David Crystal (2001): Language and the Internet

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I'll say it honestly and openly, right at the outset: as much as I love and treasure Crystal's *The Encyclopaedia of the English Language*, I am just as much disappointed in the book *Language and the Internet*. And this for various reasons. Announced and advertised as »the first book by a language expert on the linguistic aspects of the Internet«, it is sad from a German academic perspective, for none of the German-language literature on this topic is ever mentioned. To mention just a few: the 1995 volume 50 *Neue Medien und Gegenwartssprache. Lagebericht und Problemskizze [New media and contemporary language. Situation report and problems] of the journal Osnabrücker Beiträge zur Sprachtheorie; Weingarten's 1997 *Sprachwandel durch Computer [Language change by computers]; the monograph *Sprache und Kommunikation im Internet [Language and communication on the Internet]* by Runkehl/Schlobinski/Siever 1998; and the extensive monograph by Döring 1999, which goes over and above the work by Sherry Turkle; and even less on the works on methodology of on-line research from Batinic et al 1999, and the on-line publications *Netzwerk-series* at [www.websprache.net/netzwerk](http://www.websprache.net/netzwerk). It is not inappropriate to claim that more extensive and more detailed studies of language and communication in the Internet have been carried out in the German-language domain than in the Anglophone domain – how advanced the state of the research is, is reflected in the volume edited by Kallmeyer (2000) *Sprache und neue Medien [Language and new media] and in the extensive collection by Beißwenger (Ed., 2001) and the research study by Aschwanden (2001) on chat-communication. In addition, various works for application in schools have appeared, cf. the themed volume *Internet – Sprache, Literatur und Kommunikation [The Internet – Language, Literature and Communication]* of the journal *Der Deutschunterricht* (1/2000) and *Hypertext - Hyperfiction (Der Deutschunterricht 2/2001)*. German researchers should question whether they can really continue to publish in German, if German-language works are completely marginalised in international and reigning academic paradigms.

But to get to the point. Crystal's book offers a good first entry into the topic, no less, but also no more. It is »crystal clear« and plainly written, just what German-speaking readers treasure (especially from CUP). In terms of a didactic view, however, the Screenshots usual in comparable publications are missing, with which for example threads in news-group communication (p. 137 f.) or the construction of websites and hypertext structures (cf. chapter 7) could have been concretely illustrated.

The author set himself the goal »to explore the ways in which the nature of the electronic medium as such, along with the Internet's global scale and intensity of..."
use, is having an affect on language in general, and on individual languages in particular.« (p. 5). The book is divided into eight chapters; the central point is the treatment of »the language of e-mail«, »the language of chat groups«, »the language of virtual worlds«, and »the language of the Web«. Subsuming newsgroups and mailing lists under the heading of ›chat groups‹, however, is not sensible in my view, since these forms of communications are better grouped with e-mail communication because of technically functional, textual, conceptual and linguistic aspects. Also, treating the language in MUDs and MOOs as languages of virtual worlds as compared to other forms of communication and language reduces the concept ›virtual world‹ to game worlds in the end.

Virtuality, with regard to Internet-based communication, is, however, a phenomenon that conceptually is normally interpreted much more widely, apart from commercial Linguabots and the phenomenon of spoofing.

Crystal sees the linguistic articulation of the »Internet-using situations« (p. 9 f.) such as e-mail, chat etc, in the model of Netspeak, formulated by him as a concept – »A type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, and encountered in all of the above situations, arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global and interactive.« (p. 18). The handy term Netspeak seems to me to be non-felicitous from linguistic and communication theory perspectives, especially when it is brought into context with a concept of variety which is not defined further: »A strong personal, creative spirit imbues Netspeak, as an emerging variety.« (p. 76), compare also »e-mail as a variety« (p. 94) and the chat group variety (p. 163). It is sensible to view Netspeak as first and foremost text-based, and then to differentiate: »In contrast to the Web, the situations of e-mail, chat groups and virtual worlds, though expressed through the medium of writing, display several of the core properties of speech.« (p. 29). Although Crystal offers some differences between speech and writing, his theoretic founding lacks the clarity seen in Koch/Österreicher's (1994) modelling, which differentiated between medial and conceptual verbality/writing, a concept which has proven itself extremely fruitful, especially for the analysis of e-mail and chat communication (cf. also Günthner/Wyss 1996 and Storrer 2001). In view of the fact that we also find just as stark variation in Internet-based communication as in the ›real‹ world, the concepts of text types [Textsorten] and style registers [Stilregister] and the new
approaches to media genres [Mediengenres] and communicative genres [kommunikative Gattungen] (Luckmann 1986) are particularly suitable for conceptually interpreting linguistic variation in Internet-based communication.

