Because Internet: Understanding the new rules of language (a review)

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Gretchen McCulloch is a Canadian linguist, podcaster and blogger who writes extensively about language use on the Internet. Unlike many commentators, she is a qualified expert (with a Master's in Linguistics) and so can base her insights on theory and research as well as her own opinions.

The thesis of the book is that the English language is changing faster than before, because of the influence of the Internet. She suggests that online communities develop their own slang and jargon and this spreads much more rapidly (especially through social media) than previous linguistic changes ever could. In addition, we consciously change the way we express ourselves in order to fit into new media systems – like character restrictions on Twitter, abbreviations in texts, and emoji in WhatsApp and Messenger. The book explores these changes and new forms of expression, and looks at the interaction between language use and the development and spread of memes, the rapid spread of new types of message. For example, she explains how tildes (~) become a new punctuation form to express irony. Or how certain emoji reflect physical gestures in the real world. And when people are likely to be more careless or more precise in spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, etc. when composing messages.

How is the Internet changing our language? The book's 8 chapters range widely over language, writing, stylistics, memes and new ways of expressing ideas.

In the chapter on *Informal Writing*, McCulloch makes an interesting distinction between formal and informal writing. We have mostly seen writing as a formal activity – writing letters, reports, essays – and informal communication was mostly oral.

Now, most people communicate informally by writing texts, messages, emails, Facebook posts. And this Internet-informal text is much more informal in terms of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, tone and lexical choice than the formal writing we teach in schools. In this new informal writing we use a lot more acronyms, not just the technical acronyms like *NATO* but new social acronyms like *btw, lol, afaik, tl:dr,* etc. This is another example of the changes in the language that have developed through wider Internet use. McCulloch's view is that these changes – which may seem small and even unimportant now – will in the future be seen as a major shift in the language.

In the chapter *Language and Society*, McCulloch suggests how the Internet has changed linguistic research. Linguists are now using Twitter archives as a linguistic corpus, searching for uses of informal forms and looking at their geographical distribution. Did you know that the usage *hella* as in *it's been hella hot recently* is concentrated in Northern California? This research is focused on informal writing, not formal edited texts (like newspapers or books) which were previously the main source of linguistic research on written forms. This allows for a new kind of dialect mapping, showing we are still local as well as global.

In the chapter *Who Are the Internet People,*

McCulloch explains that people are now writing more (and using phone calls less), and she gives an interesting quote from technologist Jenny Sunden, saying *'you are writing yourself into existence – how you write is who you are'*. This may always have been true for authors and journalists – but until the rise of the Internet this was rarely true for ordinary people leading everyday lives. Suddenly, so much of one's life is based on writing via the Internet – not just sending email and texts, but building friendships through Facebook and meeting new partners through dating apps. All of these modern social activities are more writing-dependent than 25 years ago – when they would have been more likely to be oral interactions.

McCulloch categorises different kinds of 'Internet people' by the way they first learned the Internet and what they do with it. Along the way she very effectively demolishes the myth often spread in ELT that there are 'digital natives' (young people born into Internet use) and 'digital immigrants' (older people who have had to learn it more explicitly). This distinction, coined by Marc Prenz but not intended to be so all-encompassing, has done a lot to damage the confidence of older teachers who are afraid of technology – they feel it tells them that they are not really expected to learn the technology, whereas young people just 'get it'.

There is no evidence for this distinction, though,

as McCulloch quotes a survey about younger people that found there was no significant difference in their ability to do things like edit a spreadsheet or create a digital photo. Even further, quoting the British Journal of Educational Technology, *'a critical review of the evidence for and against digital natives describes it as a myth, the academic equivalent of a moral panic.*

An interesting related point is that we should no longer assume who knows what. *'Rather, computer skills have become as meaningless a category as electricity skills,'* suggests the author. Thus, many people familiar with the online world and seemingly ultra-tech savvy may still need to learn how to organise files into folders, use a spreadsheet, code a programme or build a website. Being proficient at Facebook, Twitter, etc. does not mean you are able to do these other technical things – and may still need in-depth training. This is relevant for ELT teachers using technology in the classroom – it is clear that those skills their students have – and those they don't have – is not a factor of age.

