



by David Crystal

Oh What a Tangled Web We Weave

The Internet has proven itself to be the next leg of a linguistic revolution that began with the slow, steady spread of English and the death of other languages.

Linguistics used to be a much simpler affair: There was American English and there was the Queen's English. There was speech and there was writing. There were thousands of languages, none of them global in stature. There were certainly no smileys.

Those days are gone. Now, with a sequence of characters on the computer keyboard, we can tack happy little faces onto the end of our sentences (a colon represents the eyes, a dash the nose, and the right parenthesis the mouth:-). We can "cut and paste" by taking words from one place in an e-mail and adding them somewhere else. Web pages change in front of our eyes: Words appear and disappear in varying colors, sentences slide onto the screen and off again, letters dance around.

It's revolutionary, the Internet. Any linguists worth their salt can't help but be impressed. If nothing else, the Internet deserves great credit for granting us a mode of communication more dynamic than traditional writing and more permanent

than traditional speech. In fact, electronic communication is neither writing nor speech per se. Rather, it allows us to take features from each medium and adapt them to suit a new form of expression. The way we use language is changing at break-neck speed.

It has often been said that the Internet is a social revolution. Indeed it is, but it is a linguistic revolution as well. Consider traditional writing, which has always been permanent; you open a book at page six, close the book, then open it at page six again, and you expect to see the same thing. You would be more than a little surprised if the book's page had changed in the interim. But on Web pages, this kind of impermanence is perfectly normal.

Then there are the hypertext links, the basic functional unit of the Web. These are the links you click on in order to go from one part of a page to another, from one page to another, or from one site to another. The nearest thing we have in

writing—the footnote or the cross-reference—is always an optional extra, and there is nothing like this in speech.

Real-time Internet discussion groups, or chat rooms, allow a user to see messages coming in from all over the world. If there are thirty people in the chat room, it's possible to see thirty different messages, all making various contributions to a theme. In a unique way, you can “listen” to thirty people at once, or have a conversation with them all at the same time; you can monitor what each one of those people is saying, and respond to as many of them as your mental powers and typing speed permit. This too is a revolutionary state of affairs, as far as speech is concerned.

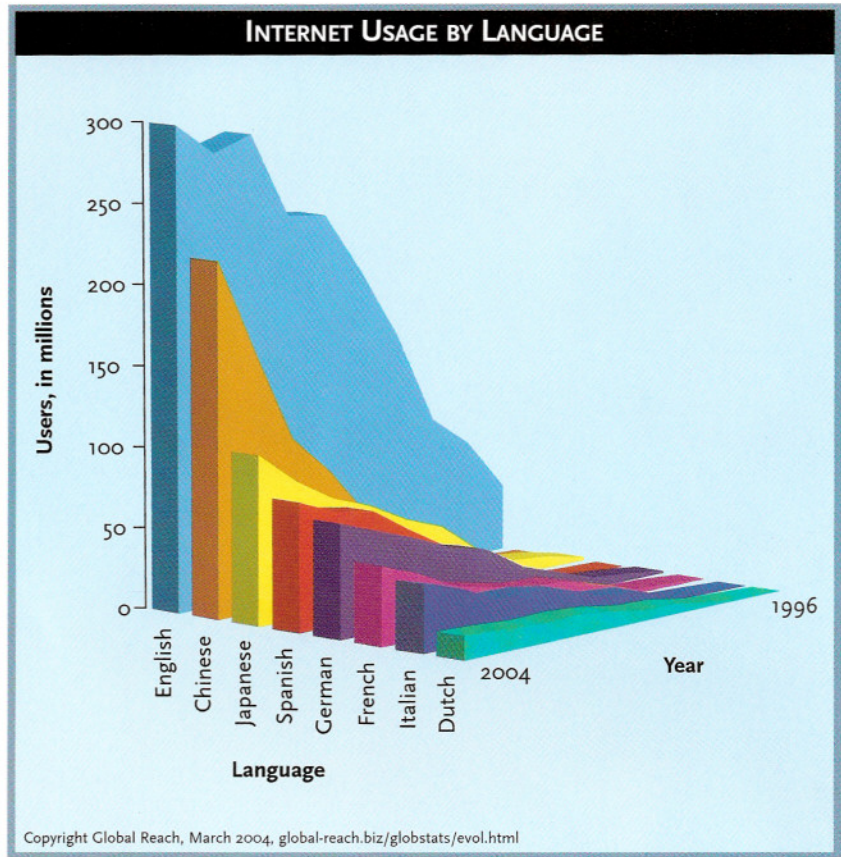
What so many people now understand is that there are very specific ways in which the Internet is changing our linguistic experience. There are symbolic ways as well. The Internet is part of a larger revolution, with two other major trends working in tandem. For one, English has emerged as a global language. For another, we are in the midst of a creeping crisis: Thousands of languages are dying out.

When the World Wide Web came along, it offered a home to *all* languages—as soon as their communities had functioning computer technology, of course. While the Internet started out as a totally English medium, its increasingly multilingual character has been its most notable change.

To get a sense of just how radical this change has been, consider the fact that in the mid-1990s, it was widely quoted that eighty percent of Internet pages were in English. By 1998, however, the number of newly created Web sites *not* in English was greater than the total number of newly created sites that were in English. Since then, estimates for how much information on the Web is in English have fallen steadily. Already, some have put the amount at less than fifty percent.

On the other hand, the presence of other languages has steadily increased. It's estimated that about one-quarter of the world's languages have some sort of cyber existence now, and as communications infrastructure expands in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America, the Internet as a whole will soon be significantly non-English.

The Internet has turned out to be the ideal medium for minority languages. If you are a speaker or supporter of an endangered language—an aboriginal language, say, or one of the Celtic languages—you're keen to give the language some publicity, to draw the world's attention to its plight. Previously, this was very difficult to do. It was hard to attract a newspaper article on the subject, and the cost of a newspaper advertisement was prohibitive. It was virtually impossible to get a radio or television program devoted to it. Surely, by the time



someone wrote a book about one of these languages, got it published, and everyone read it, the language might well be uttering its last words.

But now, with Web pages and e-mail, you can get your message out in next to no time, in your own language—with a translation as well, if you want. Chat rooms are a boon to speakers of minority languages who live in isolation from each other, as they can now belong to a virtual speech community. The Web offers a World Wide Welcome for global linguistic diversity. And in an era when so many languages of the world are dying, such optimism is truly revolutionary.

It is a real art to be able to make sense of a revolution as it's happening, to not leave it up to the historians to later analyze its impact and effects. Revolutions are fast and dynamic by nature, radical shifts that take place in a short period of time. We are now at a transformative step in the evolution of human language.

The linguistic originality and novelty of the Internet should make our hearts beat faster. It is offering us a future of communication radically different from that of the past. It is presenting us with styles of expression that are fundamentally unlike anything we have seen before. It is revising our cherished concepts of the way we think about the life of a language. Electronic communication has brought us to the brink of the biggest language revolution ever, and it is exciting to be in at its beginning. ©