

## **Overview of Internet Linguistics in the Context of Sociolinguistics**

Alejandro Ciuba

Department of Linguistics, University of Pittsburgh

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Professor Alexis Brown

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### **Abstract**

The internet, a wide network of computers and servers connected across the globe, is arguably one of the biggest achievements of human society. It contains vast information, and allows us to communicate across the globe in a matter of seconds. With communication, comes the study of it. Particularly, how our communication changes from our traditionally written and spoken forms. “Internet Linguistics” is the term used by linguist David Crystal in his book, *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide*, to describe this subfield which studies online language use. Here, I examine several key concepts highlighted within the first few chapters of his book from an applied approach. I will examine the key facets of internet sociolinguistics, the main differences between various online forms of communication (known as “outputs”), and the linguistic variation of internet discourse via real-life examples gathered from my own repertoire of online conversations. In particular, I will use Discord Message Logs, professional email exchanges, and WhatsApp chat logs to look at these topics. Through examining these concepts in this manner, this paper seeks to enhance the reader’s understanding of internet linguistics and its relationship with sociolinguistics.

*Keywords:* Internet, Linguistics, Sociolinguistics

### **Introduction to Internet Linguistics**

Internet linguistics is the study of language use and change through the internet. The internet itself has caused and highlighted a lot of interesting linguistic phenomena, especially within the context of sociolinguistics. This paper serves as a starting point for anyone who is interested in internet sociolinguistics by broadly examining various phenomena and aspects of internet language use through real-life examples gathered from the author’s personal repertoire of online conversations. All modes of online communication are known as *outputs*, an *output* can

be of any length: from a rebus-text message to a formal email correspondence. Each output is used in different contexts and, therefore, contain different linguistic phenomena. Within each output, there exists individual components that make it up (texts in a chatroom, emails in a correspondence, etc). An individual component of these outputs is a *transmission unit*. Another important aspect to consider when examining the internet from a sociolinguistic point-of-view is how the overall architecture of the internet functions. To explain very succinctly, the internet works via a network of *hyperlinks*, text within online resources which one can click on to access another resource on the internet, creating a network of resources that connect to one another. This is a very important concept because it is necessary for the internet to function and is a unique characteristic of the internet which regular writing cannot accomplish to the same degree.

### **The Speech-Writing Continuum**

Another important idea to establish is the speech-writing continuum that becomes extremely apparent in internet linguistics. All internet outputs fall somewhere on this continuum where speech is on one end and traditional writing lies on the other. Some internet outputs share more in common with speech and others writing; however, there is no clear distinction and there exists a continuum between the two extremes. Yet, in most cases, outputs share a lot of features associated with writing. For example, much like writing, there is a lack of immediate feedback from the recipients of the message to the “speaker.” Even in audio-visual outputs like voice chat or facetime, there exists things like lag and buffering that prevent it from being as stimulant-driven as a normal conversation. There is also the problem of conveying specific emotions through writing. This is especially true when there is a character limit or you do not want to type a lot. Many informal outputs (such as Twitter, Facebook, or Discord) try to alleviate this problem by using emoticons, emojis, and markers (e.g. “/s” to denote sarcasm). The

following example is a conversation taken through the online chat application Discord, an informal chat site where users can create communities of practice (servers) about various topics and can connect with other individuals who join said servers. The server in the example was for students enrolled in university math courses.

*Context: Participant 1 is discussing learning a new concept in their math class.*

*Participant 1: "man series suck tho 🤔"*

*Participant 2: "yeah, i don't like series"*

*Participant 1: "he tried to teach me maclurin and taylor"*

*Participant 1: "I was like what 😐"*

This example demonstrates how participants use emojis combined with a casual writing style to communicate not only the message, but also the emotions associated with the message, like their anger or immediate confusion when they were introduced to the material. While the lack of immediate response is not solved, the limited solution of emoticons and emojis helps users express the intended emotions associated with an utterance.

However, the use of emoticons or emojis is not always possible. Many outputs lie closer to traditional writing, like professional email correspondences. The following is an email written to a professor, with the "proper" prescriptivist grammar usage, proper addressing of the recipient, and overall formal language use.<sup>[1]</sup>

Hello Professor Xavier,

My name is Alexander Crumplebump and I am a current Junior at the University of Georgia State in the School of Computing and Information Sciences. I write to you because I am extremely interested in your LING3040 "Fundamentals Computational Linguistics" course and ask you to grant me permission to enroll into the course for the upcoming Fall 2021 Semester. I am interested in pursuing a linguistics minor and I feel that this course can help me strongly in getting a better understanding of what I want to do with my future linguistics courses. As for previous linguistics experience, I have taken SPAN2332 "Overview of Spanish Linguistics" for my Spanish minor with

Professor Juanita Rodriguez. I am also currently taking LING2000 "Introduction to Linguistics" with graduate student Michael Phong in a 6-week Summer course format, and I am expected to complete this course without any complications.

