vocal variations in pitch (intonation), loudness (stress), speed, rhythm, pause, and tone of voice. As with traditional writing, there have been somewhat desperate efforts to replace it in the form of an exaggerated use of spelling and punctuation, and the use of capitals, spacing, and special symbols for emphasis. Examples include repeated letters (*aaaaahhhhh, hiiiiii, ooops, soooo*), repeated punctuation marks (*no more!!!!!, whohe????, hey!!!!!!!!!, see what you started???????? ??????????*), and the following range of emphatic conventions:

all capitals for 'shouting':	I SAID NO
letter spacing for 'loud and clear':	W H Y, N O T, w h y n o t
word/phrase emphasis by asterisks:	the *real* answer

[15] Crystal and Quirk (1964), Crystal (1969). Emoticons have been called 'the paralanguage of the Internet' (Dery, 1993), but they are not the same, in that they have to be consciously added to a text. Their absence does not mean that the user lacks the emotion conveyed. In face-to-face communication, someone may grin over several utterances, and the effect may be noted. In Netspeak, a 'grin' emoticon might be added to just one utterance, although the speaker may continue to 'feel' the relevant emotion over several turns. There is also no guarantee that the person who sends a 'grin' is actually grinning at all – a point which also applies to abbreviations used: how many people are actually 'laughing out loud' when they send *LOL*?

(Underbars are also sometimes used for emphasis, as in 'the _real_ answer', but are less widespread, as they have other functions, such as their use as space-fillers in addresses to ensure that a compound name is a single electronic string (*David_Crystal*).) These features are indeed capable of a certain expressiveness, but the range of meanings they signal is small, and restricted to gross notions such as extra emphasis, surprise, and puzzlement. Less exaggerated nuances are not capable of being handled in this way, and there is no system in the use of the marks – it seems likely that the number of question marks or exclamation marks reflects only the length of time the relevant key is held down. There are signs of other characters or character combinations being used in order to express shades of meaning (e.g. *sure/*, *\so*), but in the absence of agreed conventions it is difficult to know how to read such symbols, or what the user means by them. As a result, it is no surprise to find participants in chatgroups falling back on literary expressions in an attempt to capture the range of effects and emotions involved, using a graphic convention to distinguish the text from the rest of the conversation, as in these examples:[16]

<Hoppy giggles quietly to himself>
<Jake squeals insistently>
<Henry eyes Jane warily>

In virtual worlds, there are commands which allow people to express textually the emotion they feel, often with the addition of synthesized sounds and visual effects. Despite these innovations, users are aware of the ever-present ambiguity when the prosody of speech is lacking, as can be seen in the regular injunctions in usage guides to be careful, especially when engaging in humour or irony.

Related to this is the way Netspeak lacks the facial expressions, gestures, and conventions of body posture and distance (the *kinesics* and *proxemics*)[17] which are so critical in expressing

[16] Angle brackets have several other functions in Netspeak: they identify commands in HTML, surround e-mail addresses, and indicate speaker responses in e-mail dialogues.

[17] See Sebeok, Hayes, and Bateson (1964), Hall (1959).

personal opinions and attitudes and in moderating social relationships. The limitation was noted early in the development of Netspeak, and led to the introduction of *smileys* or *emoticons* (a name deriving from Emote, used in MUDs to convey actions: p. 189).[18] These are combinations of keyboard characters designed to show an emotional facial expression: they are typed in sequence on a single line, and placed after the final punctuation mark of a sentence. Almost all of them are read sideways. The two basic types express positive attitudes and negative attitudes respectively (the omission of the 'nose' element seems to be solely a function of typing speed or personal taste):

:-) or :) :-(or : (

Table 2.2 illustrates the most commonly used forms, along with a few of the hundreds of ludic shapes and sequences which have been invented and collected in smiley dictionaries. It is plain that they are a potentially helpful but extremely crude way of capturing some of the basic features of facial expression, but their semantic role is limited. They can forestall a gross misperception of a speaker's intent, but an individual smiley still allows a huge number of readings (happiness, joke, sympathy, good mood, delight, amusement, etc.), which can only be disambiguated by referring to the verbal context. Some commentators have even described them as 'futile'.[19] Without care, moreover, they can lead to their own misunderstanding: adding a smile to an utterance which is plainly angry can increase rather than decrease the force of the 'flame'. It is a common experience that a smile can go down the wrong way: 'And you can wipe that smile off your face, as well!' Those who get into the habit of routinely using smileys can also find themselves in the position of having their unmarked

[18] See the collections in Sanderson (1993) and Crystal (2004); the latter are also available at www.findout.tv.

[19] Dery (1997: 2), quoting an anonymous correspondent: 'Shit happens, especially on the Net, where everyone speaks with flattened affect. I think the attempt to signal authorial intent with little smileys is interesting but futile. They're subject to slippage like any other kind of sign.'

Table 2.2 *Examples of smileys (after Sanderson,* 1993)

Basic smileys	
:-)	pleasure, humour, etc.
:-(	sadness, dissatisfaction, etc.
;-)	winking (in any of its meanings)
;-(:~-(	crying
%-(%-)	confused
:-o 8-o	shocked, amazed
:-] :-[	sarcastic
Joke smileys	
[:-)	User is wearing a walkman
8-)	User is wearing sunglasses
B:-)	User is wearing sunglasses on head
:-{)	User has a moustache
:*)	User is drunk
:-[	User is a vampire
:-E	User is a bucktoothed vampire
:-F	User is a bucktoothed vampire with one tooth missing
:-~	User has a cold
:-@	User is screaming
-:-)	User is a punk
-:-(	Real punks don't smile
+-:-)	User holds a Christian religious office
0 :-)	User is an angel at heart
Smiley stories	
:-) 8-) 8-{)	A smiley to disguise himself gets glasses and a fake moustache.
C:-) >[] C8-)	A smart smiley left watching too much TV.

