

## Is the Internet Destroying Our Language?

Halloween is upon us. A time for scary stories, trick-or-treating, the annual movies about Jimmy Kimmel urging parents to tell their kids they ate all their hard-earned candy (youtube that shit, it is redonkulously funny), and just general fright&terror. But one thing that seems to scare multitudes of people these days has little to do with witches and zombies: they are afraid that our language (be it English or Dutch) is being systematically raped and pillaged. And who do they deem responsible for all the murder and mayhem? The Internet. And as soon as language on the Internet goes, our whole society will collapse. Wassup with that? Why Internet, and why that link between values and language?

### All change is bad

The Internet in general is (of course) some sort of virtual Sodom & Gomorra, where you can put your virginity on eBay, where terrorists strife, and where 14% of all searches are porn-related. And people do worry about this a lot: see for example the recent legislation passed in the UK to implement pretty strict porn filters. It is striking however, just how strongly people feel about these issues: to some extent, it actually seems to be the language deterioration that they blame for all this behavior. Young people (who else?) abuse the language systematically, and especially on the Internet. What people are worried most about are the acronyms, abbreviations, and contractions which so flood the Interweb. Examples galore: from YOLO to *w8 4 me*. People are supposedly getting sloppy: spelling mistakes are everywhere. The world is falling into disarray, especially now.

First of all, the thought that language is deteriorating is not new: in

one of his letters Cicero sighs that “people used to speak correctly, but with the passing of time a certain degradation has set in”. This was not some blogger complaining: Cicero wrote this in his *Brutus*, about 46 BCE. In a same vein, the linguist bishop John Wilkins complained that “especially in the late times” (in this case the 17<sup>th</sup> century) language was being disguised with false appearances (i.e. flowery, unnecessary words). In the present day people are focusing their attention on new variants of language: most notably Netspeak and texting: language use here is destroying syntax, young people can't write anymore, that sort of thing. The reason why people always focus on language seemingly has to do with identity: use of a certain language is an important tool for social cohesion. Furthermore, there seems to be a strong link in the public mind between social values and language use: in a classic case of slippery slope argumentation one can find arguments along the lines of “the whole world is going down the drain: youngsters are not spelling right, and before you know it they will start having sex in the streets.”

It all has to do with one all-encompassing yet extremely scary concept: change. Everything changes all the time, and that is a bewildering thought for almost everyone. So we try to hold on to the past, and reject change: everything should stay as it is and everything that changes is bad. This idea stems from the Greeks: in their religious view, mankind was slowly going down the drain: from the Golden Generation to the Silver to the Bronze to the Iron. Many people still have this idea, the pervasive everything-used-to-be-better. But this is a falsehood, best exemplified in



Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*: the main character idolizes the 1920's, but on arriving there finds out that someone from that time thinks it is all crap, and idolizes the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This ties in with Seneca and Wilkins: we think that we are so special, and that language is now really being flushed away, but I regret to inform you, boys and girls, that the good Bible, otherwise known as the Treasury of One-liners, is right again: *nihil novum sub sole*.

The main reason why people nowadays YET AGAIN think that proper speech etc. is dying out is nevertheless quite interesting, because it is different from before. It has to do with increased linguistic awareness. People have been employing acronyms and deviant punctuation as long as there has been writing, but it is only now that people are becoming generally aware of this. This awareness is the last in a long development of linguistic awareness. Think back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. You lived in a village, milked some cows, churned some butter, and if you were lucky you would visit the nearby town once or twice. This was the standard for innumerable people: of course some people like Mr. Darcy and such would be up and about, but most people stayed close to their birthplace. As a result of this, the only language they came into contact with was the language of their neighbors, who happened to speak just like they did.

