



Leetspeak as Modern English Dialect

by David Chalker

There are many Internet users who rail against the “degradation” of language that many others use to communicate online. Letters replaced with numbers, consistent misspellings, and mysterious new words are part of a large vocabulary of online users. Many complain, saying that it is causing the death of the English language, and should not be allowed in any forum. However, like Pidgin English, African-American Urban English, Southern English, and many others, this new way of communicating online is just another dialect that has risen out of the history of those who use it and of the technology it is used on.

Technology has always changed the way we use language. Written language, in particular, is shaped by the technologies that need language to adapt to a certain format. Years ago, long before email, the telegraph was the preferred way to send messages in long distance. However, telegraph operates charged by the word, and so people begin to clip their language as much as they could to save money while still trying to stay legible. Even the car has shaped written language: as unique license plates became required for automobiles to use the road, people began to use “vanity plates” to convey their own messages on the back of their car.

However, there was only space for so many letters because the characters had to remain

readable at a distance. So in order to convey their messages, and because license plates had to remain unique within a state, people began to drop vowels and substitute numbers that shared a sound with a group of letters. Now, however, we have the Internet, which during its trial period faced its own restrictions due to the speed at which it operated. People also began to use the Internet in other ways that required speed: namely, video games. While it may look the same speech is used for every form of communication on the Internet, there is actually a discernible difference between them, and a dialect used specifically among those who play video games is gaining prominence today.

In the early days of the Internet, before even the World Wide Web protocols were established, many people who were on the Internet communicated via bulletin board service (or BBS for short.) On these BBSs, a new dialect of English was formed because of the various constraints. In those days, dial-up modems were the only way to connect, and they were slow. Users often shortened words whenever possible to expedite communication. Words were substituted for letters with the same or similar phonemes. “You” became “u”. “Later” became “l8r”. “You're” and “your” both became “ur”, in a move that both sped up typing and eliminated the need for a distinction that many English speakers grapple with anyway.

Meanwhile, as with happens with most cultural movements, counter-culture movements emerged within the groups using the emerging technology. One very prominent group pushed the technology to its boundaries, and also used it for illicit purposes. This group came to be called “hackers.” Other people were looking to not play by the rules of the bulletin boards everyone was posting on. Many of these bulletin boards had bans on foul language and spreading X-rated material. However, moderators of these boards did not have the time to read through every post, so computer programs were written to detect censored words. This proved ineffective when people looking to subvert the system began to substitute similar characters for letters so that the computerized detection systems would skip over it. The moderators struggled to bring their programs up to date with these character substitutions, but those who wanted to subvert it adapted as well. Purposeful misspellings

(and accidental misspellings that were co-opted) began to enter into the dialect as well. Additionally, character substitution became more and more advanced, and made it even more difficult to detect when multiple keystrokes were used to form a single letter. While a computer might be able to detect “fuck” and even “fu{k”, it would have difficulty extending to “|=|_ { |<.”

There was, of course, a mingling between counter-cultural groups. Often hackers would need to disguise what they were saying as the information they provided wasn't necessarily legal. And as a counter-cultural group who did not always lack respect the laws, they weren't about to censor themselves. The two ideas in language blended together, trading words back and forth, forming a blended dialect of English that was commonly called “leetspeak.”

The term leetspeak itself is an interesting study in how words are formed within the dialect and how they evolve over time. “Leet” started as the term “Elite”, a term of status among the early hacker groups (i.e. an elite hacker.) This was clipped to “leet” as it is shorter and easier to type and if the “e” was dropped from the front, it would leave “lite”, which would not be interpreted the same way to those trying to read it. The word “leet” was often further ciphered as before, using numbers, the most common being “1337.”

By this point, however, the Internet was becoming much more common in homes, and a great deal many more people were using it. As the masses began to trickle into the Internet, and as communication tools such as America Online (and later, AOL Instant Messenger), chat rooms, and online video games with chat features became more common, the dialect spread from the existing users to the new users. The people who had already been using the Internet continued to use leetspeak, and so new users began to use it to converse with those who were already using it, and began to adopt the dialect as well.