utterances misinterpreted precisely because they have no smiley attached to them.[20] Usage guides warn against overuse. However,

[20] Brian Connery (1996: 175) makes a similar point in relation to other softening devices. Talking about people who avoid flaming by using such abbreviations as *IMHO* ['in my humble opinion'] and *my $0.02* ['my two cents worth'], he comments: 'Ironically, because of the innately authoritative nature of writing, within such anti-authoritarian conversations, the absence of such cues may trigger flames because of the suspicion that the author is claiming to put forward the definitive response which will end the discussion.'

they are not especially frequent; in one study, only 13.4 per cent; of 3,000 posts contained them – and some people did not use them at all.[21] Most participants, moreover, made no use of most of the formal possibilities, restricting themselves to just one or two basic types, especially variants of the 'positive' smiley, as in:

dont be silly :) hi :)) that's a pain :)))))

It should be noted, too, that smileys have other roles than disambiguation. Sometimes they seem to be doing little more than expressing rapport. Often, their presence seems to have purely pragmatic force – acting as a warning to the recipient(s) that the sender is worried about the effect a sentence might have. David Sanderson makes this point in his dictionary, when he recommends:

> You might include a smiley as a reminder of the ongoing context of the conversation, to indicate that your words don't stand on their own. A smiley can point out to the other participants of the conversation that they need to understand you and your personality in order to understand what you've said.[22]

What is interesting to the linguist, of course, is why these novelties have turned up now. Written language has always been ambiguous, in its omission of facial expression, and in its inability to express all the intonational and other prosodic features of speech. Why did no one ever introduce smileys there? The answer must be something to do with the immediacy of Net interaction, its closeness to speech. In traditional writing, there is time to develop phrasing which makes personal attitudes clear; that is why the formal conventions of letter-writing developed. And when they are missing, something needs to replace them. A rapidly constructed Net message, lacking the usual courtesies, can

[21] Witmer and Katzman (1997). Baron (2000) also notes the paucity of smileys in e-mails, other than among youngsters; in her view, adults have the communicative skills to make their messages sufficiently clear to avoid the need for the crude signals that smileys can provide.

[22] Sanderson (1993: 25).

easily appear abrupt or rude. A smiley defuses the situation. (Incidentally, the same problems can arise with faxes, especially quickly handwritten ones, though as yet smiley-type conventions have not made an impact there.) We might therefore expect to see the frequency of smileys reduce, as people get more used to Netspeak exchanges and construct their messasges more carefully and explicitly.

Whatever their function, and despite their limited use, smileys are one of the most distinctive features of e-mail and chatgroup language. But they are not the only mechanism devised to get round the absence of kinesic and proxemic features. Verbal glosses are also used, often within angle brackets, as in the prosodic examples above:

<Eagle smiles sympathetically at Gunner>
<Spoon nods in greeting>

This convention is widely used in virtual worlds for all kinds of kinesic effects, such as <smirk> and <laugh>. Abbreviated words are also found in some groups, notably <g> = 'grin', used to react to a message thought to be funny, or to convey teasing. The convention has developed a small system of its own: bigger smiles are symbolized by <gg>, <ggg>, etc., and a range of acronyms based on the letter <g> have been devised, such as <vbg> = 'very big grin', <gd&r> = 'grinning, ducking and running' (as a music-hall performer might do after a bad joke).

These features of Netspeak have evolved as a way of avoiding the ambiguities and misperceptions which come when written language is made to carry the burden of speech. They are brave efforts, but on the whole Netspeak lacks any true ability to signal meaning through kinesic and proxemic features, and this, along with the unavailability of prosodic features, places it at a considerable remove from spoken language.[23] Absent also are other linguistic features typical of conversational speech, and these

[23] This gap is probably the chief reason why, as Wallace puts it in her discussion of Internet anonymity, 'it is so easy to lie and get away with it' (1999: 51). In face-to-face interaction, only the most skilled liars can keep their deceptions out of their facial expression and tone of voice. In Netspeak, nothing could be easier – though participants can still give the game away by their unconscious use of other linguistic features (see p. 172).

make it even more difficult for language to be used on the Internet in a truly conversational way. These limitations arise out of the current dependence of the medium on typing speed and ability (see chapter 9 for future possibilities). The fact of the matter is that even the fastest typist comes nowhere near the spontaneity and speed of speech, which in conversation routinely runs at five or six syllables a second. Even apparently spontaneous Internet messages can involve elements of preplanning, pausing to think while writing, and mental checking before sending, which are simply not options in most everyday conversation. Some features of spoken language are often present in Internet writing, as we shall see below, such as short constructions, phrasal repetition, and a looser sentence construction. But studies of e-mail and chatgroup interactions have shown that they generally lack the very features of spoken language which indicate most spontaneity – notably, the use of reaction signals (*m, mhm, uh-huh, yeah . . .*) and comment clauses (*you know, you see, mind you . . .*). Indeed, some writers have identified the lack of these features as one of the reasons why so many Internet interactions are misperceived as abrupt, cold, distant, or antagonistic.[24] In face-to-face conversation, rapport, warmth, and agreement are regularly conveyed by subtle reaction signals which are injected at salient points by the listener; and the speaker adds softness, sympathy, friendliness, and solidarity by introducing such items as *you know* – there is a world of difference, stylistically, between *I think you're wrong* and *Y'know, I think you're wrong.* But because immediate reaction signals are not possible (see above, p. 36), and comment clauses are not a natural part of typing (most people are unaware they use them, or how frequently they use them, in everyday speech), these cues are missing from Netspeak. It is possible to do something about comment clauses, and Patricia Wallace (see fn. 23) is one who

[24] For example, Wallace (1999: 16), who devotes a whole chapter to the social-psychological implications.

recommends their increased use, as a means of improving e-rapport. Also, informality, and thus warmth, can be improved through the use of colloquial grammar and vocabulary (especially 'cool' abbreviations, see p. 90) and a readiness to introduce language play. But there is nothing one can do about reaction signals. Addressing someone on the Internet is a bit like having a telephone conversation in which a listener is giving you no reactions at all: it is an uncomfortable and unnatural situation, and in the absence of such feedback one's own language becomes more awkward than it might otherwise be.

