BOOK
Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language

AUTHOR
Gretchen McCulloch

PUBLISHER
Riverhead Books

PUBLICATION DATE
July 2019

SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]
"*Because Internet* is for anyone who's ever puzzled over how to punctuate a text message or wondered where memes come from. It's the perfect book for understanding how the internet is changing the English language, why that's a good thing, and what our online interactions reveal about who we are."

"Writing has become a vital, conversational part of our ordinary lives. In the year 800, Charlemagne managed to get himself crowned as Holy Roman Emperor without being able to sign his own name."

"What's changed is that writing now comes in both formal and informal versions, just as speaking has for so long."

"If you define a "published" writer as someone who's had something they've written reach over a hundred people, practically everyone who uses social media qualifies."

"Linguists are interested in the subconscious patterns behind the language we produce every day. But traditionally, linguistics doesn't analyze writing very much, unless it's a question about the history of a language and written records are all we have. The problem is that writing is too premeditated, too likely to have gotten filtered through multiple hands, too hard to attribute to a single person's linguistic intuitions at a specific moment. But internet writing is different. It's unedited, it's unfiltered, and it's so beautifully mundane."

"Even keysmash, that haphazard mashing of fingers against keyboard to signal a feeling so intense that you can't possibly type real words, has patterns."

"Here's a few patterns we can observe in keysmash: Almost always begins with "a" Often begins with "asdf" Other common subsequent characters are g, h, j, k, l, and ;, but less often in that order, and often alternating or repeating within this second group Frequently occurring characters are the "home row" of keys that the fingers are on in rest position, suggesting that keysmashers are also touch typists If any characters appear beyond the middle row, top-row characters (qwe . . .) are more common than bottom-row characters (zxc . . .) Generally either all lowercase or all caps, and rarely contains numbers."

"The majority of people will delete and remash if they don't like what it looks like, plus a significant minority who will adjust a few letters."

"Even when something looks incoherent to an outsider, even when it's intended as incoherent for an insider, we as humans are still practically incapable of doing things without patterns."

"One way to think about informal writing is through the lens of efficiency. Across languages, short words tend to be more common words, which contribute a small amount of information to a sentence, while longer words occur less frequently and contribute more information."

"Frequency isn't completely static: the word "rhinoceros" entered English around the fourteenth century, but as the animal became more common in the lives of English speakers, we shortened it to "rhino" by 1884."

"We also try to maintain a constant rate of information flow: to say predictable words more quickly and unpredictable words more slowly."

"On the internet, real laughter calls for a representation that hasn't become trite through overuse. In my survey of 2017, people favored the ever-increasing repetition in "hahahaha" or expanded, ad hoc phrases such as "I actually just spat water on my keyboard from laughing." But, by necessity, the way we express genuine laughter keeps changing."

When dealing with the generations above them, the Posts often overinterpret: they infer emotional meaning from minor cues that are more subtle than the older folks ever dreamed of sending. This level of nuance conveyed through choices in punctuation and capitalization is so varied and interesting that it deserves its own chapter, and we'll get to that next.

"As we've become better typists, we've also increased our ability to produce and appreciate the nuances of informal written language that allow us to be kind, humorous, or polite online."

"One way of creating in-jokes is to play with the language of the computer itself, writing humorous pseudo-code in the style of a programming language. Let's say you wanted to mark a particular string of text as italic in HTML: you could put <i>where you want the italics to start and</i> where you want the italics to end. This naturally lends itself to creative uses, like <sarcasm>I fail to see the problem with this</sarcasm>, or in abridged form, THIS IS TERRIBLE /rant."

"Irony is a linguistic trust fall. When I write or speak with a double meaning, I fall backwards, hoping that you'll be there to catch me. The risks are high: misaimed irony can gravely injure the conversation. But the rewards are high, too: the sublime joy of feeling purely understood, the comfort of knowing someone's on your side. No wonder people through the ages kept trying so hard to write it."

