

INTERNET AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITY: CULTURALLY MOTIVATED SPECIFIC MORPHOLOGICAL PROCESSES IN NEOLOGISMS

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Introduction

The technologically conditioned Internet interface has led to the development of a specific mode of language. The features of Internet communication include the absence of prosodic and paralinguistic features, in addition to the limitedness of the set of symbols and the need for economy of time and space. This mode of language is used not by a specific class or group in society, but rather by any member operating within particular conditions and the linguistic environment. As a result, all the processes of this mode of language can be explored only by taking into consideration factors that are purely linguistic, technological and sociological factors together. The aim of this paper is to explore the development of neologisms and their morphological features in the light of this specific linguistic and extralinguistic environment.

Although the Internet communication mode is a rapidly developing phenomenon with manifestations in a number of different languages, some general features can still be traced. However, the exceptional features of communicative style require corresponding tools of analysis (cf. Halliday 1985), which were developed by Bodomo and Lee (Bodomo, Lee 2002) and Croft (Croft 2005). English is universally acknowledged to be the main lan-

guage on the Internet in general and within Relay Chats specifically. As a result, its patterns of development may be reflected in the Internet modes of other languages. There are numerous observations (e.g. Ryklienė 2001) that there are no fundamental differences among Internet languages, which is natural as all these languages develop in almost identical conditions. As distinctive phenomena of the Internet language gradually enter not only youth slang, but also standard languages, Internet style becomes an important subject of analysis, which gives the possibility to predict the future development of traditional language modes.

The article sets out to discuss the peculiarities of Internet English lexical and morphological deviations, that is, the Internet-style creative activity and its differences from Standard English, together with the main factors conditioning specific alterations.

The analytical method of the paper is based on the exploratory model established by William Croft (Croft 2005), who views language as a unity of components with their representative aspects, and sees morphology in the light of analytical ideas developed by Martin Haspelmath (Haspelmath 2002).

A corpus of texts from various Internet relay chat networks (mainly *Undernet*, *Efnet* and *Dalnet*; the database is located at www.irclogs.ws) was used for this paper. The networks are not restricted thematically; specific chatrooms concentrate on computer technologies, music, lifestyle, etc. or are conditioned regionally (e.g. Australia). The corpus contains approximately 1,800,000 words. Further in the text, all examples are marked by *U*, *E* or *D* for the three networks. If no reference is given, the lexical unit concerned may be found in any of the chatrooms.

Given that languages aim at fulfilling the needs of a user society, the specific features of the Internet language should reveal the linguistic philosophy of the world of Internet users. The technological perspective adopted here specifies that Internet culture is not merely a culture of information, but complementarily develops a culture of Internet discourse skills, in which the message contents are parallel to the message form (Rumšienė 2004: 49). Internet language tends to perform the functions of speech and is closely related to it by a number of shared features; at the same time, it faces virtually the same limitations as a written language does. The dispute concerning the real nature of Internet language has not been concluded, but the latest trends refer to “the third medium of communication”, close to maximally informal spoken language (cf. Hale, Scanlon 1999, Crystal 2001, Shortis 2001, etc.).

Individual freedom is the main reason for multidirectional creativity in Internet English. It is intensified by the absence of any elements imposing the use of a universal system of signs on representatives of various cultures. Thus, anthropological differences lead to slight variations even in case of the interpretation of fundamental laws. This explains not only the abundance of neologisms in Internet English, but also the variety of their nature. As the Internet community is supposed to be created through shared beliefs and strategies of action, users subconsciously or even consciously conceive the basic rules of “language behaviour”. In fact, practice shows that no essential problems of (mis)understanding arise between native and non-native speakers, as well as between representatives of different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, it is possible to claim that some sort of universal code does exist, adherence to which ensures mutual understanding throughout the communication process.