All in all, the dialect held many logical pieces for English speakers: they recognized what the words meant, and yet they were quicker to type. However, the ciphering aspect of the language became less important. There was less need to hide censored words, and oftentimes, words spelled

using alphanumeric characters required more keystrokes and were far less intelligible. Certain words had made their way into the “main” dialect of leetspeak that have evidence of the ciphering and corruption originally used to disguise it. One notable example is pr0n for Internet pornography- which contains a clip of an English word, a corruption and cipher, and as a whole becomes a word to describe a specific circumstance.

From its history, modern leetspeak has come into its own as a dialect. It contains a variety of English words with different spelling. It also contains entirely new words, like w00t. It makes heavy use of acronyms as new words. It is also fairly unique in written dialects in that it is not designed to be spoken- the use of acronyms and numbers and letters makes it difficult. However, it is clear that the language has gained widespread acceptance as some do use some leetspeak words in English conversation. W00t (pronounced “woot”), lol (pronounced like “lawl”), and OMG (pronounced like “Oh Em Gee”) all are increasingly common in conversation.

In the years to come, modern leetspeak will probably only gain in usage. A new technology, built on the Internet, but still separate, has caused it to have a wider use: in text messaging on cellular phones. Text messaging has a character limit, and is semi-real time, so it has a lot in common with the way leetspeak evolved. It is no surprise then that the dialect is nearly identical, but the medium for it has an even lower cost of entry. Instead of needing a computer and Internet access, all you need is the right cell phone for text messaging. Recently, a decision by the New England Qualifications Authority gave “text speak” an official stamp of approval when it decided to allow “text speak” as acceptable on its national exams. According the CNN, the New Zealand body “still strongly discourages students from using anything other than full English, but that credit will be given if the answer 'clearly shows the required understanding,' even if it contains text-speak.” (CNN). Though the move has been controversial, it shows to what extent the population uses and understands text-speak, and by extension, the parent dialect leetspeak. Decisions such as this are very rare, but by gaining official acceptance like this, it paves the way for leetspeak becoming more common, and possibly eventually becoming a part

of English. There are other examples of acceptance too, like a recent release on DVD of the tv show “The IT Crowd” which features subtitles in leet. Popular media is starting to embrace leetspeak as more of its viewing population understands it, and this understanding and use will only increase.

Lexicon and Etymology

There are a number of ways that morphemes are formed in the leetspeak dialect. Here is a (non-comprehensive) listing of different constructions and some examples of each. Additionally, definitions and origins are provided where possible, along with interesting constructions and histories.

Acronym

The easiest way to cut down the amount of characters that have to be typed online is to shorten common phrases down to a few characters.

BRB: Be Right Back. Though more out of fashion now, this phrase is often used when one suddenly has to be away from the computer. Speed is often of the essence in these situations since it indicates a sudden leaving, and it is important to communicate this to anyone who might be depending on you in-game.

AFK: Away From Keyboard. An alternative to BRB, though often more planned and for a longer period of time. This is an actual status in many games including World of Warcraft, and so becomes an “official” term in games leading to it replacing BRB and any other expression.

OMG: Oh My God. Used for surprise or outrage.

OMFG: Oh My Fucking God. Used as an even more extreme OMG.

ZOMG: Oh My Gold. A “z” is often added to the front as pressing “z” opens the chat with other players in many online games. Many times, in the rush to type while playing, an extra z was added.

Thus ZOMG and other acronyms with the prefix z- were created, even though they do not contain extra meaning.

LOL: Laughing Out Loud. Originally intended to convey that one was actually laughing out loud, instead this morpheme has become an expression to convey that the listener has found something humorous.

ROFL: Rolling On Floor Laughing. Like LOL, but stronger. It itself has been clipped from ROTFL (“Rolling On The Floor Laughing.”)

