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WORDS I

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Once upon a time social status and viability for employment were judged expressly – and some might say, erroneously – on one’s elocution, handwriting and spelling. School masters whipped and strapped students into producing good copperplate and correctly positioning apostrophes, and an RSVP was something you handwrote and mailed. These days the rigid rules for writing and speaking have relaxed a lot and, thanks to the ease and immediacy of electronic communication, it’s not the end of the world if you don’t dot your ‘T’s or cross your ‘T’s – near enough is usually good enough. This week’s interview with linguistics expert Sarah Pasfield-Neofitou discusses how chat room slang and acronyms are fast becoming language varieties in their own right.

But in direct opposition to this has been the mainstreaming of ‘grammar fascism’ – a take-no-prisoners approach to spelling and punctuation championed by guides like *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* and Facebook interest groups. Grammar fascists often display borderline OCD and won’t hesitate to whip out a texta to correct shop sign typos. This week Beth Keating and Liv Hambrett reveal their pet peeves regarding written and spoken language.

evolving or destroying written words?

by megan gannon*



Megan Gannon

often wonders which is the real case of cultural damage and vandalism: street signs with misused apostrophes, or correcting them with a thick black texta.

Critics often attribute the diminishing standard of written language to the dominance of text messages and email, but others appreciate their unique function and limits. Melbourne arts agency Ambiguous Horse celebrated the humble SMS last year with the publication of *200 Characters*, a collection of undeletable text messages from inboxes the world over. Founder Pip Carroll admitted an “almost physical aversion” to overly-abbreviated text messages, but said relationships could blossom on the back of a well-structured SMS.

“I have a really close personal attachment to them – not just the content but sometimes they’re very whimsical or funny. They’re just like little sentimental bubbles,” she said. “I always thought it was unusual that this thing that I placed so much importance on, in its most basic form, is just zeros and ones. It’s just code, it doesn’t actually have any temporal existence.”

But when composed with care and wit, a text message can rival a sonnet or Haiku.

“Because you’ve got such a small amount of space to communicate something, if it’s done creatively it can be really potent,” Pip said.

This week marks our first edition on Words, and Small Lust’s last month in its current incarnation before the team goes on hiatus for a well-earned break. It’s set to be a huge month with fresh faces in every edition, so stay tuned.

Links:

ambiguoushorse.com

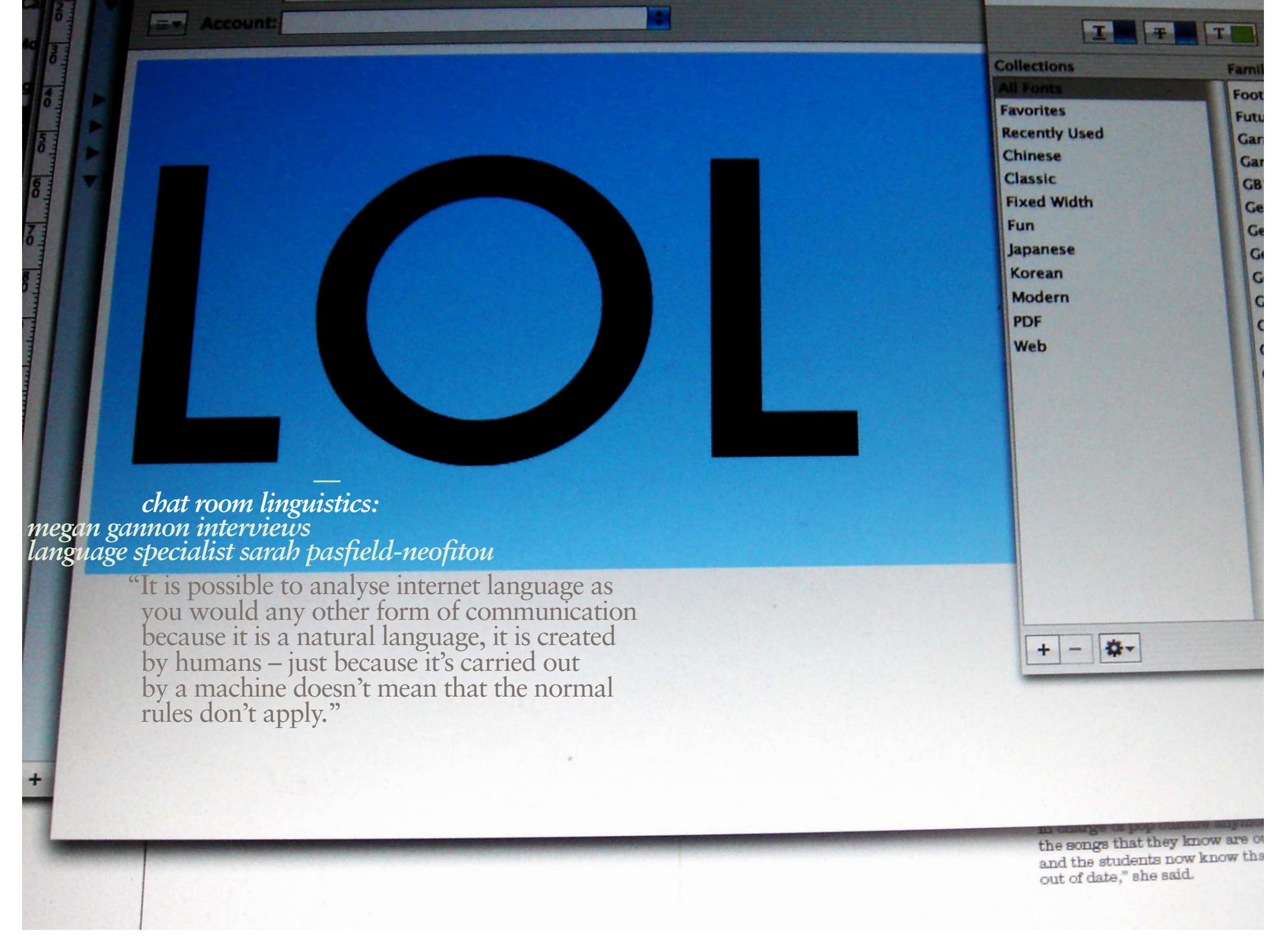
Buy *200 Characters – A day in the life of the Short Message Service* off the Ambiguous Horse website.