Neologisms, along with non-verbal signs aimed at the expression of the paralinguistic elements of speech, represent the specific symbols of this mode of language. In this context, the object of this paper is to examine the principles governing development of neologisms on the Internet, especially their morphological patterns in the context of the semantic values that are created. In this paper I deal with specific features of conversion, compounding affixation and other specific word-building strategies, emphasising the patterns which are considered unacceptable within the scope of standard language.

The main motifs for the development of new forms are (cf. Rumšienė 2005: 327-8):

- non-represented meaning values;
- irregular forms or forms with atypical affixation;
- long word forms (too many symbols);
- the need for parody or foregrounding experienced by a net user.

As a result, the development of new lexical units may stem either because of the absence of a necessary word or due to the unacceptability of already existing words for largely stylistic reasons. An additional maxim of this creative activity is that all natural things become redundant, and thus apostrophes, gaps between words in set phrases, parts of regularly occurring words and numerous other elements are dropped.

The neologisms of Internet English are extremely flexible; they tend to produce further derivatives by employing regular patterns. There are certain affix shifts between Standard and Internet English, as the computer

language may employ obsolete models and employ irregular word-building patterns. A Net speaker is allowed and even expected to change the language in terms of culturally motivated limits. Hale and Scanlon believe (cf. Hale, Scanlon 1999: 3–22) that, because of the nature of Internet conversation, its participants should play with voice, i.e. their utterances should reflect linguistic inventiveness, creativity, play in the form of new words and odd constructions. In addition, online language users should aim their discourse at its audience and share its background and style (which in fact is an emphasis on the process of collective creativity).

Of all the neologisms used in the process of analysis of this paper (331 lexical units and their derivatives), 38,36% are compounds (127 words), 22,66% are affixation-based neologisms (75 words), 16,01% are words containing new roots (53 words), there are 26 cases of conversion (7,86%), shortenings and parody-based cases of mixed types of derivation make 5,44% (18 words) each, and other types of derivation when more than one strategy is employed produce 4,23% of total usage of neologisms (14 cases).

Conversion in Internet English

The relatively simplest method of neologism production is conversion. It is extremely convenient to users, as an existing word only acquires a new function as another part of speech. Several useful things are achieved: first, the neologism has no more symbols than the source so that the law of time and space economy is observed, and, second, the pattern is very simple so that even those participants of communication who use English as a foreign language can easily recognize and further employ the new word. As a result, although this method is not frequent (less than 10 per cent of all innovations), these derivatives usually get established. While in Standard English, conversion is usually a long and natural process, on the Internet it is immediate. *A feel, to heart, to message*, etc. simply denote the action related to the source or refer to subjects related to activities (“to feel → a feel: <Alaric-school> And go for a kinda shaman *feel*”, *E*). As a result, conversion may take place merely due to style issues, e.g. “an error” produces “to error” despite the existence of “to err” (“[...] because mail *was erroring* with the imap error”, *E*). On the other hand, it is possible to claim that “to err” and “to error” are two different words, the first of which denoting the loss of one’s way, and the latter referring to the occurrence of errors in computers.

However, this is not always the case; in Internet English there is no substantial difference between “a feel” and “a feeling”. Although a large majority of conversion-produced neologisms are verbs, virtually any part of speech may be derived by this method.

Conversion in Internet English is much more popular than in Standard English. It is motivated by a number of reasons; first of all, it is a very simple derivational process; second, it is an economic derivational process since it adds no new symbols to the initial stems; third, when several parts of speech have identical forms, they are easier to memorize and use. Unlike Standard English, where conversion processes were natural and took much time, Internet English users actively practice this strategy. Internet English poses no restrictions on the conversion patterns in terms of parts of speech. Conversion-based neologisms may both fill in the lexical gaps of Internet English and substitute already existing affix-laden multimorphemic words.