Thank you for your time,

Alexander Crumplebump

Here, demonstrated, the participants take turns writing to each other's emails in-turn, without the use of informal language or emotion markers because they are considered unprofessional. Email correspondences overall, regardless of professionalism, also follow more in-line with traditional writing (in this sense, emails are essentially just fast-delivered letters).

### **Unique Discourse Features of Internet Speech**

Another interesting way that internet discourse differs from both speech and traditional writing is the way conversations can be had. In speech, the participants (usually) take turns discussing and replying to one another, focusing on one topic at a time. In writing, the participants write to each other, waiting for the previous writer's letter before responding back. However, in many instant messaging applications and forums such as WhatsApp, Discord, Reddit and Twitter, participants frequently both do not wait for the other participants to respond and refer to previously discussed items out of order, resulting in multiple utterances separating the previously discussed subject. This is due to the nature of how we use the internet, we get on in chunks of time where we might write something and then leave to do something else, then return to respond to all the different topics others, who were on, had written about. It is also encouraged by how these websites are structured; participants can see previously stated comments and reply to whichever ones they want to (unless that comment was deleted). The websites also include features to make this way of conversation less ambiguous. For example, when replying to a specific message on Discord or WhatsApp, that message is restated at the top

of the reply. And on Reddit, the way the comments are organized allow users to see who is responding to what via lines drawn from the parent comment, to its children. Below is an example taken from a dyadic (two-person) conversation on WhatsApp, a Facebook (now Meta) chatting application that substitutes regular texting.

*Context: Participant 1 is talking about a science project to Participant 2.*

*Participant 1: “Well I’m on the final part of the laser project”*

*Participant 2: “How’s that going for you?”*

*Participant 1: “I have to research about X-rays”*

*Participant 2: “X-rays? Will they give you superpowers?”*

*Participant 1 replies specifically to Participant 2’s “How are you?” message.*

*Participant 1: “Well, I haven’t done much, I’m still looking for articles about the subject”*

*Participant 2 (Still discussing superpowers): “hmm, an unknown ray sounds a lot like the beginning of a superhero origin story”*

In the example, Participant 1 is using the WhatsApp reply feature to explicitly answer the question stated at the beginning of their conversation, even though the conversation’s topic changed. This feature of internet language makes it extremely unique, allowing for overlapping topics and conversations to continue even if a participant is not currently at their keyboard.

### **Language Change through Internet Speech**

The internet has created a plethora of neologisms, many specific to various outputs. While some are now common words that are used everyday outside the internet (tweet, post, memes, etc.), most are not used outside a small internet sub-community. This nonce-usage of many internet words means that, while the internet is good at being highly productive in the

creation of new words, its overall impact to our everyday language use is rather small. In fact, one of its biggest contributions is its “revitalization” of words that were once infrequent. For example, words like “font,” “edit,” and “options” were given new linguistic meaning specifically related to technology and the internet. For example, the word “file” is now used to mean a document on a computer-archive and that meaning is now becoming the meaning many people think of first when hearing the term. These changes to our language (while small in number) occur at all levels (Crystal).

The internet also has a small set of extremely productive derivational morphemes which can be attached to many words to give them new meaning: *hyper-*, *cyber-*, *e-*, *-web*, *-bot*, and *-ware* are examples of this set. For example, attaching the suffix *-bot* to a word indicates that it is an online chat bot which does something related to the stem (*Statbot* allows users to see statistics in a Discord chatlog). Another contribution related more towards the writing side is the increased usage and creation of acronyms. While many are nonce-usage and community-specific, acronyms like “idrc” (I don’t really care), “idk” (I don’t know), and “iirc” (if I remember correctly) are seen across online communities and in informal writing.

While formal writing on the internet mostly coincides with traditional prescriptivist rules of \*standard language<sup>[2]</sup>, informal writing on the internet has caused many changes to orthography: capitalization, emojis/emoticons, punctuation, and grammar are all given specific meaning. Intercapitalization is used to indicate a mocking/sarcastic tone, while certain emojis can be used in-place of a word or idea (more than just indicating the emotion of a message), even ellipses can indicate things like uncertainty. However, there are some who feel like prescriptivist grammar rules should apply to all outputs, and try to reinforce this idea. The internet has produced one term very popular to describe these people, “Grammar Nazis.”

### Conclusion and Summary

Internet linguistics is a vast area of study which is constantly shaping and reforming itself as technology advances. Likewise, the sociolinguistic observations made on internet speech have also become a great interest for many linguists. Throughout this paper, examples of how the internet has blurred the lines within the speech-writing continuum, given new insight into discourse, deepened our understanding of language change. It is clear that internet linguistics is an extremely important area of linguistic study, and that its relevance to us everyday is reflected ten-fold in its relevance to sociolinguistics.

### Footnotes

1. Names, university affiliations, course information, and GitHub Repository Links were removed for the sake of anonymity.
2. \* (asterisk) used in the style of Lippi-Green to signify the fake-standards of standard languages.

### References

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