There are fascinating insights in the discussion of the *Typographical Tone of Voice* which may seem an odd concept, but it will be clear to anyone who has had one of their emails misinterpreted by a recipient, because there was a perceived negative or crucial 'tone of voice' in the email that the writer hadn't noticed or intended. She defines it

thus: *'HOME in a message like 'ugh I want to go HOME' is a typographical tone of voice'.*

The author reflects on how people perceive written messages, search for emotional content in them and react accordingly. So, using all capitals is interpreted as SHOUTING, using the 3-dot ellipsis (…) is used for pauses, but also to indicate that some other information might be forthcoming. It's interesting to learn that whole academic articles have been written on how the ellipsis is used and how people perceive it in online messages as 'passive-aggressive'. There is even an add-on programme for Gmail, *Emotional Labor,* that promises to 'brighten up the tone of any email'.

McCulloch sets all of this in historical context, outlining in a scholarly and knowledgeable way the development of informal writing from the age of typewriters and early computers. Other 'emotional' usages include repeated letters such as *yayyyyyy, craaaazy,* which she calls 'expressive lengthening'; exclamation marks to add a friendly tone; using HTML coding to indicate a tone, such as *<sarcasm>* and *</sarcasm>* to show the beginning and end of a sarcastic remark, or */rant* at the end of a passionate speech.

The introduction of Twitter meant that writers now included the hashtag (#) into messages to indicate meta commentary, such as *#awkward* after

quoting someone's embarrassing speech or action. Interestingly, this has even passed into spoken interactions: McCulloch quotes a parent delighted that her child used the phrase *'hashtag mom joke'* when teasing her. Incidentally, I was fascinated to learn that the # is actually a Latin abbreviation of the 'lb' meaning 'libra' or 'pound'.

Many more examples of how sarcasm and irony have been expressed in writing are given: *'The Internet didn't create informal writing, but it did make it more common, changing some of our previously spoken interactions into near real-time text exchanges'.*

As one might expect, there is a detailed discussion of the current fascination with the use of emojis. Personally, I find emojis greatly overused and although I do use a handful in messages, I cannot see why anyone would need so many. But we are all different, and many people enjoy sending messages consisting mainly of emojis. It's a 21st century form of Egyptian hieroglyphics, and can be richly expressive in its own way.

McCulloch takes the interesting approach of comparing emojis to the physical gestures (e.g. hand gestures) that some are based upon. And explains the derivation, which is purely Japanese, from 'e' meaning *picture*, and 'moji' meaning *character*.

Other sections of the book delve into the ways that conversations are changing, how we have shifted our metaphor of language from thinking of it as a book (a formal written resource), to thinking of language as an Internet resource.

An engaging section deals with how we use memes in Internet culture. Of course, everyone now knows what a meme is – when they see one. But it's harder to define or to explain. (If you have never heard the word 'meme', go to the back of the class, get out your typewriter and send a fax to Encyclopaedia Britannica for an explanation….).

Does the book hold implications for language teaching? There is little explicit reference to the teaching of languages (or English specifically), but it is clear that teachers of English would probably benefit from having an overview of the issues that McCulloch raises. If learners are using language in a different way online, then making reference to this, using examples of this, would serve to enhance motivation and perceptions of relevance in the classroom.

The book is recommended to anyone fascinated both by language and the development of online communication systems – and how these interact. McCulloch has thought hard about how new technologies lead people into new forms of communication, and provides many new and interesting insights.

A minor niggle (for some readers) may be the occasional over-informality of the writing, often introducing sentences with 'Sure' as in 'Sure, it can be useful to…'. There is also a lot of reference to North American lifestyles with the assumption that we all share the experience of high school life – jocks, teen culture, etc. It's of course just a matter of taste, but some readers outside North America might find this a little grating or even puzzling. Despite this, there is a lot to learn from this detailed and accessible study of language on the Internet.