

Dissecting Newspeak

David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, hardback, ISBN 0 521 80212 1, pp. 272, £13.95

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David Crystal, well known for his accessibly written encyclopedic language studies, turns his gaze to the language of the Internet in this new work. Crystal's book presents a description of the "linguistic properties of the so-called electronic revolution; and probes the question as to whether the linguistic practices involved deserve to be described" as "revolutionary". Taking the view that almost anything in the electronic environment might "soon no longer be as it currently is", Crystal differentiates, in illuminating ways, between the properties of *Netspeak* and those of spoken and written language. (His choice of *Netspeak* to describe the language of the Net immediately reminds us of his point about currency. The term has been in and out of favour since the mid-nineties and has uncertain status in the cyber-fashion stakes at the beginning of the twenty-first century.)

He convincingly argues that *Netspeak* can be considered a new species of communication, and analyses the language of five distinct yet overlapping Internet-using situations – email, synchronous and asynchronous chatting, the virtual world, and the World Wide Web. In highlighting the paradoxes that abound in an electronic environment, a world of transition where users acquire rules when there are really no rules, and where technologies overtake and consume themselves with alarming rapidity, Crystal emphasises the liberating possibilities of the medium.

His chapters on the nature of communication

within chatrooms and virtual worlds are particularly useful for the uninitiated. At the same time the critique of the patterns of linguistic behaviour that characterise interaction in these evolving cyberscapes make an important contribution to understanding of the processes involved and their social implications. Crystal is well known for his ready fund of examples to illustrate his intuitions and insights, and this book is no exception. He has examples by the bucketload to demonstrate *Netspeak* in all its manifestations, and takes pleasure in informing and amusing his readers with a fine illustrative collection. Examples which come to mind include *nicks* (assumed names) devised to hide identities, the sayings or emotings of users of the "Alice-like" world of murky MUDDS, or the obstacles searchers come across when pitting their search skills against not-yet-as-fully-intelligent-as-might-be-hoped search engines.

Other areas where Crystal's observations have value for the general and academic reader alike include predictions about evolutions in the language and conventions of emailing, the graphically eclectic nature of the Web, and the challenges of non-linear reading promoted by hypertext. His critical stance towards the language cops of the Internet, whose views are reinforced by online dictionaries, and the green and red wiggly underlinings which "guide" our own electronic wordsmithing, is well justified, as are his views about the inevitability of multilingualism becoming more established on the Net.

At times Crystal seems a little bemused to find himself in the midst of a world which multiplies and reinvents itself almost daily, produces such a prodigious quantity of information and interaction, and is governed by a technology characterised by transience. His forecast that in a statistical sense we may one day communicate with each other far more via computer mediation than direct interaction may cause some unease. Yet, as his book demonstrates, a revolutionary change in communication has already taken place. In his view the revolution should be welcomed as having potential to show human linguistic creativity and versatility "at its best". ■