Then people started moving around: increased social mobility caused increased linguistic awareness. Not to mention that darn Satanchild the radio. Suddenly all the farmers and country hicks found out that people actually talked very different in other places. And vice versa: what a surprise it must have been for Joe Average that his paragon in some other town spoke almost completely unintelligible. Of

course, people thought that their own language was the best, and that all the others were making a mess out of it. Interestingly, the opposite seems to be true: since mass media emerged we are speaking much more alike, which is a tragedy for dialect fans, but not such a bad development for Dutch (to take an example), because it strengthens our position against the tsunami of English linguistic influence. In conclusion: change in general and linguistic change specifically is of all ages: it is hardly possible that internet will suddenly destroy it.

### **The linguistic threats of the Interweb**

Anyway, these are just some general thoughts on why (language) change is perceived as scary. Let's take a look at some interweb-specific linguistic "problems".

My favorite claim is that punctuation is being perverted by claims such as "Best. Song. Ever.". We are of course not dealing with a fully formed sentence here, and the use of the period is unusual, but is it perverting anything? Hardly. Quite the opposite in fact: have you ever wondered *why* we use punctuation? Nowadays most punctuation signs are employed to disambiguate otherwise too complex sentences, such as "John, who had hit Mary, who was being a little bitch, loved her yet." However, punctuation started its life to indicate pauses for speakers: full stop is a long pause, comma is a shorter stop. This is what is also happening here: the full stops indicate pauses. Punctuation goes back to its rootz, so to speak. The reason *why* these are used is also QI: for emphasis. So, the humble full stop is gaining an expressive dimension hitherto only attributed to the question and exclamation marks: it is emancipating itself! People who deny this new function are only trying to

keep the full stop down. Rebel! Fight. The. Man.

Then of course there are all the acronyms, like YOLO and such, all the spelling mistakes, and all the weird words. Firstly, a lot of the annoyance towards these linguistic utterances is simply general old-young annoyance. But people should be happy that young people are creating so many new words: that shows how alive the languages are, and how much people enjoy using them and playing with them. Furthermore, there are two very important points to take into consideration when criticizing spelling mistakes for example: the volume of output and the relative informality of the written Internet. These are tied together very firmly.

The distinction between formal and informal speech is becoming increasingly blurred. It used to be the case that writing was usually more formal than speaking, but this seems to be changing because of the Internet and WhatsApp and texting, which are all prone to informal use of written language. Let me just stress again, that this is not new, and that people have been using informal written language as long as there has been written language. However, three things are new: the sheer amount, the accessibility, and the durability of the output. Firstly, I firmly believe (but have no evidence yet) that the balance between speaking and writing is shifting. Say that all your language use is divided up into passive and active, and then into speaking, writing, listening and reading. We used to predominantly speak and listen, but since the Internet I think we write and read significantly more than ever before. As with all things increasing in frequency, there comes an increased need for brevity and efficiency: one of the reasons why one may encounter new abbreviations online (again,

abbreviations are nothing new: in Latin, letters were often started with S.V.B.E.E.V. Look it up). People start treating some written language with the informality of spoken language, resulting in spelling errors and hasty grammar. Again, nothing new, but the problem with the Internet is (a lesson anyone may take to heart generally): everyone knows what you are doing, everyone can read your messages, nearly everyone has access to most of what you do. Combine that with the fact that messages stay on the internet forever (well, at least for the last 20 years that we have had it around) and you have a combustible combination.

So, you have to be careful: the rules about language use on the Internet are only just emerging. It seems clear that any user who does not want to be flamed needs to keep an eye on what kind of message s/he is leaving where: in interpersonal communication some degree of informality is fine, but when you react to a news story for example saying “wow there boat is totally on fire #yolo” then you may not be taken altogether seriously. My advice (and again, this is broadly applicable, you are welcome): be alert and take your audience into account.

I do not think the Internet is destroying language. To some degree, the idea of language deterioration is a consequence of a general fear of change, which is all-pervasive in our society. Also, people are uncertain about the rules of the Internet: it is so new that nobody knows how (in)formal one can write. So try for a little compassion, and please, do not worry: whatever your parents are saying about young people destroying everything, their parents probably said the exact same thing about them.

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