Although Netspeak tries to be like speech, in its e-mail, chatgroup, virtual-world, and instant messaging incarnations, it remains some distance from it, in respect of several of spoken language's most fundamental properties. One commentator has called it 'metacommunicative minimalism', which he characterizes in this way:

> Textual cyberspace filters away all qualities of a personal self save the highly mediated, acutely self-conscious elements that appear in written language. Phatic or metacommunicative cues, the linguistic and paralinguistic signs that maintain cognizance of the social relation between the sender and receiver of a message, are drastically reduced in this medium.[25]

Table 2.3 is a summary of the seven characteristics of speech outlined in table 2.1, applied to the Internet situations described in my opening chapter. Notwithstanding the way netizens routinely talk about their domain in terms which derive from everyday conversation, in my estimation the actual amount that Netspeak has in common with speech is very limited. The Web is furthest away from it; chatgroup and virtual-world interactions are somewhat closer to it; instant messaging is closer still; and e-mails and blogging sit uncertainly in the middle. Several of these categories are certainly more speech-like than any other variety of traditional writing; but the similarities are balanced, if not outweighed, by the differences. So, if Netspeak does not

[25] Millard (1996: 147).

Table 2.3 *Spoken language criteria (see table 2.1) applied to Netspeak*

	Web	Blogging	e-mail	Chatgroups	Virtual worlds	Instant messaging
1. time-bound	no	no	yes, but in different ways	yes, but in different ways	yes, but in different ways	yes
2. spontaneous	no	yes, but with restrictions	variable	yes, but with restrictions	yes, but with restrictions	yes
3. face-to-face	no	no	no	no	no	no, unless camera used
4. loosely structured	variable	yes	variable	yes	yes	yes
5. socially interactive	no, with increasing options	no, with increasing options	variable	yes, but with restrictions	yes, but with restrictions	yes
6. immediately revisable	no	no	no	no	no	no
7. prosodically rich	no	no	no	no	no	no

display the properties we would expect of speech, does it instead display the properties we expect of writing?

Here too, the situation is not straightforward, as can be seen from the analogous summary in table 2.4. Let us consider first the space-bound character of traditional writing – the fact that a piece of text is static and permanent on the page. If something is written down, repeated reference to it will be an encounter with an unchanged text. We would be surprised if, upon returning to a particular page, it had altered its graphic character in some way. Putting it like this, we can see immediately that Netspeak is not by any means like conventional writing. A 'page' on the Web often varies from encounter to encounter (and all have the option of varying, even if page owners choose not to take it) for several possible reasons: its factual content might have been updated, its advertising sponsor might have changed, or its graphic designer might have added new features. Nor is the writing that you see necessarily static, given the technical options available which allow text to move around the screen, disappear/reappear, change colour, and so on. From a user point of view, there are opportunities to 'interfere' with the text in all kinds of ways that are not possible in traditional writing. A page, once downloaded to the user's screen, may have its text cut, added to, revised, annotated, even totally restructured, in ways that nonetheless retain the character of the original. The possibilities are causing not a little anxiety among those concerned about issues of ownership, copyright, and forgery (see chapter 7).

The other Internet situations also display differences from traditional writing, with respect to their space-bound presence. E-mails are in principle static and permanent, but routine textual deletion is expected procedure (it is a prominent option in the management system), and it is possible to alter messages electronically with an ease and undetectability which is not possible when people try to alter a traditionally written text. Messages in asynchronic chatgroups and blogs tend to be long-term in character; but those in synchronic groups, virtual worlds, and instant messaging are not. In the literature on

Table 2.4 *Written language criteria (see table 2.1) applied to Netspeak*

	Web	Blogging	e-mail	Chatgroups	Virtual worlds	Instant messaging
1. space-bound	yes, with extra options	yes	yes, but routinely deleted	yes, but with restrictions	yes, but with restrictions	yes, but moves off-screen rapidly
2. contrived	yes	variable	variable	no, but with some adaptation	no, but with some adaptation	no
3. visually decontextualized	yes, but with considerable adaptation	yes	yes	yes	yes, but with some adaptation	yes, unless camera used
4. elaborately structured	yes	variable	variable	no	no	no
5. factually communicative	yes	yes	yes	variable	yes, but with some adaptation	variable
6. repeatedly revisable	yes	variable	variable	no	no	no
7. graphically rich	yes, but in different ways	no, with increasing options	no	no	yes, but in different ways	no

computer-mediated communication, reference is often made to the *persistence* of a conversational message – the fact that it stays on the screen for a period of time (before the arrival of other messages replaces it or makes it scroll out of sight).[26] This certainly introduces particular properties to the conversation which are not available in speech. It means, for example, that someone who enters a conversation a couple of turns after an utterance has been made can still see the utterance, reflect upon it, and react to it; the persistence is relatively short-lived, however, compared with that routinely encountered in traditional writing. It also means, for those systems that provide an archiving log of all messages, in the order in which they were received by the server, that it is possible in principle to browse a past conversation, or search for a particular topic, in ways that spontaneous (unrecorded) conversation does not permit; however, in practice none of the systems currently available enable this to be done with ease, time-lags and the other factors described above making it extremely difficult to follow a topical thread in a recorded log (see chapter 5). There are well-established means of finding one's way through a traditional written text: they are called indexes, and they are carefully compiled by indexers, who select and organize relevant information. Indexes of this kind are not likely in interactive Netspeak, because there is so much of it and the subject-matter does not usually warrant it. There has been little research into the question of whether automatic indexing could be adapted so as to provide useful end-products (see chapter 7).

