15 Online Communication – Netspeak
The Internet as a Facilitator for New Ways of Communication and the Impact on our Language

15.1 Communication and Online Communication

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, communication is ‘the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviours to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else; a message that is given to someone: a letter, telephone call, etc.‘, while Oxford Dictionary sees communication as ‘the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information; methods of sending information, especially telephones, radio, computers, etc. or roads and railways’.

As the Internet has entered our lives, a new kind of communication has emerged – the online communication. The term online communication denotes communication, reading and writing by means of networked computers, which suggests that computer mediated communication helps computer users interact in real time, with all of them operating their computers, simultaneously.

Mark Warschauer (2001) mentions asynchronous computer mediated communication (whereby people communicate in a delayed fashion by computer, using programs, such as e-mail), and the reading and writing of online documents via www (World Wide Web). The www is a way of presenting information and any kind of materials in an electronic format, in an easy to access and use way. One can use www to communicate with other people, send messages, use e-mail, take part in conferences, and so on. It is the Internet that facilitates it and there is nothing worse than feeling left behind, when everyone is talking about something and you are ‘in the dark‘; nothing is more frustrating than being computer illiterate. If you can use the Internet, you are ‘potentially connected with everything’ (Crystal, 2001a:195). David Crystal mentions the name of ‘the creator of the Web, computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee devised it in 1990 as a means of enabling high-energy physicists in different institutions to share information within their field‘ (Crystal, D. 2006:14), and, figuratively speaking, it invaded other domains of activity; nowadays it is designed for multimedia interaction among computer users all over the world. Consequently, new words connected to the web have been coined – netizen (Internet users) and netspeak (the language spoken by the netizens, Internet jargon) as an alternative to Netlish, Weblish, Internet language, Cyberspeak, Electronic discourse, Electronic language, Interactive online discourse, Computer-Mediated Communication, and various computer related locutions.
Although many people use www, most of them have no idea as to where this abbreviation (www) comes from. It is called so because all of the different pieces of information are linked together, and one can move from one piece of information to another by simply clicking the mouse button. The information we need can be anywhere in the world and this way, the information on our www page may link to other information on a page in Bucharest, London, New York, Tokyo and so on. ‘The Internet is an electronic, global and interactive medium, and each of these properties has consequences for the kind of language found there’ (Crystal, 2001a:26). ‘The Internet has undoubtedly appeared almost from nowhere to take a rather important role in our lives’, Hadžiahmetović (2007:2); the Internet is meant to present a wide range of information and is, therefore, used by individuals, educational institutions and companies. It can be used for anything that other information systems are used for: presenting facts and figures, academic research, advertising and launching new products, disseminating news and ideas on a variety of topics, talk about ourselves, our businesses, or our interests.

We shall not enter into details concerning how it works from the technical point of view; we shall focus on the purely linguistic dimensions of the written expressions – the use of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and other properties/features of the electronic discourse (netspeak). ‘Whatever variety of written language we may have encountered in the paper-based world, its linguistic features have their electronic equivalent on the web. It has extended the stylistic range of the language in interesting and innovative ways’ (Moise, 2004:529). The e-mail, for example, is an opportunity for linguistic education, and overall, the Internet has developed and diversified written communication. Everyday communication – at work, in schools, and in private, is Internet mediated. Understanding and making progress in this new type of communication in terms of style, lexis and register help the Internet users become skilled communicators. The language of the web is no longer under a ‘central control’; it does not consider national boundaries; ‘people have more power to influence the language of the Web than in any other medium’ (Crystal, 2001a:208).

The main platforms people use for online communication are: Facebook – a medium used for posting pictures, video-clips, make comments, or write articles; it is also used as an opportunity to announce important events. In some universities, it is also used as a teaching aid – for example, Professor Casimir C. Barczyk of Purdue University Calumet, USA (Barczyk&Duncan, 2014) uses Facebook for teaching and communicating with his students.