"Emoji aren't the same as words, but they're clearly doing something important for communication."

"Looking for a grand unified theory of emoji had been dooming me to failure because emoji don't just have one function, they have a range of them. But crucially, it's the same range that gestures have, and that's why emoji caught on so quickly and so completely: because they gave us an easy way of representing the functions behind the gestures that are so important for our informal communication. Without realizing that either gestures or emoji were potentially systematic, a couple billion internet users had subconsciously, collectively, and spontaneously mapped the functions of the one onto the capacity of the other."

"The eggplant emoji is a prime example: widely used as a phallic symbol, it's a natural heir to the obscene gesture list above. The smiling pile of poo emoji is another: in deciding whether to include it in Gmail, the Japanese engineers had to explain its importance to the head office. They described it as: "It says 'I don't like that,' but softly," and "'That's unfortunate, and I would like to punctuate my comment with a reiteration that I am displeased at what has just been expressed.' It's the anti-like." (For me, what made the poo emoji "click" was parsing it as "a bit sh*tty.")"

"In an article called "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," Lauren Michele Jackson pointed out that black people are overrepresented in gifs used by nonblack people, especially those that show extreme emotion. She linked this stereotype to the exaggerated acting of minstrel shows and scholar Sianne Ngai's term "animatedness" to describe the long-standing tendency to see black people's actions as hyperbolic."

"Every culture that's been studied has gesture, and we gesture along with our speech even when it's communicatively useless, such as when we're talking on the phone. Even people who have been blind since birth do it, even when they're talking with people who they know are also blind."

"The idea that caught on was a suggestion by a professor named Scott Fahlman. Here's the original message that he posted, dug up from dusty 1980s archives, from back when computer records were preserved on reel-to-reel tapes: 19-Sep-82 11:44 Scott E Fahlman :-) From: Scott E Fahlman <Fahlman at Cmu-20c> I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers: :-) Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use :-("

"Symbols like :-) were named emoticons, a combination of the words "emotion" and "icon." One useful side effect of emoticons is that they let you incorporate the facial part into your running text, right alongside your words, rather than using a large, unwieldy image that has to go on a new line—even."

"Although the word "emoji" resembles the English "emoticon" ("emotion" + "icon"), the word actually comes from the Japanese e (絵, "picture") and moji (文字, "character"), the same moji as in kaomoji. This coincidence did probably help the word catch on among English speakers, but typing the symbols wasn't quite as straightforward. These small, easy-to-send pictures quickly became popular in Japan, and other Japanese cellphone carriers got busy adding their own sets of emoji."

"The basic smile emoticon :) or emoji is a versatile tool for this kind of contextualization. It can soften other kinds of harsh statements: making a demand into a softer request, or a seeming insult into softer teasing."

"Bodies don't just communicate gesture: they also exist in space and time, and emoji can help us get across similar meanings in virtual space. Sometimes, you don't actually have anything informative to say to the other person, and all you're looking to communicate is subtext: "I see this," "I'm listening," or "I am still here and I still want to be talking with you.""

"But we walk the same way that humans have walked for generations; if you want to know the rules of chess, you can consult a rulebook which simply lists them all. Conversation is different. Its norms are more fluid, emerging from constant negotiation between its participants. And especially when it comes to conversations that happen via technology, its norms are subject to a lot of change."

"When the telephone came, all of a sudden you could have real-time conversations with people who were far away, at any time of the day or night. A whole series of norms, established through centuries of gradual normalization of the written word and millennia of face-to-face conversation, were completely upended."

"According to the research of the linguist Gillian Sankoff, I may not be alone here: although much sociolinguistic research finds that the way you talk is pretty much established by late adolescence, Sankoff finds that some speakers may keep changing well into middle age, especially for formal and prestigious bits of language."

"We've been following a trend towards shorter and less descriptive greetings for several centuries. "Dear" is our last relic of what used to be an elaborate system of greetings that describe people in flattering terms, which was popular for well over a millennium."