The other characteristics of traditional written language also display an uncertain relationship to Netspeak. Is Netspeak contrived, elaborate in its construction, and repeatedly revisable (items 2, 4, and 6 in table 2.4)? For the Web, the answer has to be yes, allowing the same range of structural complexity as would be seen elsewhere. Blogs vary greatly in their constructional complexity. For chatgroups, virtual worlds, and instant messaging,

[26] For example, Thomas Erickson (1999).

where the pressure is strong to communicate rapidly, the answer has to be no, though the fact that smileys and other graphic conventions have been devised illustrates a certain degree of contrivance. E-mails vary enormously: some people are happy to send messages with no revision at all, not caring if typing errors, spelling mistakes, and other anomalies are included in their messages; others take as many pains to revise their messages as they would in non-Internet settings – or even more, if there is some sensitivity over flaming (p. 58). Is Netspeak visually decontextualized (item 3 in table 2.4)? Immediate visual feedback is always absent, as discussed above, so in this respect Netspeak is just like traditional writing. But web pages often provide visual aids to support text, in the form of photographs, maps, diagrams, animations, and the like; and many virtual-world settings have a visual component built in, with signs of adaptation even in text-only worlds (such as instructions to 'move North' or 'leave through the East door' on a game screen; see p. 184). The arrival of webcams is also altering the communicative dynamic of Netspeak interactions, especially in instant messaging. Is Netspeak factually communicative (item 5 in table 2.4)? For the Web, blogs, and e-mails, the answer is a strong yes. The other two situations are less clear. Within the reality parameters established by a virtual world, factual information is certainly routinely transmitted, but there is a strong social element always present which greatly affects the kind of language used. Chatgroups vary enormously: the more academic and professional they are, the more likely they are to be factual in aim (though often not in achievement, if reports of the amount of flaming are to be believed); the more social and ludic chatgroups, on the other hand, routinely contain sequences which have negligible factual content. Instant message exchanges are also highly variable, sometimes containing a great deal of information, sometimes being wholly devoted to social chit-chat.

Finally, is Netspeak graphically rich? Once again, for the Web the answer is yes, its richness having increased along with technological progress, putting into the hands of the ordinary user a

range of typographic and colour variation that far exceeds the pen, the typewriter, and the early word processor, and allowing further options not available to conventional publishing, such as animated text, hypertext links, and multimedia support (sound, video, film). On the other hand, as typographers and graphic designers have repeatedly pointed out, just because a new visual language is available to everyone does not mean that everyone can use it well. Despite the provision of a wide range of guides to Internet design and desk-top publishing,[27] examples of illegibility, visual confusion, over-ornamentation, and other inadequacies abound. They are compounded by the limitations of the medium, which cause no problem if respected, but which are often ignored, as when we encounter screenfuls of unbroken text, paragraphs which scroll downwards interminably, or text which scrolls awkwardly off the right-hand side of the screen. The difficulties are especially noticeable in blogging, where many pages fail to use the medium to best effect. The problems of *graphic translatability* are only beginning to be appreciated – that it is not possible to take a paper-based text and put it on a screen without rethinking the graphic presentation and even, sometimes, the content of the message.[28] Add to all this the limitations of the technology. The time it takes to download pages which contain 'fancy graphics' and multimedia elements is a routine cause of frustration, and in interactive situations can exacerbate communicative lag (p. 34).

Disregarding the differences between Internet situations, in tables 2.3 and 2.4, and looking solely at the cells in terms of 'yes', 'variable', and 'no', it is plain that Netspeak has far more properties linking it to writing than to speech. Of the 42 cells in the speech summary in table 2.3, only 15 are 'yes', 4 are 'variable', and 23 are 'no'. The situation for the writing summary in table 2.4, as we would expect, is almost exactly the reverse: 11 are 'yes', 8 are 'variable', and 23 are 'no'. Once we take the different Internet situations into account, then the Web is seen to be by far the closest

[27] For example, Pring (1999). [28] For graphic translatability, see Twyman (1982).

to written language, with instant messaging furthest away, and the other situations in between. The differences are striking, as later chapters will further illustrate. But on the whole, Netspeak is better seen as written language which has been pulled some way in the direction of speech than as spoken language which has been written down. However, expressing the question in terms of the traditional dichotomy is itself misleading. Netspeak is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both. Davis and Brewer see it thus, as an eclectic resource: 'Writing in the electronic medium, people adopt conventions of oral and written discourse to their own, individual communicative needs.'[29]

Netspeak is more than an aggregate of spoken and written features. As we shall see in later chapters, it does things that neither of these other mediums do, and must accordingly be seen as a new species of communication. Baron, in a metaphor which takes up the species theme, calls it an 'emerging language centaur – part speech, part writing'.[30] I would have to adopt an aliens metaphor to capture my own vision of Netspeak as something genuinely different in kind –'speech + writing + electronically mediated properties'.[31] It is more than just a hybrid of speech and writing, or the result of contact between two long-standing mediums.[32] Electronic texts, of whatever kind, are simply not the same as other kinds of texts. According to Marilyn Deegan,[33] they display fluidity, simultaneity (being available on an indefinite number of machines), and non-degradability in copying;

[29] Davis and Brewer (1997: 19).

[30] Baron (2000: 248), and see below, p. 133. Baron also sees the relationship between speech and writing as continuum-like, though she makes a different set of distinctions. From one extreme, which she labels 'writing (as product)', she recognizes 'joint composition > anonymous dialogue > 1–many dialogue (not anonymous) > 1–1 dialogue (not anonymous)' before arriving at 'speech (as process)' (p. 158).

