

Beata BURY

(Wyższa Szkoła Filologiczna we Wrocławiu)

SUCH LOL: LINGUISTIC VARIETY AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN INTERNET MEMES

Abstract

The Internet memes have become the object of interest among many researchers. Memes are a popular means of communication in the cyberspace. The users, who spend most of their free time on the Net, recognize memes' graphic and textual codes and try to play with their original images. The Internet memes have taken over the Web and given rise to the new online language. The aim of this article is to analyse two popular Internet dialects, namely, Dogespeak and LOLspeak. The author analyses their form, construction and introduces both dialects as the expression of the collective Internet identity.

Keywords: Internet meme, LOLspeak, Dogespeak, identity, language play.

Introduction

The Internet communication is fast and easy. In the past, letters were the most popular means of communication with someone who lived far away, and today it is enough to have the computer with the Internet connection in order to keep in touch with people living in the remote areas. This fast communication is possible by means of software programmes or social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter. As these interactions are quick, writing needs to be short, concise and easy to understand. The use of abbreviations is popular on the Internet. However, it is impossible to present some general rules of the language use on the Internet because there are many language varieties on the web. According to David Crystal,

The Internet world is extremely fluid one, with users exploring its possibilities of expression, introducing fresh combinations of elements, and reacting to technological developments. It seems to be in a permanent state of transition, lacking precedent, struggling for standards, and searching for direction.¹

¹ D.Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 15.

It can be said that both LOLspeak and Dogespeak are one of hundreds of dialects used by the netizens. Their users employ some amusing combinations and pronunciations of the letters and some basic knowledge of English is required in order to understand these two language varieties. Both LOLspeak and Dogespeak are unique forms of language play and the creative manipulation of language. The paper therefore presents linguistic analysis of these Internet varieties and aims to outline what makes the netizens play with LOLspeak and Dogespeak.

Meme

Richard Dawkins, a British biologist, coined the term **meme** and compared it to genes. According to Dawkins, **memes** are cultural units, such as ideas or behaviour, which spread from one mind to another². When memes travel through the medium, they mutate and duplicate. Over the course of years, the term **Internet meme** has emerged to refer to the viral spread of the cultural element via the Internet³. Patrick Davidson in the *Language of Internet Memes* has defined this new phenomenon as “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission”⁴.

Heylighen defined memes as “ideas, habits and traditions which are communicated from individual to individual”⁵. He argued that the media influence the spread of memes. By means of digital technology, memes could be copied with higher fecundity (greater number of copies) or longevity (information can be easily stored). Heylighen also listed some detailed criteria which determine the meme’s success:

- utility (the meme contains useful pieces of information);
- novelty (the meme differs from already existing memes);
- simplicity;
- formality (it is vital to express the meme explicitly if it contains less background information);
- authority (the source is trustworthy);
- conformity (hosts agree on the meme);
- proselytism (hosts spread the meme further)⁶.

Other researchers, Knobel and Lankshear defined meme as “a catchy, widely propagated idea or phenomena”⁷. They claim that memes “are generated out of networks of shared interests, experiences, habits, worldviews and the like that pick up

² R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976, p. 192.

³ M. Knobel & C. Lankshear, *Online memes, affinities, and cultural production*, [in:] *A New Literacies Sampler*, Peter Lang, New York, 2007, pp. 199–227.

⁴ P. Davidson, *The Language of Internet Memes*, “The Social Media Reader” 2012, p. 122.

⁵ F. Heylighen, *Objective, subjective and intersubjective selectors of knowledge*, “Evolution and Cognition” 1997, pp. 63–67.

⁶ F. Heylighen, *What makes a meme successful?: Selection Criteria for Cultural Evolution*, [in:] *Proc. 16th Int. Congress on Cybernetics, Association International de Cybernetique*, Namur 1993, pp. 524–528.

⁷ Knobel & Lankshear, op. cit., p. 201.

on or use texts, events, phenomena, icons or cultural artifacts”⁸. They agree that in the online context, the term meme refers to the rapid spread of ideas in the form of a written text or image⁹. Memes are an example of the creative activity which changes the linguistic landscape.

