

Please cite as:

Warschauer, M. (2002). A review of *Language and the Internet* by David Crystal. *Education, Communication, and Information*, 2(2), p. 241-244.

Book Review

Language and the Internet
David Crystal, 2001
Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
272 pp.
ISBN 0-521-80212-1

Any medium of communication as revolutionary as the Internet is bound to have a profound effect on language. Though many have noted the linguistic changes emerging in online communication, few have studied the phenomena and fewer yet have written about them in a clear and cogent manner. David Crystal's volume on the topic presents a well-organized and highly-readable overview of value to both specialists and non-specialists alike.

Crystal is well-suited to tackle the subject of language change, having authored two previous encyclopedias of language (1995; 1997a). Crystal is a chronicler of language, not an ideologue, and that stance is reflected once again in the book, which focuses more on providing evidence of change rather than on arguing about its significance.

Crystal begins the book by outlining the five distinct "Internet situations" (p. 6) that give rise to different language use. He considers these to be E-Mail, Synchronous Chatgroups, Asynchronous Chatgroups (e.g., bulletin boards), Virtual Worlds (e.g., MOOs and MUDs), and the World Wide Web. He then posits the existence of a "Netspeak" (p. 17), which, in each of these situations, differs from prior forms of

communication in graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical, and discourse features. In chapter two, he provides an introduction to these changes by analyzing Netspeak in terms of the traditional dichotomy between speech and writing as well as the conversational maxims of quality, relevance, quantity, and manner that are standards in the field of pragmatics. Crystal concludes that Netspeak, while selectively and adaptively displaying properties of both writing and speech, is closer to the former than to the latter, and also is able to do things that neither can accomplish. He thus terms online communication a "third medium" (p. 48) that shares elements of speech, writing, and electronically mediated properties. The use of the conversational maxims yield a fresh way of looking at well-known online phenomena such as spamming, flaming, and lurking, and the chapter is further enhanced by an insightful discussion of lag-time and turn-taking.

About half the book consists of linguistic analysis of each of the five situations described above, with chapters on the language of E-Mail, Chatgroups (synchronous and asynchronous combined into a single chapter), Virtual Worlds, and the Web. These are preceded by a chapter that explains the descriptive (in contrast to prescriptive) perspective on language analysis and introduces some of the lexical, graphic, and orthographic features that are common to several of these five modes of Internet communication.

The descriptive chapters on E-Mail, Chatgroups, Virtual Worlds, and the Web include a combination of easily observable phenomena (e.g., the differences between the header and body of an e-mail message), a review of published studies of online language use, and reports of Crystal's own mini-investigations (e.g., the percent of e-mail messages sent to Crystal that actually fit within a single screen). Though much of what is presented

in these chapters treads on familiar ground, the careful reader is rewarded by interesting tidbits, such as the quotation from an interviewee in a study by Chernee that "it is possible to do calculus homework and have tinysex at the same time, if you type quickly" (p. 187).

One disappointing feature of the book is its rather brief treatment of the issue of language competition online, that is the extent to which the Internet fosters diversity of languages or English dominance. Crystal surveys the topic in seven pages in the Web chapter, providing a basic overview and again adding detail from his own investigations (such as that the first 1000 languages listed in an online ethnologue all have obtained a presence on the World Wide Web). Nevertheless, as Crystal has previously written at length about global language competition (1997b, 2000), the reader wishes he had addressed this issue more substantially here. Similarly, he largely ignores the issue of dialectal differences among English on the Internet, for example, how standard English competes with various creole Englishes in online realms.

In a final chapter, Crystal touches on the linguistic future of the Internet, speculating on the effect of developments such as ultra-broad bandwidth, pervasive mobile computing, speech recognition, and automatic translation. He also briefly addresses the future of Internet-based language research and teaching, a field that he terms "applied Internet linguistics" (p. 231). He ends with a celebratory view of language online, concluding that neither linguistic quality nor linguistic diversity will be threatened by the Internet, but rather enriched by it. He compares the abbreviated and non-standard language so common on the Internet to the shocking informality of a new brand of hip clothing. In both cases, the introduction of informality does not weaken the informal-

formal distinction, but extends and sharpens it. Thus exposure to the imperfect language of the Internet, so feared by many educators, can, in Crystal's view, help children "consolidate their linguistic intuitions and make responsible linguistic choices" (p. 128).

Though I agree with the main thrust of Crystal's conclusion, a more fine-grained and critical perspective might have looked at what is lost as well as what is gained in language change. For example, the development and diffusion of writing certainly enriched the global linguistic repertoire, but also served to undermine certain genres of oral communication such as the epic poem. Similarly, the diffusion of print privileged European colonial languages versus many indigenous languages that never developed a written or printed form. The linguistic impact of the Internet will undoubtedly also entail both losses and gains, and these will be mediated by the unequal social, economic, and political context in which the Internet has arisen.

In any case, those seeking a sociopolitical critique of language online will best look elsewhere. What Crystal has provided instead is an interesting and well-informed description of how language is evolving on the Internet, and this he has accomplished well. The result is a readable and entertaining overview that situates computer-mediated communication within established linguistic frameworks of analysis and points the reader to much of the extant research addressing language use online.

MARK WARSCHAUER

University of California, Irvine

References

Crystal, D. (1995). *Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (1997a). *Cambridge encyclopedia of language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (1997b). *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2000). *Language death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.