There are also platforms such as Twitter – used by people to exchange or share ideas, and opinions, and whatever one wants to communicate to one’s friends and to the world (chit-chat), Tumblr – a blogging platform similar to Twitter, where users could share photos, videos, and make comments, Snapchat – an application that makes possible for one to post photos and videos for a short period, Instagram – a photo sharing application that is used for photos to be shared with others, mainly their group of friends. One of the features shared by most of these online communication
platforms is that users can also go for a private or public account, and can share photos or videos directly with their group – friends or acquaintances; in a way, it is a sort of a private message, in a different form.

With **online communication** being such an important part of our lives, people, especially scientists – experts in communication, have started to study this phenomenon and ask questions related to its impact on people’s communication skills. We should be concerned regarding the consequences of social media in the long-run, on the young generation’s critical thinking, on their writing and on personal and intellectual communication skills, especially in higher education, where the level of expressing oneself should be higher than average. Impact does not necessarily mean a negative impact, and using online communication may have either a positive or a negative effect; we shall focus on the positive impact only, and see the negative effect only as less and less face-to-face communication. Accordingly, blogging, texting and twitting via Internet is real-time writing and faster communication. Young people use netspeak because ‘their writing is real writing, because their writing is their voice’ (Rusul). In fact, social media’s power of connecting people will enable the young generation’s thoughts to impulse and promote change in our world, and their impact and attitude may generate remarkable ideas and thoughts. Therefore, as people, especially the young ones, are so much addicted to this kind of communication, sociologists often speak about ‘homo smartphonius’; every time they have new ideas or opinions, they feel the need to share them with their friends or group of netizens.

Writing in **social media** is the writing of the young generation. According to Wikipedia, social media are computer-mediated tools (as the forementioned ones) that allow people to create, share, or exchange information, ideas and pictures/videos in virtual communities and networks. It is defined as ‘a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content’.

According to Barnbrook (1996), the linguistic future of the Internet – computer mediated communication ‘may become an obsolete notion, as Internet information and communication functionality migrates to other tools, especially mobile phones, smart phones and tablets’ Barnbrook (1996:214). According to the same author, technology developments may have three major impacts from the linguistic point of view: ‘new modalities and their effects on the nature of language and speech community; new modalities bringing languages and speech communities into contact with one another; English – the common language of the Internet will influence the vocabulary of its users’ Barnbrook (1996:214).

The question at this point is: will the Internet end the traditional spelling as it is known, and whether creativity and suppleness of the language will diminish due to globalization, which imposes sameness. In the history of mankind, any breakthrough, especially if connected to technology, was accompanied by fears and reluctance. David Crystal gives some examples in his Encyclopaedia of the English Language (2009:424), mentioning that ‘in the 15th century, the arrival of printing was widely
perceived by the Church as the invention of Satan’ (Crystal, 2009:424). The priests feared ‘that the dissemination of uncensored ideas would lead to a breakdown of social order and put innumerable souls at risk of damnation’ (idem). Therefore, measures were taken rapidly for the limitation of its potential evil effects and consequences. Approximately 50 years after Gutenberg’s first Bible (1455) in Frankfurt, censorship was extended to other books by Pope Alexander VI (in 1501). About four centuries later, identical worries were expressed, regarding the necessity of censorship and monitoring at the time of the invention of the telegraph, later the telephone and also about broadcasting technology. There were fears that the telegraph would affect family stability and would also support crime; the telephone could destabilize the stability of the society; broadcasting would manipulate people and be used for non-orthodox purposes. All these inventions generated fears, anxiety and also debates and linguistic differences of opinion. The debates were related to rules and norms to be obeyed, as well as correct pronunciation, on clarity and right utterances, and also regarding the use of local accent, or in some cases – dialects.

A similar debate is being continued nowadays, regarding the use of Internet and the language of online communication. Our aim is, therefore, to discuss the impact of Internet on language in general, and also on peculiar languages particularly. We shall try to identify to some extent, a few linguistic characteristics of the so-called electronic evolution and see whether the revolutionary way in which we use the language online is becoming different from our daily linguistic behaviour.