Bauckhage described Internet memes as “phenomena that rapidly gain popularity or notoriety on the Internet”¹⁰. Similarly, Quaranta claims that Internet memes are “media objects” which go viral, flood media, and enter spoken language¹¹. What all these definitions have in common is the stress they put on the rapidity of spread of Internet memes. When putting all those definitions together, certain common characteristics of Internet memes can be highlighted, such as fast spread by means of digital tools, creative and unexpected use of ideas or transgression of social boundaries.

It cannot be denied that people come into contact with various pieces of information every day but only some of them are remembered and shared with others. This happens because the human capacity for remembering as well as the resources for sharing the pieces of information are limited. Thus only the most creative and memorable memes will survive. Those memes whose idea is catchy will be able to adapt to the digital surroundings. Heylighen and Chielens state that “the fittest memes, such as certain songs, religious beliefs, scientific laws, or band names, will have a stable, recognizable identity”¹².

Research framework

In order to analyze LOLspeak and Dogespeak, I collected some random samples of cat and dog macros from the year 2016 on www.reddit.com and yesterdazelolz.com. Both sites contain catchy phrases of LOLspeak and Dogespeak.

To conduct the research I used the Grounded Theory to guide me on matters of data analysis. With the help of the Grounded Theory, I was able to construct the theory through the analysis of data. Glaser and Strauss in “The Discovery of the Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research” state that “generating theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research”¹³. I used the Grounded Theory to investigate LOLspeak and Dogespeak

⁸ Ibid., p. 220.

⁹ Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁰ C. Bauckhage, *Insights into Internet Memes*, International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, North America, July, p. 42.

¹¹ D. Quaranta, *IOCOSE: In the Long Run*, “Aksioma Brochure”, Ljubljana 2010, p. 3.

¹² F. Heylighen, K. Chielens, *Cultural Evolution and Memetics*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Complexity and System Science*, ed. B. Meyers, 2008, p. 7.

¹³ G. Barney Glaser, A. L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, NJ: Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, 2007, p. 6.

phrases and how they were constructed. I had already had some experience with these two Internet varieties some years before conducting this research.

I started constructing a Word document based on repeated phrases and specific features of LOLspeak and Dogespeak. Some categories proved useful, and for those which were not, I made some improvements. The Word document underwent some changes because new elements were added. Then, LOLspeak and Dogespeak features were put into categories.

Both LOLspeak and Dogespeak macros were selected according to some criteria:

- they had to be from the last two months of the year 2016;
- they had to be LOLspeak and Dogespeak phrases or single words posted on forum;
- they had to be composed of at least two words in LOLspeak and Dogespeak.

Dogespeak

Both Knobel and Lankshear argue that Internet memes are a new kind of text production and literacy¹⁴. One of the most notable examples is the doge meme which consists of a picture of a shiba inu dog with some phrases or series of words in the foreground. The words are in Comic Sans font in bright colours. According to Gretchen McCulloch, Doge phrases do not obey the normal conventions of combination¹⁵.

Dogespeak linguistic patterns

In this section some distinctive linguistic features of Dogespeak will be outlined in order to show how innovative this Internet dialect is. In the analysed Doge corpus, some unique elements of Dogespeak have been singled out:

- intensifiers are used with adjectives or nouns which sounds slightly ungrammatical in English, for instance, “**much productive**,” “**very educated**,” “**much ladeys**,” “**very accessorize**”¹⁶. Combination of quantifier + adjective was the most frequent pattern among the analysed 20 Doge phrases (10 out of 20 Doge phrases);
- the interjection “**wow**” appeared in almost every Doge meme (15 out of 20);
- short forms of words are used, for instance “**amaze**,” “**excite**” instead of “**amazing**,” or “**exciting**” (12 out of 20).

Another notable feature of Dogespeak is spelling. It is claimed that Doge users violate English spelling and prove their unfamiliarity with the rules of language. Yet,

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 203.

¹⁵ Source: <http://the-toast.net/2014/02/06/linguist-explains-grammar-doge-wow> [accessed on 30 May, 2016].

¹⁶ Source: <http://www.dogepixr.com/i/574412af0467b-574412af0467b> [accessed on 26 May, 2016].

