Writing in the Information Age

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Written language may currently be undergoing a transformation comparable to the original impact of print

IN RECENT years, the 'Information Age' has often been compared to the period when printing first developed (cf. Dewar 1998). During both the printing revolution (15th century) and the electronic revolution (later 20th century on), technological developments have been at the forefront of a transformation in the spread and availability of information. The introduction then widespread use of print six centuries ago led to changes not only in society's management of information but also in language itself. Comparably, present-day information technology has made for easy and rapid access to enormous amounts of information, with hotly debated consequences regarding copyright, censorship, and the communication of information.

Introduction: The 15th-century print revolution

Printing was not invented by Gutenberg. Wooden blocks had been carved and used for printing text and illustrations for centuries before he was born, notably in China. Movable metal type – individual letters or characters that can be grouped together for printing purposes – wasn't invented by Gutenberg either. There are examples of books printed using such type in Korea almost a century before such systems came to be used in Europe. What Gutenberg (or perhaps Laurens Coster) did was to develop a system of movable type for Roman characters, whereby the painstaking work of carving wooden blocks by hand was replaced by a semi-mechanized system. Movable type was ideally suited to alphabets such as the Roman alphabet, whereas the vast number of ideograms had hindered development in China.

The European printing revolution of the 15th century was principally spurred on by the development of the printing press, with its large print-runs. Pages of text could be printed quickly, fairly easily, and with great savings in cost. With great speed, the technology spread throughout Europe and beyond. Within just a few decades printed material became widely available and relatively economical. This revolution in print has been linked to developments in society, in the rise of Protestantism, in scientific discovery, and in the spread of Renaissance thinking (cf. Eisenstein 1979). It is also suggested that printing led to developments in transport: 'With the moving of information in printed form, the wheel and the road came into play again after having been in abeyance for a thousand years' (McLuhan 1964:112). And of course, printing also affected language.

Repeatability and *fixity* are two key terms that are often bandied around when the effects of printing on language are considered: 'Repeatability is the core of the mechanical principle that has dominated our world, especially since the Gutenberg technology. The message of print and of typography is primarily that of repeatability' (McLuhan 1964:172). For the first time, exact linguistic repetition was possible on a vast scale. Before then, most books were produced by hand, written mainly

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by scribes dedicated to the task. There are numerous examples of handwritten copies of books where words and even lines were missed out by scribes, where words, spellings, and other items were altered, notably where one scribe took over from another in mid-sentence and began using very different written forms. With printing, however, each copy became an exact copy.

When the 'written medium' was hand-written, personal variation abounded, but when it became a printed, repeated, exact medium, variation subsided. In language terms, this meant that a single written form became known to vast numbers of readers for the first time. An uncontrolled, individualistic approach to 'writing' was augmented by a controlled and pervasive order.

The English language felt the effects more than most other languages. Being a relatively 'young' language when the printing revolution took place, English was very much a developing language, unlike some of its more 'mature' European cousins. There was a great deal of regional variation in the English of the time and a relatively small number of literate users of the language. The repetition allowed by printing led to the *fixing* of certain written forms, in that each printed copy employed the same language conventions. As a result, vocabulary, spelling and other features started to become standardised, or *fixed*. The term *typographical fixity* is used to define this state of affairs.

It can be said, simplistically, that written language was fixed by printing – that the written form of English differs quite considerably from the spoken form because the written and printed forms have maintained many of the features of English as used some hundreds of years earlier, while the spoken form(s) has/have continued to develop. Indeed some other European languages, notably German, Italian, and Spanish (that were more 'mature' when the printing press made its appearance) have written spelling systems that still today closely mirror pronunciation.

While it took some time for written standards to appear in English, by the 17th century, it had, like other European languages, evolved standard conventions in matters of spelling and punctuation, and spelling guides, dictionaries and other reference works had begun to be published: 'By the middle of the [17th] century, printing conventions had become highly regularized, and the gulf established between the forms of speech and their written representation' (Crystal 1995:66).

In short, the printed word brought about a situation of *regularization*, of *standardization*, without which, for example, British English and American English might have more easily started to go the way of French, Italian and Spanish, becoming mutually unintelligible. For around five hundred years, the effects of printing on written forms have in many ways been repressive, restrictive, indeed obstructive to individuality and inventiveness. But with the electronic revolution, and especially the information technology (IT) revolution of the last twenty-or-so years, much of this is changing. While historians and sociologists see parallels between the development of the printing press and the development of IT, as far as language is concerned it is perhaps the differences that stand out more clearly.