In terms of communication theory, Crystal follows the sender-receiver model (common in linguistics), which proves itself sensible as a work paradigm in a linguistic perspective. The fact that a second paradigm exists, in which intersubjectivity is conceived as intertextuality, remains, however, untreated. From a communication science view, in this paradigm the question is raised as to whether interaction in the Internet can be analysed as a communicative act between persons and a transformation of a verbal conversation. For Krämer (1997) and Wehner (1997) »präli-terale, mündliche Interakionsbeziehungen (...) [können] keinen Maßstab mehr abgeben für das, was in Textnetzen geschieht.« [pre-literal, verbal interaction relationships [can] no longer be a standard for what occurs in text nets] (Krämer 1997:92). Interactions cannot be analysed as a continuation of a verbal dialog with other means, but rather »als Veränderung von Schreib- und Lesevorgängen (...). Dabei zeigt sich, wie die aus dem Umfeld der Erforschung natürlicher Interaktion stammenden Begriffe und Vorstellungen einem Verständnis dieser Veränderung eher im Wege stehen denn nützlich sind.« [as change from writing and reading events (...) In this is shown how the concepts and ideas stemming from the sphere of natural interaction research are not useful, but rather stand in the way of an understanding of this change] (Wehner 1997: 134). Since only one text reaches the interaction partners, no communication between partners takes place, but rather an interaction with texts: »Die Nutzer computermediatisierter Netzwerke interagieren nicht mit Personen, sondern mit Texten bzw. digitalisierten Symbolkonfigurationen.« [The users of computer-mediated networks interact not with people, but with texts or digitalised symbol configurations] (Krämer 1997: 97). The tele-matic interactivity is principally anonymous, for not people »sondern mit selbstgeschaffenen Namen gekennzeichneten, künstlichen Identitäten' verkehren miteinander: Chiffrene-xistenzen.« [but artificial identities labelled with self-created names interact with each other: anonymous beings.] (ibid.: 96). Telecommunication is, however, only one way to use the Internet, data search and exchange with data banks the other. Here it is clear how the computer and corresponding software steps between the interaction partners and the classical sender-receiver model is no longer valid, since the »dialog« between user and machine is an interaction...
between information searcher and information offer.

Before Crystal goes into the individual communication practices, he gives single features of Netspeak like smileys, abbreviations (g for grin), lexical means (hyperzine) and other graphic-stylistic means (@, iterations such as hey!!!!!!!!!). Here is indicated what emerges in the later chapters: linguistic characteristics are demonstrated with examples, but his own corpus-based analysis is missing or is little valid under systematic aspects (compare p. 94 footnote 2). I can only exemplify this point here.

Although a list of abbreviations, as found in many advice givers for chat and newsgroup communication and in so-called Internet lexicons, is given on pages 85-6, an analysis of which abbreviations appear frequently in which communicative practices is missing. Many of the abbreviations given are used seldom or not at all, in addition, the abbreviations from chat communication appear seldom in e-mail communication. A standardisation process is distant: as a systematic investigation of abbreviations in German chat communication found (see Figure 1), lol is realised to 39% and g with corresponding variations (gg etc) is realised to 30%, whereas lol never appeared in German e-mail communication. Also in the English chats I have seen, lol is a kind of standard abbreviation. One may use analogous arguments for the use of smileys (see Crystal p. 36-8), which is also standardised to a high degree [:)] (compare here also p.164 and Figure 2 below). Just how strong the standardisation is, is shown globally for example in Chinese chats, in which smileys and also lol are recurrent.

Not only the distribution of the features is an important factor, but also the qualitative analysis. Although the smiley is an iconic sign, the analysis of smileys cannot be exhausted in the presentation of their iconic form. Rather, where smileys appear, i.e. turn-final or as independent turns, and which communicative acts are expressed are deciding factors for an analysis of meaning. Smileys appear frequently in phatic communication, the expressive form is semantically bleached; partly they function as emphasis markers.
The treatment of nicknames (p. 50-2, 152-5, 161) from the perspective of an analysis of the semantic fields is based on Bechar-Israeli (1996) and does not go beyond this. Even Wetzstein et al (1995: 82 f.) carried out comparable investigations; further analyses of word fields and of metaphors are available in German, so that language-contrastive aspects have opened interesting perspectives here.

The most problematic chapter is certainly that on language in the Web and hypertext structures. This area has been so intensively researched in recent years from various perspectives, as regards text production and text reception of hypertexts, as regards design, link structures in connection with semantic structures, as regards the transposition of e.g. newspapers into online-versions, as regards new offerings such as e-zines and hyperfiction or the guestbook on websites, etc., that this chapter (7) is completely unsatisfactory and does not reflect the present status of research, even though it is certainly difficult to examine the veritable mountain of publications. In contrast to this, the concluding chapter »The linguistic future of the Internet« is interesting and prospective, because the phenomenon of media merging is moved into the foreground. Despite that, the book is all in all a great disappointment for me, and I wish that the English-speaking reader could know the German-language research literature.

References