Dogespeakers do not show inability to use Standard English, but they express a strong desire to play with the established language rules. Dogespeakers prove their linguistic competence through skillful manipulation of linguistic elements. Table 1 presents some common spelling variations in Dogespeak:

Table 1. Dogespeak spelling

Spelling	Examples
Acronym	2 school, 3doge4u
Deletion of letters	lern
Letter shift	tkaing
Different spelling for the same sound	such delishush

On the basis of the examples mentioned above it can be inferred that Dogespeak is an innovative language play. What is interesting about Dogespeak is the linguistic creativity employed to create Doge phrases.

LOLspeak

LOLspeak is another Internet dialect which has attracted the netizens' attention. According to the Urban Dictionary, LOLspeak is "[...] writing words with different letters (but sound the same) than the original spelling"¹⁷. The first appearance and popularization of LOLspeak was on the 4chan website in 2005. LOLspeak texts seem to follow some patterns, certain fixed conventions and repeated phrases. In order to understand LOLspeak phenomenon, it is essential to describe this language variety according to the following criteria: orthographic, grammatical, syntactic and lexical features.

LOLspeak linguistic patterns

Orthography

Nonstandard orthography is one of the distinctive features of LOLspeak and it includes abbreviations, letter substitutions or spellings which represent nonlinguistic sounds. All these features are present in LOLspeak. The examples of LOLspeak spelling variations were found on the yesterdazelol.com website. Table 2 summarizes the orthographic modifications.

¹⁷ Source: <http://pl.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lolspeak> [accessed on 26 May, 2016].

Table 2. LOLspeak orthography

Spelling	LOLspeak	Standard English
<u> → <oo>	yoo [Yoo gibbs mee a bendy straw] [poussinboi, 26.05.2016, 5:53 a.m.]	you
<e> → <ar>	befoar [(...) befoar the screen comes up] [JuneyB, 1.03.2016, 4:43 p.m.]	before
<v> → 	howeber [Howeber, da general duzzint mind] [Sirnativeca66, 2.03.2016, 9:22 p.m.]	however
<th> → <v>	wiv [(...) wiv dis wun] [bluesfan473, 26.05.2016, 9:22 p.m.]	with
< o > → <aw>	tawp [kitteh sittin awn tawp] [ElsaMama, 25.05.2016, 9:08 a.m.]	on, top
<ei> → <ay>	fayse [a fayse, a wite bibb (...)] [cheshirekittchk at, 2.03.2016, 2:29 p.m.]	face
<oul> → <oo>	wood [it wood be fasster (...)] [ElsaMama, 26.05.2016, 1:02 p.m.]	would

Another notable feature of LOLspeak spelling is the letter inversion which may sound ungrammatical for the outside but it is widely accepted by the LOLspeak community. Some examples include: **tihs** [this], **tehn** [then], **teh** [the], **tohse** [those]. LOLspeakers show their creativity by coming up with different ways of writing the same word. For instance, the article **the** is written as **teh**, **deh** or **da**¹⁸. These variations of the article **the** suggest that they are an acceptable way of writing this word.

The next example of spelling variation includes replacement of <s> for <z> as in **appeerz** or **woz**. It is an example of spelling rebellion, which is a deliberate transformation of orthography used to mark the cultural and social belonging.

Inflection

LOLspeakers add suffix -s to the verb in the present tense. In Standard English, the -s suffix is added to the verb in the third person but in LOLspeak it appears in the first and the second person. I encountered 12 verbs with the -s suffix in the first person and 6 in the second person. These nonstandard verbal forms which lack agreement with the subject are a unique feature of LOLspeak grammar. The examples include:

- I trys [P], 25.05.2016, 2:00 a.m.]
- I finks [ElsaMama, 25.05.2016, 1:02 p.m.]
- I lubz [poussinboi, 25.05.2016, 6:38 p.m.]
- I feelz [cweenmj, 25.05.2016, 6:33 p.m.]
- Yoo wants [ElsaMama, 23.05.2016, 9:37 a.m.].

¹⁸ Source: <http://www.yesterdazelolz.com/2016/05/25/how-else-am-i-gonna-have-fun/#comments> [accessed on 26 May, 2016].

