The uses of internet slang, and ways in which it differs from its spoken counterpart.

Introduction

Although numerous critics have attempted to define the parameters of slang in different ways, certain similarities between these definitions may be noted. Andersson and Trudgill both agree that slang includes “uses of words or expressions which are extremely informal and which are often fashionable and therefore rather temporary.”¹ During the course of this essay, I will be investigating the reasons behind slang usage on the internet. Additionally, the essay will consider how this form differs to traditional ideas of slang in areas such as purpose, longevity and user-status due to its written rather than spoken nature.

Need for speed

Within the world of online gaming, one of the main reasons for slang usage is related to time constraints. In a situation where an individual’s attention should be primarily concerned with the game’s progression rather than communicating with other players, slang is used in order to convey meaning quickly. For this reason, initialisms such as ‘IC’ (In Character) and ‘OOC’ (Out Of Character) have been developed for such usage. In the case of ‘OOC’, speaking the initialism aloud is less articulate than when attempting to verbalise the represented words. However, such impediments are not encountered with the written expression of the term. It is therefore arguable that in this instance, the written slang has an aspect of versatility that its spoken counterpart does not.

It is interesting to note, that within the sphere of multiplayer gaming websites, a person is identifiable not only by their screen name, but by the purpose they serve within the game. From the list of words within my glossary, 56% are nouns, at least half of which are slang terms for different types of individuals. For example, someone who runs from

place to place within the game for profit is called a ‘runner’. This trend of producing a slang term from words which were initially verbs (e.g. run) and turning them into nouns is the most frequent form of grammatical alteration within the glossary. Arguably, this also functions as the quickest method of describing the role of an individual. Looking at the common assumption that slang can be effectively based upon an individual’s occupation, we are able to see here that online, the case is the same.²

A consequence arising from this need to convey messages in a short, effective manner has also produced a number of slang terms which originate from misspellings of other words. The most common of which is ‘pwn’, having come about from the word ‘own’, since the letters ‘p’ and ‘o’ are next to one another on a standard keyboard. Due to a great many individuals regularly making this typing error, the new term was assimilated into common usage, and therefore began to be utilised purposefully. This is once again unlike spoken communication, wherein a slip of the tongue is generally overlooked and soon forgotten about.

Language Barriers

The development of the Internet as a global institution has provided users with the ability to “send a new word around the world in a matter of minutes”³. Any newly created slang word is subsequently assimilated by a wide ranging geographic of individuals. When relating this to spoken slang, which is said to be “much like other trends. They tend to start in the bigger cities and go from there,”⁴ it can be seen that a highly used slang expression on the internet may come from the smallest source. For example, the term ‘roflcopter’ originates from a single picture posted in an online forum, and not something which began on a widely-read website. Not only does this serve to indicate that slang terms on the internet are easier to initiate than their spoken counterparts, but also that there is little to no country-specific slang on the internet. This is due to anyone being able to access any website from any part of the world.

² Ibid, p.80
³ David Crystal, Words Words Words (UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.3
⁴ Andersson & Trudgill, Bad Language, p.78
In this regard, written slang obtains the function of a communication bridge between members of an online game who speak different languages. In an environment where the slang is situational (for example, ‘w0ot’ would be used when a member has reason to celebrate an in-game event), constant participation enables the individual to assess and then utilise the term after only a brief period of time. The meanings conveyed by the different slang words are more easily understood by a wider audience due to it being in a textual form. Issues such as correct pronunciation and accent do not factor in the comprehension and utilisation of these words. These written forms of slang are therefore more universal than verbal slang which is specific to different areas of the world.

According to David Crystal, “80 percent of the world’s electronically stored information [on the internet via both websites and online files] is currently in English”\(^5\). Even in terms of the slang used, we are able to see from the glossary that 99% of the terms originate from English, with only 1% coming indirectly (via a mistranslation) from a different language. However, it would be incorrect to assume that all users of slang on the internet know how to speak perfect English. Due to a vast majority of internet slang having the ability to convey meaning through the use of individual words, problems which may arise due to the implementation of syntax are non-existent.