The forces behind the IT revolution

For almost five hundred years, printed material – principally in the form of books and periodicals – accounted for the lion's share of all mass communication of information. Only with the electronic revolution has this changed, thanks (pretty much in order) to telegraph, radio, telephone, television, faxes, computers, internet, emailing, texting and so on. With the minor exception of the telegraph, the first electronic means of communication involved the spoken rather than the written word. The primacy of print in 'writing' has only been challenged very recently. Until just 20-odd years ago, nearly all 'written' mass communication was by means of *printed* material, and we were still very much in the 'paper age'. Now, handwritten messages are almost a rarity, printed text faces great challenges, e-communication predominates, and (so it seems) we are moving rapidly into a 'paperless world'.

The effects of the earlier spoken means of mass-communication are easy to see. The written language of today is much closer to the spoken language than ever before. A comparison of a page from today's *The Times* and the same newspaper just 50 years ago reveals a stylistic abyss. Students who are being taught to write business letters are today often told to avoid being too formal and to write much as we speak. Formal, old-fashioned expressions such as 'we are in receipt of your letter' are to

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be steered clear of in favour of clear, simple phrases such as 'we have received your letter' or 'thank you for your letter'. Likewise 'we are not in a position to …' is to be replaced with 'we cannot …'. In style at least, the written form of the language has become much more relaxed, in great part due to the importance of spoken mass communication (radio, telephone, television) in the 20th century.

However, the latest forms of mass-communication – principally faxes, computers, internet, emailing and texting – are primarily based on the written word. For some, this has been a happy revenge, toppling a predominance of the spoken form of the language. Just as with the print revolution, with the IT revolution people are reading more. But they are also *writing* more. Whereas, before the Information Age, printed books and periodicals were written by the few for the masses, with information technology, more and more people are producing written (typed) information without constraints imposed by printers, publishers and editors. As a result the written form of language is being pushed to the limits (and beyond the limits) of its established conventions.

The need for speed

'Our electric extensions of ourselves simply bypass space and time, and create problems of human involvement and organization for which there is no precedent': Marshall McLuhan (1964:115–6), who had already realised that e-communication implies speedy global communication. In his day, our 'electric extensions' were principally radio, television and telephone (spoken media); now they include the written forms of e-communication. But the need for speed is just as relevant, if not more so. Writing has always been a slower form of communication than speaking, but, in the era of 'messaging', writing at speed is important.

Speedy communication allows less time for careful, organised thought. Partly for this reason, emails, text messages and broadcast messages (instant messages, chat messages) are in many ways stylistically more similar to spoken language than traditional written forms. Contracted forms (*don't*, *he'll*, *she'd've*) are the rule rather than the exception. Elision of the subject is common (*wonder if you're interested*; *have to go*), and modified spellings that reflect pronunciation are widely used (*dunno, gotta*, *kinda*, *howdya*). All such features are far from new, but e-communication has mushroomed their use. It's quicker and easier to write thoughts as they'd be spoken, and informality's the order of the day. Another indication of how emails and messages are closer to the spoken than the traditional written form comes immediately with the salutation (if indeed there is one). *Hi* is the common opening, a *Dear X* is the exception rather than the rule in emails, and it is almost unheard of in messages.

The need to be concise

There would be little call to separate the need for speed from the need to be concise if it were not for text messages (on mobile phones). Emails, IMs (instant messages: exchanged by using MSN Messenger and the like), and chat messages (used in Internet chat rooms) do not have the limitation of space (and cost) imposed by texting. Nevertheless, text messages, emails, and instant/chat messages have influenced each other to a great extent, and some methods of speeding up the writing of IMs and chat messages have crossed over into text messaging, and vice versa. Thus, while all three share many of the features associated with a quest for quick communication, texting stands out as far as the need to be concise is concerned.

Therefore in texts, but not only in texts, single letters are often pressed into service for whole short words. *Where r u?* asks 'Where are you?' and *B, C* and *Y* are often used for *be*, *see*, and *why*. Numbers are employed when they sound similar to words: *8* instead of *ate*", *4* instead of *for*, and *2* instead of *to(o)*. And numbers can also stand for a part of a word: *gr8, b4, there4,* and *2moro* are typical text or chat forms of 'great', 'before', 'therefore', and 'tomorrow'.

Vowels are frequently omitted in texting and chatting, and common words such as *thanks* and *between* are likely to be reduced to *thx* and *btwn*. Final *g*'s in *-ing* forms are often dropped, as in *goin* and *thnkin*. Another common spelling convention is to use *z* instead of a double *r*, giving forms such as *soz* ('sorry') and *2moz* ('tomorrow').