"Babies learn the rhythm of having a conversation before they even learn the words to do so. When we talk to them, we tend to ask them questions, leave spaces for them to reply, and react to their cooing and babbling as if they're participating with us."

"How do we know when it's our turn? It would be easy to assume that we must pause after we're finished saying something, and that other people notice that pause and interpret it as an invitation to speak."

"Do you keep refreshing social media at the expense of your bedtime? Oldenburg has an explanation for that: "Third place conversation is typically engrossing. Consciousness of conditions and time often slip away amid its lively flow." What about when a random person goes viral or a celebrity replies to an unsuspecting fan? Third places are a leveler: "the charm and flavor of one's personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts."

"The hours that people now spend on social media are often time that would otherwise be spent on television consumption, which he considered an inferior replacement for third places."

"And the connections forged in online third places might be helping counteract the suburban isolation which he so hated. Moreover, third places, including social media, foster the kinds of repeated, unplanned interactions that sociologists have identified as crucial for the formation of deeper relationships. Casual, third-place acquaintances sometimes become first-place people you'd invite into your home, or second-place people you might end up working with."

"The third places of the internet that are so effective at helping fans of knitting or videogames find each other, and the loose ties that are so effective at mobilizing protests against unjust laws or a beloved TV show being canceled are unfortunately just as effective at enabling hate mobs to assemble."

"We're used to the idea that language changes, at least somewhat. One generation's new slang is another's tired cliché. We don't talk like Shakespeare. And so on. But what's less apparent is that macro-level conversation norms have changed and will keep changing. Sometimes they change because new technology arises; sometimes the underlying technology is practically unchanged but its social context is different."

"We don't create truly successful communication by "winning" at conversational norms, whether that's by convincing someone to omit all periods in text messages for fear of being taken as angry, or to answer all landline telephones after precisely two rings. We create successful communication when all parties help each other win."

"When you say "The City," which city are you referring to? This is a great way to start an argument. A lot of people will declare for a few classic regional lodestones: London, New York, San Francisco."

"This is not just the narcissism of modern urbanites. So clear was it to residents of medieval Constantinople that their city was The City that they eventually renamed it as such—Istanbul is a variant of Middle Greek stambóli, from colloquial Greek s tan Póli, "in the City." (The same pol as in "acropolis" or at the end of "Constantinople.") Medina, in Saudi Arabia, means "city" in Arabic, and no less than three places in Andhra Pradesh, a state in India, are named Nagaram, which is "city" in Telugu."

"When Richard Dawkins introduced the idea of memes in 1976, he intended them as an ideological counterpart to genes: like how a gene (such as for brown eyes) spreads through sexual selection and physical fitness, a meme (such as the idea that the earth orbits the sun) spreads through social selection and ideological fitness. He based the word on mimeme, from Ancient Greek μίμημα, "imitated thing," and shortened it to pair well with "gene.""

"A few years later, he described his experiment in an article for Wired, invoking Dawkins's term to describe what he'd been doing and thereby introducing Wired's readers to the term "meme" in a specifically internet context. "Meme" was seeded just in time for a major cultural rupture."

"Limor Shifman points to "Kilroy Was Here" (a graffiti sketch of a big-nosed man looking over a wall that became popular during World War II) as an example of a pre-internet meme."

"Both memes and needlework are collective folk texts that spread because people remix and remake them. The words "text" and "textile" have a common origin, from a Proto-Indo-European root teks, "to weave." Writing and weaving are both acts of creation by bringing together. A storyteller is a spinner of yarns, and the internet's founding metaphor is of a web."

"Incoherent language or bad photoshop accomplishes the same thing. Just as slang or minimalist typography can convey that you're approachable or invite people to understand your layers of irony, the playful language of many memes provides a clear route to participation."