ROFLMAO: Rolling On Floor Laughing My Ass Off. The most extreme expression of humor.

WTB/WTS: Want To Buy/Want To Sell. In those games with an in-game economy, buying and selling to fellow players becomes very competitive, especially in games where it is possible to sell said in game currencies for real money. Being able to buy and sell effectively leads to quick language, and is the origin of these acronyms.

NH: Nice Hand. Used in online card rooms to compliment someone's play. An example of a subdialect created by the same rules as the parent. However, it remains a subdialect as it would be meaningless to someone who does not play online card games.

WTF: What The Fuck? An expression of outrage or confusion.

FTW: For The Win. Positive reinforcement for something. This acronym was created entirely because of the heavy use of “WTF”, the mistyping lead to this acronym which was then given a meaning, which has its origins in television game show terminology.

Phoneme Substitution

Another way to cut down on characters to be typed is by substituting single letters with the same sound as full words or multiple letters.

u: You.

Ur: Your or You're.

CU: See you.

Z: Substituted for “s” when forming plurals. E.g. “skills” becomes “skillz”

L8r: Later. Either as “goodbye” or as in “happening later.”

Coinage

Some words seem to have been created from nowhere. Due to random historical accident, these words have gained widespread usage without having a clear meaning or clear origin.

w00t: A happy exclamation.

-xorz: A suffix added to verbs and nouns. Apparently meaningless, as it does not change tense, case, or meaning of a word. Ex. “pwnxorz” or “Joshxorz.” Originates from “hackers” becoming “haxorz”, however, it's common modern usage has lost this meaning.

-sauce: Suffix used to change verbs into nouns in leet. Ex. “pwnsauce” or “weaksauce.”

Corruption

Many words have simply gained usage by being consistently misspelled.

pwn: to own. More specifically, refers to defeating someone or something, or to be very good at something such that everyone else is defeated.. Ex. “I pwn at Halo” or “If you play against me, I will pwn you hard.” A common online video game player term. The word began as “own”, but as the p is close to the o on the standard QWERTY keyboard the mistake was quite common, especially in online games where people had to react in the video game while also typing quickly. Past tense of “pwn” can be pwned, pwn3d, or pwnt.

teh: The. As it is such a common word, this is a common misspelling. However, it has gained a greater meaning as it is often used in an ironic fashion to mock those who use excessive leetspeak and/or are not skilled spellers. It is also used to create a more emphatic adjective by turning an adjective into a noun. For example, “it is hot” would indicate one level of being hot, whereas “it is the hotness” implies a higher level. An alternative common spelling is “t3h”, which removes any implication that it is a simple misspelling and instead is one of the specific meanings.

Miscellaneous/Combination

Most words in leetspeak are formed by combinations of multiple methods of word creation.

1337: Elite. Originally a term of status, now more commonly used in an ironic sense. Elite became

clipped to “leet” which could then easily be ciphered with numbers.

pr0n: Internet Pornography. A clip of “pornography”, corrupted and with a character substitution, originally used to defeat software that would filter normal spellings out.

n00b: Newbie. Someone inexperienced or unskilled, derogatory. Clips down to “newb” which can phonetically be substituted for “noob”, and then character substituted to “n00b.”

Ph33r: Fear. Phoneme substitution “ph” for f and “ee” for “ea.” Then the “ee” is ciphered to “33”

OMFGWTFWNBBQ: A meaningless expression combining a number of acronyms. Used to mock leetspeak, but only among those who understand it.

“!!11!1!oneoneelven”: Adds emphasis. In English, an “!” is used to add emphasis. Multiple exclamation marks, while not common in formal usages of English, is used for more emphasis. In leetspeak, as an exclamation mark is made by holding SHIFT while pressing the “1” key, “1”s became common substitutions for exclamation marks. However, the use of a string of “1’s” can be read as “one” or “eleven” forming this combination of terms, created as another ironic/mocking use of leetspeak that gained acceptance into the language.

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