There must be made a clear-cut distinction between the paper-based communication (letter writing, telegrams) and the online communication (netspeak). The traditional paper-based communication relies on rules and conventions; the older generations employ their knowledge instinctively and very rarely break these rules. Some psychologists would argue that this trend of not using handwriting – in fact who is writing letters nowadays?, does not stimulate creativity, the capacity of memorising. People read less and less, and write even less. If they have to write something or fill in a document, it is a very stressful effort because they are not used to handwriting anymore, and they are used to only sign ready-made documents. About 17 years ago, calligraphy (handwriting) as a subject matter has disappeared from the Romanian schools. Decades ago, it was a school discipline for pupils in the primary schools; now it no longer exists. According to scholars, handwriting supports the cognitive circuits in the brain and when writing something by hand, we express ourselves in longer and more elaborate sentences. When we type, we only communicate the essential and there is no poetry, sensitivity, imaginary, originality, nor inspired and imaginary communication; everything is dry and sticks to facts like in a scientific communication. People no longer try to find the right word to express their ideas and feelings, what James Joyce called ‘le mot just’. In the case of the Internet equivalent of traditional writing – e-mails or texts – there is no tradition. Some multinationals see handwriting as the reflection of a candidate’s personality; therefore, they do not accept typed / computer processed applications and they always insist on handwritten
document. These companies have a graphologist who will analyse the handwriting of each applicant and will examine each letter. S/he will eliminate those candidates who do not ‘fit’ for the job, and even if the candidate, theoretically, may seem the best for the job, s/he is not selected for the interview. The graphologist will identify those features which ‘betray’ the candidate and do not make him/her fit for that position.

There are some letters, such as those expressing condolences or congratulations for promotion or for being appointed in a higher position, which are also compulsory handwritten. If we want to show our consideration for family members, close friends, or people we appreciate, we do not send a ‘ready-made’ greeting card for Christmas, Easter, or other holidays, but we write one ourselves. The recipient will appreciate it if we took the trouble to write it and word it ourselves. However, the young generation very often disregards these conveniences and use the e-mail even in such cases. Most people have started using the e-mail or texting less than two decades ago; however, most of them disregard the factors and rules they should obey and consider, so as to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstandings of their texts.

15.2 Netspeak

Netspeak is a compound noun – speak involves both writing and talking; it also comprises listening or reading. Netspeak refers to speaking in ways commonly used to converse in text on the Internet. According to macmillandictionary.com, netspeak is ‘the special language, abbreviations, and expressions used by people when communicating using the Internet’. Netspeak, or the Internet language is ‘written speech’ (Elmer–Dewitt 1994), while Davis and Brewer (1997:2), quoted by David Crystal (2006:27) 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’ (Crystal, 2006:27). Some of the newly invented words belonging to netspeak are already included in the Oxford Dictionary of New Words 1997 (e.g. e-text, e-zine, e-cash, e-money). Other words are not yet included in this dictionary still, but we can come across them in online communication: e-lancers, e-management, e-government, e-books, e-voting, e-newsletter, e-cards, e-shop. The number of these new words that will still be in use in the future is impossible to predict, as language changes all the time. Netspeak – the type of language used on the Internet, displays some characteristic features which make it different from the traditional correct language; these features can be noticed if we study pieces of writing in online communication and are due to their electronic, global, and interactive character. Netspeak is mainly used on social media websites, online messengers, sms and very often in informal short e-mails. It is a code consisting of simpler or modified spelling of words in order to avoid wasting time while typing a message (texting). Messages are usually written as if someone were really talking (as mentioned in the two previous definitions), and might, therefore, not have the correct grammar or punctuation that formal writing should have (e.g., Marry: hey, bff how

As for the reasons why these linguistic inventions are popular, a large amount of abbreviated terms and acronyms are used to speed up texting by shortening words, or commonly used expressions into a couple of characters. Some of these new words ended up in becoming a trend, especially among teenagers. Emoticons are another variant of netspeak that uses specific characters that translate into an emotion (simplified facial expression); they are widely spread and something used to express agreement, disagreement, feelings in general, etc.