Such integration of this form of slang once again demonstrates its versatility. The observation that “facilities in the twentieth century provided the circumstances needed for a global language to grow,”\(^6\) seems to apply here with regards to slang when viewed as a limb of the English language.

\(^6\) *Ibid*, p.13
Identity

In the book *Bad Language*, it is noted that “one of the many points of slang...is to identify you as part of a particular social group.”\(^7\) This is one facet which is not altered within this form of written slang. Even though the internet is essentially open to everyone, the identification of different groups due to their slang usage is still effective. Amongst different sections of the internet, (games, role playing, forums, chat rooms, etc) distinct slang terms tend to be used. An example of this may be found with the word ‘plottiful’, which would only be exercised by someone participating in an online role playing game. As with any slang however, there are also terms which serve as an overlap between different user groups, (examples include ‘pwn’ or ‘noms’). These would only illustrate that an individual was a regular internet user, and would not enable others to identify them as a member of a particular group.

Many critics believe that slang usage depends heavily “...upon sex, social class, and occupation”\(^8\). Such factors do not feature so heavily in online slang. It may be argued of course, that it is more likely for males to be attracted to playing online shooter games. Therefore the slang terms such as ‘boomstick’ will be predominantly used by males instead of females. However, there is an undeniable female presence within such internet gaming circles, as the 2009 survey by ‘Entertainment Software Association’ shows\(^9\). The slang term ‘femmegamer’ also signals the increase of female participation in online games, therefore suggesting that a wide gender segregation within online slang does not exist.

Although “people frequently give away information about their age when they speak by how up-to-date their slang is”\(^10\) online terms have a longevity which is not inherent within spoken slang. Therefore, the age of an individual does not affect their choice of slang usage whilst online. Since terms such as ‘emoticon’ have been in use for over a decade, this allows for interaction to occur between a wide variety of ages. Therefore

\(^7\) Andersson & Trudgill, *Bad Language*, p.16  
\(^8\) Ibid, p.80  
\(^10\) Andersson & Trudgill, *Bad Language*, p.16
identities based upon the differences which are commonly associated with spoken slang – be it through age, gender or location - are remarkably difficult to determine. In some ways however, parallels may be drawn between occupational slang used within both written and spoken mediums. For example, a ‘rezzer’ would have their own set of slang for their actions, items and team members, which would not necessarily be used by those who concentrate on a different aspect of game play. We can see here, that an individual’s ‘job’ – albeit online in a recreational capacity – still impacts the specialist slang which is being used.

Online slang may also be used as a tool for distinguishing members who are new to a forum, game, etc. These individuals are unlikely to be familiar with each of the terms used by the older members, and are consequently likely to draw attention to themselves as new members by either using different slang terms, or reverting back to a more formal style of writing.

It has been contested that slang has traditionally been a way to “include people into [a social] group, and exclude other people from entering.”\textsuperscript{11} On the internet however, the readiness of information available is such that the meanings of slang terms are easy for an individual to research and gain knowledge of. Using slang as a method of exclusion may therefore be deemed ineffective. It is clear from the aspect above that online slang facilitates inclusion, as showing an individual the meaning of a term is a simple endeavour. In this instance, it may therefore be argued that this feature of internet slang functions in an opposite capacity – that is, a means of inclusion rather than exclusion – to its verbal counterpart.

**Swearing & Taboo**

Another way in which written slang deviates from spoken forms is in its use of words which may be considered taboo. David Crystal comments that taboo words are commonly “not so much a use of language as an outburst.”\textsuperscript{12} This assertion is not

\textsuperscript{11} Tony Thorne, *BBC News Article* \(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8388545.stm>\), [01/05/2010]

\textsuperscript{12} Crystal, *Words Words Words*, p.132
altogether true when placed in the setting of an online chat room however, since in order to convey an outburst in such an environment, an individual must first spend the time writing it down and thus losing its spontaneous nature.