Affixation in Internet English

Affixation is more frequent than conversion. The main reason for this is the indefiniteness of converted lexical units. While it is easy to interpret *to message* as “to send a message”, the same would be impossible with “to manage → a manage” (*U*) or “to execute → an execute” (*U*). Conversives are most frequent in cases of a lexical unit being narrowly related to a single action. As Google® is an Internet search program, which is not expected to perform any other functions, the derivative “to google”, i.e. to search on the Internet by using Google®, is natural. In addition, a number of the lexical units which are widely used in Internet English already have conversion pairs with specific meanings, e.g. “to paste → (a) paste”. Consequently, the application of compounding is limited by the semantic and lexicological factors of precise definition and already existing lexemes.

Affix-based neologisms are comparatively frequent since affixes possess set meaning values; thus the meaning of “uncool” (un + cool) can be detected using purely logical operations: something is not great (cool). Similarly, “bestness” (best+ness, *D*) is the quality of being the best. It violates some formal rules of word building as the suffix “-ness” is not added to adjective forms of the superlative degree, but the pattern of meaning development is totally clear.

Generally, affixational derivatives may be divided into two large groups:

lexical units with already existing equivalents and neologisms developed to reflect new semantic values. When there are a number of allomorphs (e.g. *il-*, *im-*, *in-*, *ir-*, *un-*, etc.) or semantically close affixational morphemes, a predominant unit may be developed. As a result, the transition from “inappropriate” to “unap(p)ropriate” (*U*) or from “nonexistent/ in-existent” to “unexistant” (*D*) is motivated by the principle of language standardization. Internet language tends to simplification, and “accessible” is transformed to “accessable” due to its higher frequency of application.

It is frequently believed that such mistakes are caused by the Internet users’ inability to spell correctly. However, an extensive experiment by Ferrera and others (Ferrera 1991) proved that the level of orthography skills of most so-called netizens is not lower than the average of the society of native speakers, and most misspellings are noticed but not corrected if the message is still transparent to the addressee. Only about two per cent of all mistakes were corrected because they made utterances ambiguous.

New meaning values usually stem from the presence of new phenomena in everyday life, and the development of neologisms is triggered by attempts to substitute frequently used extensive descriptive phrases. Thus “to unmute” stands for switching the sound on again, while “to unpause” denotes the action of finishing a pause and continuing a game. There is a popular belief that the creativity of Internet English is mostly restricted to such lexical units as “to counterspell” (to act against some spell, *E*) or “to dispel” (to annul some spell, *E*), but, in fact, a relatively small part of Internet chat communication covers technical issues or games; vocabulary of any thematic field may be affected, as the same principles are applied to virtually all the thesaurus. As a result, failing computer users as well as people taking stupid decisions in everyday life may be called “sheepy” (*U*, *E*). Last but not least, computer terms may also be transferred to everyday language.

Affixation is usually based on the word building patterns of Standard English; most Internet-specific neologisms have counterparts in other modes of language. Thus “cool” produces “coolth” (*D*) on the basis of the regular pair “warm → warmth”. As has already been mentioned above, all the morphological heritage of the English language rather than currently active morphemes of Standard English can be applied in word building processes.

Another important difference between Standard English and Internet English lies in the fact that Internet English may employ stems which are blocked for a particular derivation pattern in Standard English. Thus Inter-

net English produces “chatly” (*U*) on the basis of the noun stem *chat* (an adjective with this root does not exist; communication practice does not require it) while, regularly, adverbs are expected to be produced only from adjectives. This relative liberty also explains the abundance of neologisms in Internet English and their oddity to an inexperienced addressee’s ear.

On the other hand, intuitively feeling that the preceding examples violate traditional structures, even inexperienced users face no difficulty in dealing with the meaning values. On the whole, the structure of the word remains maximally simple, and there seem to be no cases in which the root-only word acquires an affix and preserves the old meaning. In fact, two essential factors, namely, economy and stylistic reasons, which also largely overlap, condition the present run of vocabulary development processes. However, in some cases, affixes are treated with slight differences of their meaning or with atypical kinds of stems, the latter being much more frequent. First, non-standard paradigms are regularized (“bad→baddest”, *U, E*; “best→bestness”, *D*); second, already existing words may be supplied with affixes (“imagine→imagine”, *U*; “snooze→snoozilate”, *U*); third, affixes may be used in atypical surrounding (“shot→shotness”, *E*, despite the traditional pattern “adjective + ness”). Usage irregularities do not tend to lead to meaning adjustment; all words denoting material objects are liable to acquire abstract counterparts (cf. Rumšienė 2006a).