The most commonly used abbreviations are: u = you, ur = your, u r = you are, LOL = laughing out loud, BFF = best friends forever, IM = instant message, PM = private message, btw = by the way, OMG = oh my god, xoxo = hugs and kisses.

The most commonly used abbreviations in an SMS are: & = and; 2 = two, to, too; 2DAY = today; 2MORROW = tomorrow; B = be; BF = boyfriend; B4 = before; BRO = brother; BT = but; C = see; D8 = date; GF = girlfriend; GR8 = great; L8 = late; PLS = please; U = you; UR = your; ASAP = as soon as possible; CUL = see you later; HRU = how are you; LOL = laughing out loud; MU = miss you; IC = I see; X = kiss.

Owing to its popularity among youngsters, we have tried to identify some of the grounds that may explain why texting and instant messaging are frequently used:

- Texting is fast; it is phone-to-phone instant communication and it is not connected to the Internet, hence does not make use of a server, like in the case of e-mails. Consequently, it is sent to the addressee almost instantly and the reply may come within seconds. If a longer and more complicated text is to be transmitted, texting is not to be used; in such a case, the e-mail should be sent or a phone call should be made.

- Instant messaging is very much similar to face-to-face dialogue, by means of modern technology; therefore one may often see young people typing on Twitter, Facebook Messenger, or WhatsApp. It is an instant conversation device and youngsters can be frequently seen to message while standing in line, during classes, or even when socialising.

In general, instant messages are preferred for quick answers, as phone calls take longer and are time-consuming.

- Due to smart phones, texting and instant messaging are easier, e.g., when the Iphone was launched, its advantage over the other competitors was that it had the video function enabling the user to see the interlocutor.

- People answer texts far more than phone calls or e-mails (according to specialists, 8 trillion texts were sent in 2014, 95% of those were read within the very first 3 minutes, while only 14% of phone calls to businesses were answered, and only 12% of e-mails were ever opened at all).
According to Moise J., Para I, Istodor D., (2014), if a business partner wants to get in touch with another party and also wants make sure s/he gets a reply, the best solution is to text.

- Texting gives both users flexibility to answer on their own time, after considering the problem, when stopping if driving/in the middle of something.
- We need to ask for some information on the spot or we have something important to communicate and we want to avoid disturbing people around us. We may be in the wrong place (church, theatre, workplace, on a bus, on a train, in crowded places), still we need to contact someone. Using the phone would be a sign of poor education if we disturb people around us and talk about private matters in public. In some venues, such as schools, universities, restaurants, churches, theatre halls, concert halls, it is forbidden to use the phone. For example, in Italy, in classy restaurants people are not allowed to use the phone, and even from the technical point of view, in some of them, it is impossible to use the phone, due to technical reasons (e.g., Verdi Restaurant, All’ Alba AbanoTerme, Italy).

Instead of texting, sometimes only emoticons are used; these symbols will convey our state of mind, such as sad, happy, sorry, etc.

This kind of fast communication, which is very popular nowadays, has developed recently, and it is characterised by some changes in the way people communicate, i.e., it has some specific features which we will speak about in the next sub-chapter.

15.3 Netspeak Features

Internet vocabulary is, maybe, the most important netspeak features; however, it does not contain any terminology belonging to IT. New words and elliptical sentences are being used and they are only used in Internet communication. A resource for enriching the netspeak lexis is computer hardware: freeze, lock, down, crash; some others have emerged for the Internet users themselves: netizens, neters, netheads, surfers, wannabees. Some of them are neologisms, but most of them are everyday words used by netizens with a different meaning than the one we already know.