In many instances, things are misspelt in order to defy restrictions which are put in place to ensure that taboo words are not able to be used within environments such as chat rooms and forums. Such an example is the word ‘carp’, which is not deemed inappropriate unless it is discerned as an intentional misspelling of the word ‘crap’. The effect of these deliberate ‘mistakes’ is that very little can be done – even by the most conscientious moderators – to completely eradicate the utilisation of such terms.

Due to the impossible task of putting filters in place to screen out all offensive content, the circumvention of traditional social taboo words may also be used as a tool to rebel against the rules of that particular online community. Posting content which may be seen as offensive is one of the ways in which ‘trolls’ (people who post inflammatory remarks) achieve their goal of seeing others react to their comments with consternation.

A secondary result of these misspellings is that in many cases, the dilution of these terms enables those in frequent contact with them to no longer view the words as taboo. However, such desensitisation does not necessarily mean that individuals would begin using the actual word (e.g. ‘crap’) when not in an online environment.

**Main Differences**

The focus of this essay will now turn from investigating the uses of internet slang, to the examination of the two main differences between spoken slang and the terms found online.

Despite Andersson and Trudgill’s statement that as a rule, slang terms “come into language, be very popular, then die out again fairly rapidly”\(^\text{13}\) there is a lot of

\(^{13}\)Andersson, & Trudgill, *Bad Language*, p.16
etymological evidence which suggests that certain internet slang terms have been in constant use for over a decade. The best example of this may be found via the term ‘emoticon’, which is said to have been in use on the internet since at least 1982\textsuperscript{14}. The result of words being in use for so long is arguably threefold. Firstly, as mentioned previously in this essay, the lack of ‘outdated’ internet terms makes it less likely for individuals to be segregated due to age. Thus, a wider demographic of people are able to communicate effectively without the need to revert to a more standard form of language use. Next, it can be contested that this lack of change facilitates peoples’ ability to remain up to date with current online slang. Although new terms are always being added, older words are still utilised and therefore individuals are able to participate in online discussions if – for example – they returned after a period of displacement from the internet. Lastly, one must take into consideration the amount of online slang words in use at any one time. With only a minority of terms falling entirely out of use and words constantly being created for different purposes, this amalgamation therefore results in difficulties. These are not only for critics attempting to create comprehensive databases, but also for individuals new to the online world.

The second main difference stems from the common assumption that “the more one knows somebody, the more one can rely on abbreviated forms and slang.”\textsuperscript{15} Due to the very nature of the internet however, where individuals are able to speak to one another within moments of meeting, slang is utilised between people who do not know one another at all. Such a case may include participation on gaming websites, where item trades and short-term teamwork are both commonplace and encouraged. Therefore, it is clear that Internet slang negates the assumption that written forms of communication are always more formal in nature than spoken forms.\textsuperscript{16}

**Conclusion**

\textsuperscript{14} Scott Fahlman, <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~sef/Orig-Smiley.htm>, [27/04/2010]
\textsuperscript{16} Andersson & Trudgill, *Bad Language*, p.72
In conclusion, internet slang diversifies from its spoken counterpart in a variety of different aspects. Although the actual use of online slang is much the same as any other form, (from generating a sense of identity to diluting the offensive nature of taboo words), many of the characteristics mentioned previously allow this form of slang - whether it comes about due to time constraints or misspellings of other words - to be versatile in its applications.

Although the fact that the majority of slang used online is English in origin, may “make people lazy about learning other languages, or reduce their opportunities to do so”17, it must also be contested that individuals from a non-English speaking background will be more driven to learn the language. Thus, the lack of geographical influence upon internet slang ensures fewer barriers to a common community identity.

On the internet, although the life of a slang word may span a number of years, with new terms frequently emerging, it is clear to see the fluidity and versatility of this form of slang. As David Crystal comments, “I cannot think of another area of vocabulary which conveys more insight to how we live and think.”18

17 Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, p.15
18 Crystal, *Words Words Words*, p.117
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