The 20th- and 21st-century love for acronyms finds a perfect outlet in texting, messaging, and chatting. Internet sites abound with lists (such as Ed 88 and Sharpened Productions; see also Cook 2004:44), but it is

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worth citing some examples here: *btdt* ('been there, done that'), *rofl* ('roll on the floor laughing'), *lol* ('laughing out loud'; 'lots of love', depending on context), *brb* ('be right back'), *lmk* ('let me know'), *btw* ('by the way') and *tic* ('tongue in cheek'). Acronyms can, of course, use numbers as well as letters: *g2g* (got to go), *2u2* ('…to you, too'), or they may be a mixture of a reduced word and an abbreviated word, as in *nvrm* ('never mind'), *cya* ('see you') and *kthx* ('OK thanks').

Punctuation is reduced to a minimum to save space and also time, in texts as well as in other forms of e-communication. In the extreme, even spaces between words are omitted. This can result in either a mixture of words and number (*b4goin2shops*), and/or an alternation between upper-case and lower-case letters to single out one word from the next (*GOINcinemaFRI@8canUmakeIT2?*). However, a few forms of punctuation – question marks, exclamation marks and dots (…) – are still found, highlighting the personal and casual nature of this kind of communication. In emails and IM especially, repeated question marks and exclamation marks are so common that the expression *to flame* is used to describe the phenomenon of using multiple exclamations (*!!!*).

Another feature of casual punctuation relates to emails and broadcast messages, where for reasons of simplicity and speed it is not uncommon to use small-case letters throughout. Punctuation purists, such as Lynne Truss, have admitted that with such developments 'punctuation as we know it … is surely in for a rocky time' (2003:196)

Emoticons

When considering the punctuation used in e-language, the nature and use of emoticons must be considered, such as the well-known 'smileys' widely used in e-messages. Making use in the main of punctuation marks, they reproduce faces and moods. With just a couple of symbols, the message-writer can express an emotion or a frame of mind. The Internet has many exhaustive lists (such as Ed 88, Computer User). The classic 'smiley' is :) or :-) , a sad face is :(or :-(, a surprise is :o or :-o , and ;) or ;-) suggests a wink. One advantage of emoticons is that they are truly international, in that just about all people can recognise the emotion being expressed, whatever their native language.

Emoticons have taken on such a life of their own that typing the combination :-) on a normal modern word-processing program is by default automatically re-cast (corrected?) to an evoluted J. Similarly, many instant messenger programs such as MSN Messenger or Yahoo Messenger have an array of built-in enhanced coloured emoticons to choose from, as do some email programs and plug-ins, and some mobile phones. Animated emoticons are also common on some IM programs.

The use of emoticons and other signs and symbols seems in some ways to be an extension of the current general fondness for symbols and logos. Partly as a result of increased international travel where language may be a barrier, and partly because of the greater ease in reproducing symbols and logos, the 'Ladies' and 'Gents' lettering at public conveniences (and their equivalents) has, for example, been almost universally replaced with logographs. The visual culture of the twentieth century has led to a far greater currency of symbols, which, for some linguists, is a development reminiscent of hieroglyphics (Robinson 1995).

Web writing

Going hand in hand with the written features of e-language so far mentioned are other elements of web-page language that ought to be pointed out. Online – and now elsewhere too – it is common to see capital letters being used, for a variety of purposes, as it were *within words*. The most famous online dictionary search engine is *OneLook*, the name presented as a single item with an 'internal' capital L. Others among the thousands of Internet site names and company and product names are: *WordReference*, *AltaVista*, *GuardianUnlimited*, *ScotRail*, *LoanWeb*, *WebCorp, VirtualVineyard*, *ZoneAlarm*. On the other hand, however, many online companies have no capitals at all and/or include the dotcom ending as part of their trade name, as with *lastminute.com*, *bmibaby*, *AllYouCanRead.com* and *ibiblio*. Still others have no initial capital, but a capital letter mid-word, as in *eBay* and *easyJet*. In the world of dotcom companies, capital letters appear to have a whole new set of rules.

A key influencing factor in this new use of upper/lower case letters has clearly been website addresses. Domain names cannot include spaces, but are not case sensitive. A capital letter is thus used to visually divide what might

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otherwise appear as one long unpronounceable word into two or more units: *allyoucanread*, *virtualvineyard*, or *easyjet* are far more readable as *AllYouCanRead*, *VirtualVineyard*, and *easyJet*. When these features are combined with the influence of texting, it need be no surprise to find a rail company called *c2c* ('London city-to-coast'), a toy retailer named *Toys'R'Us*, or an airline called *Jet2*.