According to Crystal, (2001b), ‘a popular method of creating Internet neologisms is to combine separate words to make a new word - compound (e.g. cyber-surfers)’ (Crystal, 2001b:6). Some elements appear repeatedly: bug (bugfix, bugnet, bugtracker), mouse (mouse pad, mouse click, mouseover), click (click-and-buy, one-click, double-click, left click, right click), web (webcam, webmail, webmaster, Webster (a person that acts like a dictionary), webhead (web addict)), ware (groupware, shareware, freeware, firmware), hot (hotlist, hotlink, hotmail, hotJava, hotspot), the symbol @ (abbreviation coming from accounting — at the rate of has sometimes a prefixal function — @ home, @ command), blends (parts of different words joined make a new word, such as: cybercide (the killing of someone in a virtual game), infonet, hypernet, netleg, netiquette,
netizen, netnews, netspeak, usenet, the substitution of a compound by an equivalent sounding entry: *e-mail* (electronic mail), *e-commerce* (electronic commerce), *e-cruting* (electronic recruitment), *dot* (dot address, dotcom organizations). Even Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft and maybe the most well-known IT specialist, has published in 1999 a book called ‘Business @ the speed of thought’ (Gates, 1999), where he makes use of the @ sign. He also uses the @ sign instead of the preposition *at*, suggesting in a way the type and contents of the book – business and the Internet.

Besides the above mentioned examples, there are also individual coinages which characterise many conversations, but it is impossible to know them all, as usually they are popular within a certain community of netizens or a group of close friends.

Change of grammatical category — conversion may also be encountered, usually from noun to verb: to mouse, to 404/303 (be unable to find the page).

Abbreviations also characterise netspeak, as acronyms are very common: *BBS* = bulletin board system, *BCC* = blind carbon copy, *DNS* = domain name system, *FAQs* = frequently asked questions, *HTML* = hypertext mark-up language, *ISP* = Internet server provider, *Letter + number combinations are also common* (GO2Net, *W3C* = World Wide Web Consortium, *P3P* = Platform For Privacy Preferences), chat groups (which mainly consist of people who know each other pretty well may have their own abbreviations, although it is possible to find them in e-mails and web pages too).

Some of the most commonly used abbreviations, identified by David Crystal are:

The smart mobile phones may have small screens and, therefore, new abbreviations have been ‘invented’; sometimes the acronyms are not limited to words only, but also to sentences, such: *AYSOS* = are you stupid or something?, *CIO* = consider it done, *CIO* = check it out, *GTG* = got to go, *WDYS* = what did you say? Individual words may also be reduced to just some letters: *PLS* = please, *THX/TX* = thanks, *WE* = whatever, *B4N* = bye for now.

Another important characteristic of netspeak is also its typical graphology and in general, all orthographic features are affected; an example is the random use of capital letters (when something needs to be emphasised) and the use of small letters almost everywhere. The principle ‘save a keystroke’ functions everywhere, as whole sentences may be written avoiding capitals or the absence of punctuation. Small letters are generally used; the use of capitalization adds extra emphasis, of underlines the importance of whatever needs to be communicated. However, in some contexts capitals are a must, as they may be abbreviations of institutions, organizations and
they may be somehow confusing, as for example: domain names in web addresses and many others (e.g., Google, Wikipedia, UVT, FEAA, etc).

BRB: be right back; FWIW: for what it's worth; HTH: hope that helps; IDK: I don't know; IIRC: if I recall correctly; IMO/IMHO/JMHO: In my opinion/In my humble opinion/Just my humble opinion; KWYM/KWIM: know what you mean/know what I mean; OTOH: alternatively; TMI: too much information; TIA: thanks in advance; TTYL: talk to you later; WTG: way to go; IRL: in real life; PM: private message; OMG: oh my god; PITA: pain in the ass; AWOL: away without leave; KISS: keep it simple, stupid; MIA: missing in action; DNR: do not resuscitate; OOP: out of power; RPG: role-playing game; WPA: well-played all; DIY: do it yourself; ARC: advanced reader copy; HEA: happily ever after; WIP: work in progress; DNF: did not finish; DQ: disqualified; FTW: for the win.