Internet English largely favours root unification. In Standard English, there are multiple possibilities for variations, e.g. “clear/ to clarify”, but Internet English establishes standards for all derivatives (in this particular case, “clear/ to clearify”, *D*). As has already been mentioned, economy of space and typing time are considered to be major factors in word formation, but regularization overrides these. As a result, according to Halliday’s theory, Internet English develops in such a way that it requires a minimum amount of effort by a user to acquire fluency skills: numerous verbs are regularized (cf. “beated”, *E, D*), spelling is standardized, the attitude to tense form and article usage is lax, and language is extremely flexible. Nevertheless, sometimes language is treated as a game, especially when efforts are made to parody archaized forms: thus “ox → oxen” results in “fox → foxen”, *D*.

Affixation is a tool for producing lexical units with a precise definition of meaning, especially when there are several derivatives from a root. As a result, decoding the meaning of this type of neologisms is limited to an awareness of the semantic values of the stem and the affix(es).

Suffixation is a very frequent method of word building in Internet

English. Net speakers employ virtually all resources presented by Standard English. Most suffix-laden neologisms are created by using the standard patterns of the English language. Due to cultural differences, Internet English needs a variety of lexical units which have no equivalents in Standard English, especially abstract nouns and verbs expressing intensity. Internet English usually leaves no lexical gaps and most groups possess full *noun-verb-adjective* sets. Very few new suffixes are introduced, and these mostly copy the habitual root endings of Standard English words. Internet English frequently regularizes Standard English adjectives and verbs. A reverse process also takes place, as a number of regular paradigms are substituted for by irregular variants on the basis of similar irregularities present in standard language. This type of alteration is frequently based cumulatively on orthographical, morphological and semantic features of words. Rare archaic affixes are occasionally employed by reiterating the historical patterns. Word building is frequently based on foreign, mostly Romanic and Greek patterns, and neologisms are developed according to models that have not been historically present in English. Internet English favours the development of a single variant of root spelling and a trend towards root unification may be observed taking place in parallel with some processes of word building. Some neologisms are created only as a means of amusement; they may feature irregular stems and/or word building patterns. Some of them also violate traditional logic and worldviews.

It is evident that language users mutually agree on the function of particular morphemes: only as long as a particular affix carries the same function through an infinite number of words, can the communicative action achieve conditions of felicity. Thus it is much easier for a root to have a shift in its meaning than for an affix. In addition, many roots gradually turn into affixes. Whenever their meaning values are universally acknowledged, they turn into bound morphemes, which may be combined with numbers of roots.

Other types of derivation in Internet English

There is a tendency to curtail long roots, and affixes may be added to their shorter variants. As a result, the phrase “hello again” is substituted by “relo” (“re” stands for again, and “lo” still makes “hello” recognizable). While this type of innovation reflects the desire to amuse (Internet English largely favours the amusing but logically grounded usage of specific

icons), the frequent application of clippings suggests the prevalence of the law of economy (“congratulations → grats”, “fragmentation → frag”, “we-blog → blog”, “acknowledge(d) → ack” or “something → somat”, *U, D*). In every case, the semantic information provided by the remaining syllable(s) is sufficient but, at the same time, the rejection of everything unnecessary occurs. This process is so frequent that it could be considered to constitute an independent type of word building.