Whether we look at texting, chatting, emails, blogs (weblogs), or web pages, the casual discourse style is mirrored in a nonchalant approach to spelling, the use of capital letters, and other aspects of punctuation. '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' (Crystal 2001:45)

Sensational spelling

In the world of e-communication, traditional (dictionary) spellings are often ignored in favour of easier, quicker and more dynamic spellings. Such spellings can be seen as a development of 'sensational spellings': the kind of informal spellings often used in the past in signs and advertising to attract people's attention. Classic examples are *hi* ('high'), *lo* ('low'), *rite* ('right'), *tonite* ('tonight'), *tho* ('though'), *thru* ('through'), *kool* ('cool'), *drinx* ('drinks'), *donut* ('doughnut'), and *Xing* ('crossing'). Generally attractive to young people, such spellings began to make inroads into pop song lyrics, titles and band names from the 1960s onwards, and have now exploded into e-communication. In some instances, however, the phenomenon has gone a step further: *tonite*, for example, is now more likely to be *tonyt*, especially in texting, where every letter counts; a final *x* or *z* commonly replaces a *ks* or an *s*; the letter *k* is often preferred to a hard *c* (especially as spelled *ck*, *ch*, and *qu*).

Alongside features of sensational spellings there is a move towards simplified spelling for certain words. Simplification here generally means writing words in such a way that they more closely represent pronunciation: *sure* therefore becomes *shure*; *love* is often *luv*; *believe* might become *bileev*; *mixed* could be *mixd*; *phone* is often *fone*; *was* and *what* are frequently *woz* and *wot*; and *of* can be *ov*. Nonstandard pronunciations are also involved in such spellings, with *h*'s dropped (*come ere, at ome*, etc) and *th*'s becoming *f*'s and *v*'s: *werf* ('worth') and *bruvva* ('brother'), at least in Britain, Cockney-style.

Leet speak

To some extent, the culmination of the new written form in e-communication seems to be *leet speak* (also known as *l337 speak*). Originally developed as an elitist language (*leet* respelling *elite*), leet speak uses the whole range of letters, numbers, and symbols on the keyboard. Its first users were hackers and online writers who wanted to make sure that only a special group could understand their ideas. It spread beyond the original group and has combined with other features of online writing.

When numbers or symbols are used, they generally have a visual similarity to the letter they replace. Hence the number *3* can replace an *E*, *4* can be used instead of *A*, *7* can replace *T*, and *!* can take the place of *L*. In addition, an *x* or *z* can be used instead of a *k* or *s*, and vowels are often omitted, especially in words ending in *y*: *hppy* ('happy'), *mny* ('many'). Even some common typing mistakes have become usual forms, as in *teh* for 'the', and *nad* for 'and'. Traditional use of upper-case and lower-case letters is often ignored, and indeed capital letters (or a zero for an O) are sometimes used to highlight non-traditional spellings, as in *r00l* for 'rule'. Lines and slashes can even be brought into play to create letters, as in words such as *just* ('_|*ust*') and *no* (|\|0).

Individuality and variety are key features of leet speak, and creativity is a plus, especially when more and more leet-speak terms are being borrowed by chatters and messengers. A term such as *phishing* owes is origins to leet speak, since leet speakers commonly swap the two spellings (*f* and *ph*) for the 'f' sound. And this elite language has also given us the term *warez* for (often illegal) copies of 'software'. An amusing but functional version of Google is available in leet speak at: http://www.google.com/intl/xx-hacker/.

Elsewhere

The developments in the writing system described so far are not confined to English. In many other parts of the world, the twentieth century was characterised by, first, a more casual written form, then the effects on writing of the Information Age. Sometimes features of

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e-communication in other languages are borrowed from English, sometimes they are homegrown. Chatters on the Internet in China may use numbers such as 7456 or 995, or apparent acronyms such as GG or PLMM, mixed in with Chinese characters. In most cases, such numbers or letters are similar in sound to Chinese expressions. When the numbers 995 are read aloud in Chinese they sound close to 'Help me' in English, and this is consequently the e-meaning of the number. As in English, numbers, symbols and letters of the Roman alphabet are given new uses: cf. the *People's Daily* newspaper.