"If we look at how frequently people wrote the phrase "English language" across all the books scanned by Google, from 1500 to 2000, we see a major upswing between 1750 and 1800. It's consistently low beforehand, and consistently high thereafter. "English" and "language" by themselves are pretty much steady—it's just the two words together that go up."

"What happened in that period? Well, in 1755, Samuel Johnson published A Dictionary of the English Language, the first major English print dictionary. Johnson's dictionary became widely cited, and Johnson was interested in defining exactly what the English language consisted of."

"But the book metaphor has run its course. Just as early analogies of the brain compared it to a steam engine or hydraulic pump, while many modern neuroscientists invoke computers as metaphor, our language metaphors, too, need to evolve with the times. Here, perhaps, is the greatest impact that the internet can have on the English language: as a new metaphor."

"Just as we find things on the internet by following links from one place to another, language spreads and disseminates through our conversations and interactions. We each inhabit our own idiosyncratic corner of the internet, a weird mix of friends, acquaintances, people we haven't talked with in ages, and people we secretly think are way too cool for us. Likewise, we each speak a slightly different idiolect informed by our entire unique linguistic history."

"When we thought of language as a book, we thought of it as static and authoritative, a thing which would be better if we returned to a pristine first edition and erased all the messy new words that people had scribbled into the margins. But there is no pristine first edition of a network. A network is not debased as it changes; its flexibility is a key part of its strength. So, too, is language enriched and made alive again for each subsequent generation as new connections grow and old ones wither away."

"When we thought of language like a book, we thought of it as an unruly mess of words that had to be kept in order, like a Victorian gardener constantly retrimming the hedges into spirals and globes. When we think of language like a network, we can see order as a thing that emerges out of the natural

tendencies of the individuals, the way that a forest keeps itself in order even though it doesn't get pruned and weeded."

"When we thought of language as a book, we thought of it as linear and finite. A book can only have so many pages, so you have to decide what to keep in, what to fence out, and how to order what remains. If you and I buy the same dictionary, we read the same exact words, making it seem like there is a single, finite English language that everyone agrees upon, which can be contained between two covers. But the internet has no beginning or end, and it's growing faster than any one person can follow."

"A single human mind can come up with a sentence that's never been said before in human history, and it's not even hard. Here's one: "The hesitant otters enjoyed the moon floating above the purple forest." In fact, even "The otters enjoyed the moon" was enough to get me zero Google hits at time of writing. You can do it yourself."

"When we know language as a network, we realize that any portrait of it is incomplete, and that's a marvelous thing. Many webpages are dynamic, generated only as we reach for them by searching for or posting something brand-new. So, too, is the creative capacity of language greater than its entire recorded history."

"Rather than thinking of books as a way of embalming language, of rendering it fixed and dead for eternity (or at least of trapping and caging it so it doesn't move around quite so much), we can think of them as maps and guidebooks to help people navigate language's living, moving splendor."

"Around 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today, and the vast majority of them have only a tiny amount of representation on the internet. Wikipedia only has articles in 299 languages, and half of those languages have less than ten thousand articles. Google Translate supports 109 languages, but many of the language pairs are translated via English. Major social networks support even fewer: Facebook's interface is available in about 100, Twitter's in about 50, and new social networks tend to launch exclusively in one language."

"Relatively soon, there will no longer be any people left who aren't internet people, at least not at a generational level, not in major world languages. The internet will be like prior technologies that no one could escape: the radio or the telephone or the book. An individual person can still refuse to use social media or have a smartphone, just like a person in the 1980s could refuse to own a television set or have a phone line, but you'll still know a lot about it regardless. The internet has become ambient, an inescapable part of the broader culture."

"The changeability of language is its strength: if children had to copy exactly how their parents spoke in order for language to be transmitted, language would be brittle and fragile. It would be losable, the way that ancient techniques for art or architecture can be lost. But because we remake language at every generation, because we learn it from our peers, not just our elders, because we can make ourselves understood even though we all speak subtly different personal varieties, language is flexible and strong."