[31] See further, Crystal (2004). Sociolinguist Celso Alvarez-Caccamo (in Cumming, 1995: 6) also seems to sense a uniqueness in the nature of computer-mediated communication, when he talks of an observing alien characterizing it in terms of 'its fundamental "weirdness" ' – by which he means the speed, invisibility, distribution, and anonymity of electronic interaction (in which the choice of a particular language is incidental).

[32] The view of e-mail as a contact language is argued by Baron (2000: ch. 9).

[33] Deegan (2000).

they transcend the traditional limitations on textual dissemination; and they have permeable boundaries (because of the way one text may be integrated within others or display links to others). Several of these properties have consequences for language, and these combine with those associated with speech and writing to make Netspeak a genuine 'third medium'.

Netspeak maxims

How should we further characterize Netspeak, viewed as a novel medium combining spoken, written, and electronic properties? One method is to continue with the comparative approach used above. Several linguists and philosophers of language have investigated what counts as a 'normal' kind of conversation. The philosopher H. P. Grice is one, well known in pragmatics research for his four maxims of conversation that underlie the efficient co-operative use of language.[34] They can be expressed as follows:

The maxim of Quality
Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically:
Do not say what you believe to be false.
Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
The maxim of Relevance
Make your contributions relevant.
The maxim of Quantity
Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
The maxim of Manner
Be perspicuous, and specifically:
Avoid obscurity.
Avoid ambiguity.
Be brief.
Be orderly.

[34] Grice (1975). For a general discussion, see Levinson (1983: ch. 3).

The point of an analysis of this kind is not to suggest that we always behave exactly according to the principles; common experience shows that we do not. But we do seem to tacitly recognize their role as a perspective or orientation within which actual utterances can be judged. For example, people who tell lies or make false claims can be challenged; if they talk too much they can be told (in so many words) to shut up; if they say something irrelevant, they can be asked to stick to the point; and if they fail to make themselves clear, they can be requested to say it again. The fact that we do all of these things indicates that we are bearing these maxims in mind. Moreover, if someone makes a remark that seems to flout these maxims, we instinctively look for ways to make sense of what has been said. If Joe asks 'Where's Uncle Kevin?' and Jill replies 'I expect there's a dilapidated blue bicycle outside The Swan', we do not criticize her for breaking all four maxims at once. Rather, we take it for granted that she is co-operating in the conversation, and that (a) she has good grounds from past experience for knowing that a bicycle will be outside The Swan at this time; (b) she knows the mention of a bicycle is relevant, because Uncle Kevin rides one; (c) she knows its attributes include being dilapidated and blue, and feels that the mention of both makes for a more vivid or jocular sentence than one which uses just one adjective or no adjective at all; and (d) she knows that Joe knows all this, so that her answer will be perfectly clear. In such ways, and by making such assumptions, we are able to make sense of all kinds of superficially bizarre contributions to conversations.

It is not so easy to work out what is going on in the Internet world. Part of the difficulty arises out of the anonymity inherent in the electronic medium. This is not the first medium to allow spoken interaction between individuals who wish to remain anonymous, of course, as we know from the history of telephone

and amateur radio; but it is certainly unprecedented in the scale and range of situations in which people can hide their identity, especially in chatgroups and virtual worlds.[35] These situations routinely contain individuals who are talking to each other under nicknames (*nicks*), which may be an assumed first name, a fantasy description (*topdude, sexstar*), or a mythical character or role (*rockman, elfslayer*) (see further, chapter 5). In e-mails, the personal identity element (the part of the address found before the @) may be any of these, or simply a number or code, it then being up to the sender to decide what authentic signature the text of the e-mail will contain. The lexical structure and character of the names themselves is an important feature of Netspeak, of course; but there are other consequences for the type of language used. Operating behind a false persona seems to make people less inhibited: they may feel emboldened to talk more and in different ways from their real-world linguistic repertoire. They must also expect to receive messages from others who are likewise less inhibited, and be prepared for negative outcomes. There are obviously inherent risks in talking to someone we do not know, and instances of harassment, insulting or aggressive language, and subterfuge are legion. Questions about identity – of a kind which would be totally redundant in face-to-face settings – are also a feature of initial chatgroup encounters. Certain kinds of information are asked for and given, notably about location, age, and gender (not usually about race or socio-economic status). Gender is so sensitive an issue that it has given rise to the terms

[35] The electronic traceability of messages, through server records, backups, and other monitoring procedures, might be thought enough to make anonymity impossible. As several commentators have said: never write anything that you wouldn't want to see read out in court (e.g. Durusau, 1996) – see further below, p. 132. But tracing can be made extremely difficult in various ways, such as through using 'anonymizers' – services that combine encryption, pseudonyms, and proxy servers to let you browse and send messages anonymously, 'remailer' services which disguise where a message comes from, or free e-mail services which do not check the user's personal details. There is no real way of knowing if an e-mail has been interfered with. Although the system is sufficiently abused (e.g. false or insulting messages sent out under someone's name) that some organizations impose e-mail controls, the general problem does not seem to have affected the vast majority of users, who operate unconcernedly with their online personae.

Morf ['male or female'], an online query addressed to someone who uses a gender-ambiguous name (e.g. *Chris, Hilary, Jan*) and *Sorg* ['straight or gay']. People seem to become particularly anxious if they do not know the sex and sexual preference of the person they are talking to.