Netspeak also has a distinctive spelling practice. Since the Americans are the best in computers, U.S. spelling is more frequently used than British English, sometimes for reasons of economy (American words are one character shorter than the British ones – mediaeval/medieval; colour/color; labour/labor; behaviour/behavior). Innovations in spelling have also been noticed: non-standard spellings (e.g., tunez, filez, downloadz). Non-standard spellings are also used in informal conversations; spelling errors in messages or e-mails are not seen as a sign of poor or lack of education; many non-standard spellings imitate pronunciation (kay, sokay = OK; cheeze = cheese; iz = is; dat = that, tha = the, bai = bye). Several recent spellings introduced by youngsters could also be mentioned: kool for cool, or the use of small zero, or of the percentage sign (0 / %) for small o; the alternative use of eh for y (bunneh = bunny; funneh = funny; happeh = happy).

Another important characteristic of netspeak is open or no punctuation at all, being justified in a way as netspeak is a speech itself in a written form. Still, the use of punctuation depends on people, some are very careful in writing a message or an e-mail, while others do not use punctuation at all. Symbols ($ for s, £ for l) and emoticons are widely used (https://messenger.yahoo.com/features/emoticons/). Asterisks are also used to underline or emphasise the importance of something (It is a *very* *important* *issue*), while normally the sentence would be: It is a very important issue. The use of asterisks calls attention to that specific issue.

As it has already been mentioned, the most typical features of netspeak may be found in its vocabulary and graphology, where it is easy to introduce innovation. Grammar innovations are less frequent, and if they occur, they are restricted to a particular group of users. A typical example is verb reduplication, which means that a verb is written twice, in order to express great pleasure, astonishment, or exasperated reactions; sometimes, it is an indication that the conversation is ended (e.g., love it! love it, go! go!, see you see you). A typical example of this characteristic is using capital P, placed after the word, thus turning the sentence into a yes/no question (e.g., cinema P = ‘are you going to the cinema?’); however, this kind of language is distinctive of a particular group of users and cannot be extended to the Internet users in general.
The features of netspeak identified in the preceding section may not influence our language, but they can provide a firm starting point for taking into consideration, netspeak as an authentic language variety, as many scholars argue in its favour.
15.4 Conclusions

In this paper, we have tried to analyse the new and very popular form of communication, i.e., online communication and identify some of the main features of netspeak. Netspeak is a new kind of language, evidently related to English, and used as an instrument of communication; it has its features, which we have identified from several Internet sites, by speaking with our students, and of course, reading the literature related to netspeak, especially David Crystal’s articles and writings. We have also mentioned the platforms people, especially teenagers, use for online communication, which are so often used that people have become addicted to smartphones and tablets. This electronic revolution has brought about a lot of changes; however, we do not consider that they will affect the language and the way we speak; most innovations in netspeak are used for the sake of texting faster, or ‘saving a stroke’.

We have also noticed some modest attempts to use abbreviations and emoticons in Romanian SMSes and online communication. Our first contact with network was the name of the English band U2; then labels on presents to be given for Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, Easter; and those labels have the short text 4U = for you. Some firms have also started to use abbreviations (ETA 2 U – the name of an IT firm from Timisoara, Romania).

In general, netspeak is used by the young generation, especially in ‘virtual socialising’, as they are addicted to the new technologies. Even if netspeak may seem unintelligible for most of us, as it is far from what we consider standard writing, still this kind of language does exist and is used on a large scale, especially by the young generation.

Acknowledgement: This work was co-financed by the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007–2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Competitive Researchers in Europe in the Field of Humanities and Socio-Economic Sciences. A Multi-regional Research Network, sau Această lucrare a fost cofinanțată din Fondul Social European prin Programul Operațional Sectorial pentru Dezvoltarea Resurselor Umane 2007–2013, Cod Contract: POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Cercetători competitive pe plan European în domeniul științelor umaniste și socio-economice. Rețea de cercetare multiregională (CCPE)

References

Original scientific paper received on 26.10.2007. Accepted for publication 28.11.2007.

Webography:

Emoticons: https://messenger.yahoo.com/features/emoticons/, seen 10/08/2015