The layout of the text is a significant factor in the philosophy of Internet language. While in oral communication, ideas mostly correspond to phrases, written texts are influenced by the line factor. In addition, some time and space is saved. Spaces between words are frequently used in ways that go against formal technical requirements; they are avoided in file names, website names and other codes, which are automatically interpreted by computers; consequently, technically-biased participants of online communication generally have a different attitude to the function of spaces between words. It is not surprising that the largest number of neologisms are compounds. Language abounds in set phrases and collocations; this is extremely typical of technically-oriented speech, where numerous terms are expressed in two or more separate words. The decision to unite them into one and omit breaks seems natural due to at least two major factors: first of all, this saves space and time, and second, the absence of breaks ensures that the whole word is within a single line. Thus, the number of compounds in Internet English is higher than in Standard English just because the medium and way of communication largely contribute to this.

The principles of compounding may differ, depending on the type of language. English, which is almost deprived of flexions, may link words virtually without restrictions. On the other hand, synthetic languages require a different course procedure; they usually link stems rather than full words (which are usually identical in English). As a result, compounding does not acquire such an overwhelming advantage over rival methods in synthetic languages.

Compounding usually applies to collocations and emphasizes the unity of a concept. It is common in extensive terms and epithets. While in spoken language, much can be expressed by paralinguistic means, Internet communication is restricted to lexical denotation and symbol-based devices, such as smilies. As a result, it is common to produce such compounds as “kickass” (“<Marina> Still a kickass song”). In many cases such alterations are motivated by collocation probability: the action of *copying* in most cases

is followed by *pasting* the copied material, only mail is *sent* on the Internet (films are *downloaded*), etc. As a result, this may be regarded as a natural development of language, satisfying the practical needs of its users.

Internet English compounds are different from those of the Standard Language in terms of the fact that they favour the rejection of unnecessary affixes: thus, “a barkeeper” is transformed to a “barkeep”, *D*. In addition, Standard English compounds seldom include verbs and few verbs are compounds. In Internet English, there is no such restriction and such verbs as “to shitlist” (meaning: to include people into lists of non-desired participants of chat communication) are common (cf. Rumšienė 2006b). As a result, similar structures not only ensure an economic use of symbols, but also foreground a specific Internet style.

The number of new roots in Internet English is relatively low. In addition to abbreviations or acronyms turning into independent words, e.g. “rom” (read only memory), proportionally few cases may be mentioned. In fact, acronyms constitute the most reliable source for the derivation of new roots, as they spread very rapidly and all net speakers are familiar with them. Acronyms corresponding to set phrases, e.g. “ctn” (can’t talk now) are usually treated as fixed units, while acronym abbreviating terms may undergo conversion and act as different parts of speech with corresponding paradigms. As a result, such word forms as “dsling” (using *dsl*, i.e. digital subscriber line) or “rofling” (“rolling on floor laughing”) may be frequently encountered.

It is of importance to pay attention to the possibility of altering the structure of a word; this especially concerns phrasal verbs. Prepositions may be simply omitted if they do not contribute to the specification of meaning. As a result, while *to agree* as a transitive verb has only a pattern with *with*, this may be dropped: “I agree Ubbe”, *U*. Furthermore, prepositions may be incorporated with a consequent transformation to compounds, and “picked it up” is converted to “pickuped”, *E*. This not only satisfies the economy of time and space, but also contributes to the entirety of stylistic features distinguishing an experienced user from a newcomer.

Conclusions

To sum up, a specific form of communication which combines the practices of oral speech and written discourse with technology restrictions

and the alternative possibilities it provides, results in the development of a unique form of language. A new type of depersonalized society favouring linguistic experiments has arisen; its values within the communication process include economy of time and place, and innovativeness. Creative processes in the fields of lexicology and morphology are mostly motivated by non-represented meaning values and by non-standard word forms; this attitude results in the development of high numbers of neologisms, most of which are produced by compounding, affixation and conversion. The new words are very active morphologically so that Internet English is very dynamic. In many cases, analogical patterns of word building may be traced in Standard English. Attempts at parody allow a non-standard interpretation of the morphological laws of the English language, and the lists of active affixes in the two modes of language do not fully correspond. Probably any root may be employed in every meaning-laden part of speech. All redundant morphological elements may be dropped.

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