Multiple and often conflicting notions of truth therefore co-exist in Internet situations, ranging from outright lying through mutually aware pretence to playful trickery. As Patricia Wallace puts it, referring to the absence of prosodic and kinesic clues in Netspeak: 'The fact that it is so easy to lie and get away with it – as long as we can live with our own deceptions and the harm they may cause others – is a significant feature of the Internet.'[36] It is of course possible to live out a lie or fantasy logically and consistently, and it is on this principle that the games in virtual worlds operate and the nicknamed people in chatgroups interact. But it is by no means easy to maintain a consistent presence through language in a world where multiple interactions are taking place under pressure, where participants are often changing their names and identities, and where the co-operative principle can be arbitrarily jettisoned. Putting this another way, when you see an Internet utterance, you often do not know how to take it, because you do not know what set of conversational principles it is obeying. Here are two such circumstances, both of which undermine the maxim of quality.

A *spoof* is any message whose origin is suspect; the sending of such messages, *spoofing*, is commonplace in some Internet situations. Unattributed utterances may be introduced into a virtual-world conversation, for example. Normally, each conversational turn is preceded by the name of the player, along the lines of *Mole says, 'I'm hungry.'* But it is possible for a player to interpolate an utterance with no name preceding, such as: *An angry lion appears in the doorway.* Spoof utterances may also be inserted by the software, and not by any of the participants. When a spoof is noticed, the players may condemn it, question it,

[36] Wallace (1999: 51).

or play about with it. The result can be a fresh element of fun injected into a game which is palling, with everybody knowing what is going on and willingly participating. Equally, because spoofing can confuse other players, and severely disrupt a game which is proceeding well, the various guides to manners in virtual worlds tend to be critical of it, and discourage it. Some groups insist on displaying the identity of the spoofer, such as by making the sender add his/her nick afterwards: *1,000 linguists have converged on Parliament – Doc.*[37] Because there is no way of knowing whether the content of a spoof is going to be true (with reference to the rest of the conversation) or false, such utterances introduce an element of anarchy into the co-operative ethos of conversation.

A similar problem arises with *trolling*, the sending of a message (a *troll*) specifically intended to cause irritation to others, such as the members of a chatgroup. It is an innocent-sounding question or statement, delivered deadpan, and usually short, though some trolls are verbose in their apparent cluelessness. For example, somebody who wanted to troll a linguistics group might send the message *I've heard that the Eskimo language has 1,000 words for snow* – then sit back to enjoy the resulting explosions.[38] The term derives from fishing (the trailing of a baited hook to see what bites), though it also captures the resonance of the trolls of Scandinavian mythology – the bridge-guarders who would let people pass only if they answered a question correctly. On the Internet, the bait is false information, deliberately introduced into a conversation to see who falls for it. People who respond, and correct the misinformation, show that they do not belong to the group, or are newcomers to it (*newbies*); old hands will simply ignore it, or – if they can be bothered – laconically send the response 'nice troll' to the originator, or *YHBT* ['you have been trolled'] to the responder. Not all chatgroups troll; some insert clues to the existence of a troll into a message that only the

[37] This is the procedure followed in Cherny's group (Cherny 1999: 115).
[38] For the reason, see Pullum and McCawley (1991).

cognoscenti recognize; some are very much against the whole process, conscious of the communicative disruption that can result.

The maxim of quantity is also often undermined in Internet situations. At one extreme there is *lurking* – a refusal to communicate. *Lurkers* are people who access a chatgroup and read its messages but do not contribute to the discussion. The motives include newbie reluctance to be involved, academic curiosity (researching some aspect of Internet culture), or voyeurism. Some manuals refer to lurking as 'spying'.[39] *Spamming* refers to the sending of usually unwanted messages of excessive size. The origin of the term lies in a 1970 *Monty Python* sketch in which a cafe waitress describes the available dishes to two customers, and culinary variation is introduced by an increasing reliance on spam – 'Well, there's egg and bacon; egg sausage and bacon; egg and spam; egg bacon and spam; egg bacon sausage and spam; spam bacon sausage and spam; spam egg spam spam bacon and spam; spam sausage spam spam bacon spam tomato and spam . . . ' – the whole interchange being accompanied, as one would expect, by the chanting of the same word from a passing group of Vikings.[40] In one of those semantic shifts which makes etymology such a fascinating subject, the term was first applied to cases where a single message would be sent to many recipients, as when a company sends out an ad to everyone on a mailing list, producing electronic 'junk-mail'. It later came to be used for the complementary situation – the sending of many messages to one user, as when a group of people electronically lobby a politician or attack a company's policy.[41] Either way, people find themselves having to deal with quantities of unwanted text.

[39] Lurking is not the same as *idling*, which is not an active attempt to hide one's presence from the other members of a group – as when a participant decides to do something else while staying connected, or simply has nothing to say. A further label identifies *smurfs* and *smurfettes* – people who post messages to a group but without saying anything much.
[40] *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, BBC, 2nd series, episode 25 (15 December 1970).
[41] A further distinction is the sending of many messages to a server in an attempt to shut it down – what is usually referred to as a *mailbomb*. The automatic deletion of spam mail is known as *blackholing*.

Not all spam is the same, either in intention or effect. Charles Stivale identifies three types common in virtual worlds: playful, pernicious, and ambiguous.[42] *Playful* spamming occurs when visual or audio effects (such as a duck quacking) have been programmed to turn up in the text, unasked-for, at intervals within the game situation. It can also be found when one character does something aggressively playful to another (a *bonk* – but not in the UK slang sense, please note),[43] thereby eliciting a vociferous response. In some game situations (especially MOOs), several participants may simultaneously respond to a playful stimulus, producing a sequence of text messages on screen which come in so fast that they can hardly be read. *Pernicious* spamming refers to the Internet equivalent of real-life harassment, often involving sexually explicit language and description of actions, and usually prompting the introduction of control measures of some kind by the group moderators. Lengthy aggressive utterances (*flaming* – see below) are often involved. *Ambiguous* spamming falls between these extremes. A participant might repeatedly send a message which irritates other players, or cause another player to do something unlooked-for (e.g. *Sting throws Moog out of the plane*) or be sent to another 'room' in the game (such as 'Prison'). The ambiguity lies in the fact that the intention behind the spam may be unclear, and the effect variously unpredictable. What counts as spam is often a matter of taste; as Marvin puts it: 'one participant's spam is another's entertainment'.[44] But in all cases, spamming is a gratuitous addition to the communicative exchange, and thus breaks the maxim of quantity.