In Italian, many of the features already noted in English can be found. Numbers can replace words: for example, the number 6 in Italian, spoken as *sei*, also represents *sei* (the informal Italian equivalent of 'you are' in English). Words are shortened, *comunque* ('however') becoming *cmq*, while the word *tutto* ('everything") is shortened to *tt*. The letter *x* represents *per* ('for') and the 'foreign' letter *k* replaces *ch* (which has the same sound), leading to such exotic forms as *xké* for *perché* ('why, because'): cf. Ross (2003). Occasionally, a common English word is adopted for texting because it is much shorter than its Italian equivalent: for example, *go* instead of *andare* (Pacchetti 2006).

Similar situations can be found in other languages, but, whether we look at just two or three or many languages, the upshot is that this revolution in the written form is not confined to English. A worldwide change appears to be happening to written forms, which David Crystal has described as 'a technology-inspired informality of expression that didn't exist before' (cf. Ganesan 2004, online). Twentieth-century informality coupled with technology-induced aspects are thus on the verge of creating what could – it seems – be a new form of writing.

A new form of writing?

There are so many factors that make writing in the Information Age revolutionary. The repeatability and fixity of the printing revolution are being overturned for the first time in five hundred years. Electronic communication has challenged a status quo that had become a cornerstone of written and printed language.

While it is true that the information in a webpage can be repeated in millions of homes, it is also true that people can easily copy and alter the written information they find there. And so many of the other printed written forms are individual means of communication. The printed form is no longer produced by the few for the many; the masses are themselves texting, emailing, chatting, blogging, and producing web pages.

While it may be regrettable that handwriting is becoming marginalized, it is clear that only with keyed-in written communications could these changes come about. Handwriting is simply not clear or immediate enough to allow for widespread mixing of letters and numbers: inevitable confusion would immediately occur, for example, between 2 and Z, and 8 and B, and most of the symbols of the keyboard or keypad have never played much of a part in hand-written language.

It should therefore come as no surprise to find that the Information Age, in which the repeatability and fixity of the printed word have been replaced by individuality and flexibility, age-old conventions are breaking down. Some stick-in-the-muds have called this development a 'massive change from the printed word to the bloody electronic signal' (Truss 2003:190).

It is early days, but there are signs to suggest that we are in the middle of a new revolution as far as the written/printed word is concerned. The rigid fixity of the written form is facing its most serious challenge ever. The outcome could be a re-thinking of outdated spelling conventions, and for English at least a much-heralded return to a written form that is closer to pronunciation. However, at this early stage, it is difficult to have a clear picture of what the future might hold.

A flash in the pan?

Just as the telegraph and telegrams came and went, and just as faxes came in and are now on their way out, the written forms of e-communication we are living with today may have their days numbered. Is it really conceivable that text messages will continue for many more decades to be limited to a measly 160 letters, spaces, and symbols? Most instant messaging programs now give users the opportunity to talk – using a microphone or headset attached to the computer – with great ease and quality, rather than communicate through written chats. VOIP communication (Voice over inter-

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net protocol) is taking off in a big way, allowing users to talk both between computers and between a computer and an ordinary telephone. Already text messages seem to be using fewer abbreviations and non-standard forms, thanks to built-in T9 dictionaries which predict (conventional) spellings and make it more complicated for the user to key in acronyms, mixtures of letters and numbers, and so forth.

On the other hand, weblogs (blogs) are a fairly new use of the e-written form, and there are no signs that email is on the wane. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that emails, for example, are becoming less informal (Crystal, in Ganesan 2004), not least because they are entering the realms of officialdom. Indeed, in many countries, an email is considered an official communication, at times on a par with a recorded delivery letter. And both *vlogs* (video blogs) and *sound logs* (often in the form of podcasts) are already beginning to vie with written blogs.

As a result, what may have seemed like a whole new approach to the written form may simply fizzle out within a few years. Or, as Crystal (2001) has suggested, the IT written form may become something of a 'a third medium', neither the traditional written form nor the spoken form.

Predicting the future is, of course, more science fiction than linguistics. What's more, we are clearly only in the early stages of a series of technological developments that are likely to have profound effects on society, and may or may not have equally significant effects on language. And, while we must remember that predicting the future is a near-impossible task, we should also bear in mind that the full effects of the printing revolution on language took hundreds of years to work their way through. Even if things tend to move more quickly nowadays, writing is only likely to be affected by the IT revolution in the relatively long term.

Nevertheless, in a number of quarters there is the sensation that a new phase for language is in the offing: 'Technological progress affecting the media has always had a significant impact on language variety and language change. But there is something about the Internet which takes us into another era' (Crystal 2004:518). Writing in the Information Age is going to be well worth watching. ■

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