As far as past tense is concerned, the irregular past simple verbs are replaced by regular ones, containing the suffix **-ed**. This tendency appeared in 10 out of 20 analysed LOLspeak phrases. The examples include:

- **camed** [Sir nativeca66, 22.05.2016, 9:07 p.m.]
- **wored** [ElsaMama, 22.05.2016, 7:51 a.m.]
- **gotted** [gunnersmama, 20.06.2016, 9:12 p.m.].

Syntax

This section discusses some syntactic variations of LOLspeak. Probably the most popular syntactic peculiarity is lack of subject-verb inversion as in the sentence **I can haz beams foar my sister and her kitteh?** Rarely is there subject-auxiliary inversion in question formation in present and past tenses. The examples below present some peculiarities in question formation:

- **Yoo wer only tryeng to sell yoor bruther?** [poussinboi, 22.05.2016, 10:30 p.m.]
- **How dey doing dat wifout Davy Jones?** [cweenmj, 22.05.2016, 9:07 p.m.].

As far as the creation of negative structures is concerned, LOLspeakers hardly ever use auxiliaries and they substitute “not” with “no” as in:

- **Yew no ax; Yoo no getz** [Elsa Mama, 21.05.2016, 11:28 a.m.]
- **Her nawt like camping** [Elsa Mama, 16.05.2016, 10:41 p.m.]
- **Ai knot has tu wurreh** [Roofie, 16.05.2016, 11:42 p.m.].

This omission of auxiliary appeared in half of the analysed LOLspeak sentences (10 out of 20 LOLspeak examples) and it shows that LOLspeak is more flexible in this matter than Standard English. LOLspeakers tend to omit even some basic elements in a sentence, for instance a dummy subject. I found some example of the omission of a dummy subject (7 examples out of 20):

- **looks** down at self;
- **looks** awl arownd;
- **seez** hair awn chest [Sir nativeca66, 17.05.2016, 3:33 p.m.].

It can be noticed that all LOLspeak syntactic features appear in some predictable patterns which, when skillfully manipulated, can be used to achieve humorous effect. This is only an outline of some syntactic elements of LOLspeak which can provide the basis for further study of this linguistic phenomenon.

Lexical features

LOLspeak has its own unique lexical features some of which have already been discussed. There are also some formations, childlike tone words as well as words connected with “cat talk”. In the analysed LOLspeak corpus, some unique formations were found (14 out of 20 LOLspeak phrases):

- **dat’s teh only time teh goggies eber git near dem** [Sir nativeca66, 17.05.2016, 12:46 a.m.];

- purr-fect;
- cyootness.

The variations of LOLspeak lexicon seem to be related to the nonstandard spelling of already existing English words.

Identity construction

It is claimed that memes are the result of collaboration between netizens. Shifman and Thelwall claim that the Internet environment is favourable for meme creation and transmission¹⁹. The Internet brings together users with similar interests to share a collective experience. According to Jenkins, mutual collaboration and solidarity guarantee cohesion and successful work, and allow the netizens to “recirculate media content in powerful ways”²⁰. The Internet community shares and re-creates the memes. Meme making becomes collaborative work and dialogue²¹. Both Dogespeakers and LOLspeakers engage in collaborative work.

It appears that Dogespeak and LOLspeak are not only forms of language play but they are unique sets of rules. Both communities declare their belonging by sharing posts or comments in Dogespeak or LOLspeak instead of using Standard English. Cook claims that language play “brings people together or forces them apart, distinguishes between those who are “in” and those who are “out”²². Those who understand norms of Dogespeak and LOLspeak are “in” and those who do not are “out”. For instance, some netizens confirm their belonging to the Doge community by commenting in Dogespeak instead of Standard English:

- Love this bot [tuankiet65];
- Such cookie.
Much Oreo.
Very doge. [PsychOutX]²³

Collaborative work appears not only at the linguistic but also at the cultural level. Dogespeakers and LOLspeakers apply the Doge meme or LOLmeme to any cultural idea. Knobel and Lankshear claim that taking part in the joke increases one’s “coolness” by showing cultural awareness of the latest trends²⁴. For instance, Doge users have played with the Windows image and created their own Doge version.