Flaming differs from spamming, in that messages (*flames*) are always aggressive, related to a specific topic, and directed at an individual recipient (spamming, by contrast, is often ludic or

[42] Stivale (1996).

[43] As *The New Penguin English dictionary* (2000) intriguingly puts it: '**bonk,** *verb trans* informal 2 *Brit* to have sexual intercourse with (somebody)'.

[44] Marvin (1996: 9). The subjectivity of the notion is also noted by Cherny (1999: 75) who refers to Marvin and observes, 'party conversation that appears witty and fun to one person is annoying spam to another'.

emotionally neutral, unspecific in content, and aimed at anyone within 'earshot'). It is similar in some ways to the ritual verbal duelling encountered between rival gangs and opposing army generals.[45] However, there is considerable dispute over what counts as a flame, and why people do it. People's sensitivities, tastes, communicative preferences, and styles differ – as they do in everyday conversation, indeed, where it is also not always agreed between two parties whether they are 'arguing' or 'having a discussion', or why an argument has blown up. Curiously, the two chatgroup parties involved in a flame often do not see their interchange as flaming, though other participants in the group do. Parties who have had their flaming pointed out to them are often surprised at the level of their linguistic aggressiveness – a function, presumably, of flamers finding themselves at a safe and often anonymous electronic distance from each other.[46] Cultural differences intervene, especially when messages are being exchanged internationally, so that an observation which might seem totally innocent to a sender in country A might seem inexplicably rude to a receiver in country B. Also, it often takes time for a series of exchanges to develop from a mild disagreement into an antagonistic interchange, and it can be difficult to identify the point when this happens. Plainly, an exchange in which participants have stopped talking about their topic and are simply exchanging verbal abuse would be a clear flame; but it is more debatable whether aggressive argument (of the kind common enough in much academic and political debate), continuing to focus on the topic, albeit rudely, is flaming or not. The point has attracted considerable discussion within chatgroups (where flaming behaviour is common, at least by comparison with e-mail).[47] William Millard reports a case where a discussion moved to a different level, involving a dispute over whether a

[45] For examples, see Crystal (1997a: 60).

[46] In one study, the members of anonymous groups made six times more hostile remarks than the members of non-anonymous ones: Wallace (1999: 125).

[47] Baron (2000: 239) finds a diminution in e-mail flaming, and suggests that the behaviour may have been an early symptom of the novelty of the medium. For a discussion of politeness strategies in relation to Netspeak, see Maricic (2005).

message was a flame or not, thereby attracting the attention of the list moderator, who attempted to control the way the interaction was going:

> The message below is not a flame, although the poster claims it is. I have noticed on lists that when anyone uses the word 'flame' in a post hitherto dormant netters gather for the kill from all parts of the known electronic universe. Don't overreact here . . .[48]

Ironically, such interventions can lead to a further discussion of what constitutes flaming, in which people take strong positions, and end up flaming each other about the topic of flaming – what Millard calls *metaflaming*.

Flaming behaviour, arising as it does out of frustration over the way a conversation is going, would seem more to contravene Grice's maxim of manner than of quantity. Its presence in Netspeak should not be underestimated. Millard, focusing on academic lists, identifies several factors in Internet writing which account for it. In addition to the metacommunicative minimalism of the medium, referred to above (p. 44), there is also:

> the customary economic constraints on connection time (and thus on personal patience), the delayed response of the audience, or the uncertainties ensuing from the consciousness that Internet communities are new enough to lack clear social protocols – as well as the general underlying tension between conceptions of language as a transparent medium for serious work or a dense material for ludic performance

– all of which, he concludes, 'implies that online academic writing as a genre is conducive to anxiety, wrath, and vendetta'.[49] The point goes well beyond the academic. Some groups have even gone so far as to experiment with flame filters, which search a message for potential inflammatory words or phrases (e.g. *get + lost/real/with it/a life; you + noun*) and automatically exclude them. But the investigation of the formal linguistic equivalents of this particular genre of communicative competence is too

[48] Millard (1996: 152–3). [49] Millard (1996: 147).

rudimentary for such procedures to be reliable – both in what they exclude and fail to exclude. Rather more useful are such features as the 'scribble' command (used on the virtual community known as The WELL ['Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link']: p. 135), which allows senders to delete what they have sent, inserting <scribbled> in its place.

The maxim of manner is also seriously challenged by the way some Internet situations operate. Will contributions be orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity? Brevity is certainly a recognized desideratum in many Netspeak interactions, in terms of sentence length, the number of sentences in a turn, or the amount of text on a screen. Style manuals repeatedly exhort users to be brief (p. 79); and while there are several signs of brevity in the different Internet situations, especially in instant messaging, it takes only a short exposure to the Web to find many instances where the principle is honoured more in the breach than the observance. Bloggers, in particular, routinely disregard it. Also, web page designers constantly talk about the importance of 'clear navigation' around a page, between pages in a site, and between sites, with the aim of providing unproblematic access to sites, clear screen layouts, and smoothly functioning selection options (for searching, help, further information, etc.). But the inevitable amateurishness of many web pages (the cost of designing a high-quality website can be considerable) means that the manner maxim is repeatedly broken. In synchronous chatgroups, the challenge is much more fundamental; there is an extraordinary degree of disorder, chiefly due to the number of participants all speaking at once, which makes a transcript of an interaction extremely difficult to follow. An interesting question is the extent to which obscurity and ambiguity is more likely in Netspeak because of the dependency of the medium upon typed input. Typing, not a natural behaviour, imposes a strong pressure on the sender to be selective in what is said, especially if one is not a very fast or competent typist. And selectivity in expression must lead to all kinds of unclarity.

Fourthly, the maxim of relevance – that contributions should clearly relate to the purpose of the exchange – is also undermined in some Internet situations. What is the purpose of an Internet exchange, one might well ask? In some cases, it is possible to define the purpose quite easily – a search for information on a specific topic on the Web, for example, or the desire to score points in a fantasy game. In others, several purposes can be present simultaneously, such as an e-mail which combines informational, social, and ludic functions. But in many cases, it is not easy to work out what the purpose of the exchange is. People often seem to post messages not in a spirit of real communication but just to demonstrate their electronic presence to other members of a group, to 'leave their mark' for the world to see (in the spirit of graffiti), or to use the medium to help themselves think something out.[50] The extreme situation is found in many chatgroups, where from the amount of topic-shifting we might well conclude that no subject-matter could ever be irrelevant. Informal conversation has long been recognized for its relative randomness of subject-matter;[51] but identifying the threads of subject-matter in a spoken dialogue is simplicity itself compared with the nature of the exchanges in such chatgroups, where several topics are being discussed at once, participants are interpolating comments about the way the conversation is going, and irrelevant utterances are being routinely introduced (as in the case of spoofing) for ludic or other reasons. The notion of relevance is usually related to an ideational or content-based function of language; but here we seem to have a situation where content is not privileged, and where factors of a social kind are given precedence.

The social function of much Internet communication has been a major theme of the literature in recent years, especially with reference to the concept of a 'virtual community'. This notion

[50] This enhancing feature of the medium is illustrated by the finding that electronic group brainstorming seems to work better than its face-to-face counterpart: Wallace (1999: 84).
[51] Crystal and Davy (1969: ch. 1).

has been not a little contentious, with some considering it an empty phrase, and others trying to give it a meaningful definition. Certainly, the mere fact of having engaged in an Internet activity does not produce in a user the sort of sense of identity and belonging which accompanies the term *community*. On the other hand, some Internet situations do promote such a sense of belonging, which comes from 'the experience of sharing with unseen others a space of communication'.[52] Underlying this view is a broader issue, to do with the way the Internet has come to be used in practice. To summarize a complex debate (in a netshell, perhaps): the Internet is not as global a medium as it might at first appear to be. While in principle much has been made of its ability to transcend the limitations of physical environments, cultural differences, and time-zones, thereby allowing people from anywhere to communicate with people anywhere else about anything at all, in practice the types of communication which take place are much more restricted and parochial. Most Internet interactions are not global in character; we are not talking to millions when we construct our web pages, send an e-mail or instant message, join a chatgroup, blog, or enter a virtual world. Derek Foster, summarizing a paper on computer-mediated communication (CMC) by Garth Graham, comments: 'The interactivity of CMC is about human connections. It is about talking. It serves individuals and communities, not mass audiences.'[53] Howard Rheingold describes the Internet as an 'ecosystem' of subcultures.[54] And Patricia Wallace identifies purpose as much more important than geography:

> Though I like the 'global village' metaphor, the Internet is not really like that most of the time. With respect to human interaction, it is more like a huge collection of distinct neighborhoods where people with common interests can share information, work together, tell stories, joke around, debate politics, help each other out, or play games.[55]

[52] Wilbur (1996: 13). [53] Foster (1996: 29). [54] Rheingold (1993: 3).
[55] Wallace (1999: 9).

Internet users are evidently wanting to talk to others who belong to their interest group (subculture, elite, niche . . .) or whom they would like to influence so that they become part of their interest group. Indicative is the way group members typically use such labels as 'guests', 'outsiders', and 'foreigners' when referring to visitors to their forum. The more light-hearted accounts go even further. Andy Ihnatko, for example, characterizes the situation in this way:

> the true purpose of language is to reenforce the divisions between society's tribes, or at least to make things difficult enough to understand so that the riff-raff keeps out. The new language of the Internet, spoken by a great number of rather insular types who like to keep interpersonal contact to a bare minimum to begin with, is no exception.[56]

Sociological analysis now seems to be moving away from the view that the kind of reduced social cues described earlier disallow the development of complex social and personal relationships on the Net. Just because we use a restricted set of graphic characters does not stop people constructing a new social world, and some have argued that cyberspace in certain conditions permits considerable levels of sophistication.[57]

Interesting linguistic questions follow. If real Internet communities are relatively small-scale, they will demonstrate their solidarity by evolving (consciously or unconsciously) measures of identity, some of which will be non-linguistic (e.g. shared knowledge, a particular morality) and some linguistic in character. The linguistic features will take time to evolve, especially in a medium where technological facilities change so quickly and where some degree of nonconformity is commonplace among users, but eventually they will provide the community with an occupational dialect which newcomers will have to learn if they wish to join it. Linguistic idiosyncrasies belonging to individual chatgroups and MUDs have often been noted, at least as anecdotal observations. One of the aims of what one day might be

[56] Ihnatko (1997: iii). [57] See the review in Paccagnella (1997).

called Internet sociolinguistics (or dialectology) will be to determine just how systematic such features are and how many such dialects can be distinguished. An initial enquiry into each of the main Internet situations provides the subject-matter of chapters 4–8. However, it is also likely, given the constraints that come from everyone using a broadly similar computer technology and having a broadly similar set of motivations, that there will be a set of shared linguistic features, found regardless of the Internet situation. The extent to which such a 'common core' exists is the subject of chapter 3.

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