¹⁹ L. Shifman, M. Thelwall, *Assessing Global Diffusion with Web Memetics: The Spread and Evolution of a Popular Joke*, [in:] *The Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 2009, pp. 2567–2576.

²⁰ H. Jenkins, *If it doesn't spread, it's dead (Part 1): Media Viruses and Memes*, [in:] *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* February, 2009, p. 9.

²¹ M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How we Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012.

²² G. Cook, *Language play, language learning*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 63.

²³ Source: http://www.reddit.com/r/dogecoin/comments/1xc84c/so_oreo_use_dogespeak_wow [accessed on 27 May, 2016].

²⁴ Knobel & Lankshear, op.cit., p. 202.



Figure 1. Windoge, Windows parody²⁵

Dogespeakers change the original idea to achieve humourous effect. Knobel and Lankshear²⁶ believe that it is important to know the original idea in order to understand the irony.

Conclusions

In conclusion, both Doge and LOLcat users manipulate English creatively in a variety of ways to produce Dogespeak and LOLspeak. Both communities show a high level of linguistic competence and skillfully play with the language. Dogespeak and LOLspeak can be applied to various cultural situations, such as art, politics or IT. Both dialects are powerful tools for creating new words and meanings. Dogespeak and LOLspeak are playful varieties of English which show manipulation of Standard English for entertaining purposes. These dialects allow netizens to comment on the world through collective work.

Dogespeakers and LOLspeakers do not produce ungrammatical sentences because they do not know English but they do it to play with the rules of English. This language play allows participants of both communities to leave their real lives and engage in an activity with its own rules.

As a future direction for meme research, it is advisable to lead a comparative study of popular Internet dialects, such as LOLspeak or Dogespeak and other short-lasting online languages. The reasons for the online dialect success deserve to be explored further.

References

- Bauckhage C., *Insights into Internet Memes*, International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, North America, July.
- Cook G., *Language play, language learning*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

²⁵ Source: <http://windoge10.com/> [accessed on 27 May, 2016].

²⁶ Knobel & Lankshear, op.cit., p. 202.

- Crystal D., *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004.
- Davidson P., *The Language of Internet Memes*, "The Social Media Reader" 2012.
- Dawkins R., *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976.
- Glaser Barney G., A. L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, NJ: Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick 2007.
- Heylighen F. & Chielens K., *Cultural Evolution and Memetics*, [in:] Encyclopedia of Complexity and System Science, ed. B. Meyers, 2008.
- Heylighen F., *Objective, subjective and intersubjective selectors of knowledge*, "Evolution and Cognition" 1997.
- Heylighen F., *What makes a meme successful?: Selection Criteria for Cultural Evolution*, [in:] *Proc. 16th Int. Congress on Cybernetics Namur, Association Internationale de Cybernetique*, Namur 1993.
- Jenkins H., *If it doesn't spread, it's dead (Part 1): Media Viruses and Memes*, [in:] Confessions of an Aca-Fan, February 2009.
- Knobel M., Lankshear C., *Online memes, affinities, and cultural production*, [in:] A New Literacies Sampler, Peter Lang, New York 2007.
- Quaranta D., IOCOSE: *In the Long Run*, "Aksioma Brochure", Ljubljana 2010.
- Shifman L., Thelwall M., *Assesing Global Diffusion with Web Memetics: The Spread and Evolution of a Popular Joke*, [in:] The Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology 2009.
- Zappavigna M., *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How we Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012.

Internet Sources:

- Doge forum <<http://www.dogepixr.com/i/574412af0467b-574412af0467b>>, accessed on 26 May, 2016.
- Dogespeak forum,
<https://www.reddit.com/r/dogecoin/comments/1xc84c/so_oreo_use_dogespeak_wow>, accessed on 27 May, 2016.
- Eddy2008, LOLspeak, <<http://pl.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lolspeak>>, accessed on 26 May, 2016
- LOLspeak forum <<http://www.yesterdazelolz.com>> , accessed on 26 May, 2016.
- McCulloch G., *Linguist explains the grammar of Doge*, <<http://the-toast.net/2014/02/06/linguist-explains-grammar-doge-wow/>>, accessed on 30 May, 2016.
- Windoge, <<http://windoge10.com/>> , accessed on 27 May, 2016.