poppiesforgrace.com

Rediscover the joy of handwritten cards with this Melbourne range of handmade stationery. Take your next event up a few notches – at least above the group email/text message.

[facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)

The social networking site is a meeting place for grammar fascists. Interest group ‘I judge you when you use poor grammar’ boasts more than 263,000 members.



LOL

chat room linguistics:

megan gannon interviews

language specialist sarah pasfield-neofitou

“It is possible to analyse internet language as you would any other form of communication because it is a natural language, it is created by humans – just because it’s carried out by a machine doesn’t mean that the normal rules don’t apply.”

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out of date,” she said.

Who'd believe a culture that reduced phrases down to acronyms and replaced self expression with emoticons might be more educational than foreign language courses?

Critics have long blamed the internet for stunting students' language skills, but there's a new train of thought that says it can bridge the gaps between cultures better than a GAP year or a *Lonely Planet* guide book.

Linguistics scholar Sarah Pasfield-Neofitou says new communication forms like the internet are forcing written and spoken English to evolve, as seen by the appropriation of abbreviations like OMG ('oh my God!'), LOL ('laugh out loud'), and ROFL ('rolling on floor laughing'). But she said we were still a while off from recognising chat room slang as an exclusive language.

"It is possible to analyse internet language as you would any other form of communication because it is a natural language, it is created by humans – just because it's carried out by a machine doesn't mean that the normal rules don't apply," she said. "Technically the definition would be more of a 'language variety', but it has penetrated spoken and written language, certainly not just online," she said.

"We're getting young people saying 'LOL' instead of actually laughing out loud, which, to older people, must seem strange."

As part of her PhD, the Monash University scholar is studying how English and Japanese-speaking students use the internet to practice their language skills.

"As part of that I've been looking at how it's affecting first-language literacy," Sarah said.

In studying the social context of these modes of communication, Sarah has also become a serious expert on emoticons. For those who begrudge tilting their head to try and decipher smiley faces constructed from colons and parentheses (or, like myself, gag whenever one is included in an email or SMS), the Japanese lexicon is pretty damn impressive.

"The main feature of them is that they are written horizontally, part of the reason for that is the anime and manga tradition in Japan where you see very big, expressive eyes," Sarah said.

"Another reason is that Japanese, having a much bigger character set written with two bits per character rather than one, has a much bigger range for symbols and can produce huge amounts of different emoticons which aren't possible with the English character set," she said.

"Because the Western system is a one-bit system it's limited to 200 characters, and a lot of that is taken up with mathematical symbols which aren't conducive to making cute faces!"

Sarah said Japanese social networking sites like *Mixi*, which is similar to Facebook, gave Japanese language students an opportunity to practice their skills with native speakers.

"I'm finding that a lot of Australians who want Japanese friends are joining up to *Mixi* and finding their way around," she said. "It's not a particularly learner-friendly site to navigate but in spite of that, even students in their first year of university are signing up and giving it a go."

Sarah, who also tutors Japanese to undergraduate students, said the internet could empower and motivate language students, because they were able to put their skills into practice straight away.

"You don't have to study for a year and then hope to find the money that you'll need to go on exchange, you don't have to host someone in your house anymore, you can jump on the internet and get access to a native speaker."

The dominance of pop culture in chat rooms and social networking sites means that language students can learn about more relevant topics – like music, film and celebrity news – than what they'd cover in a classroom.

When you open the pages of *Dolly* magazine and see Japanese adjectives like *kawaii* ('cute') in the text, you realise how important the internet has been for cross-cultural exchange.

"Japan has a rich history of borrowing from English but, in a way that I think is being facilitated by the internet, we're now seeing more Japanese borrowing into English," she said.

Sarah habitually reads blogs and websites to keep her own Japanese knowledge up-to-date, since she hasn't lived in Japan for five years.

"Previously language teachers were the gatekeepers of their cultures," Sarah said. "Now teachers are having to come up with alternative methods because they aren't in charge of pop culture anymore – the songs that they know are out of date and the students now know that they're out of date," she said.

"If I'm not on the internet finding out what the Japanese Top Ten songs are, they'll pick me up on it."

Sarah said the same debates were raging in Japan as in English-speaking countries, that new communication forms like chat rooms and text messaging were causing young people's language skills to falter.

"There's a lot of debate about it causing people to write shorter sentences and use shorter words," Sarah said.

"[But] it's important to remember that these kinds of debates were introduced with any kind of technology. In Japan there was a huge uproar when ball point pens were introduced because it was said to be detracting from the traditional brush stroke writing," she said.

There's little doubt the internet helps Japanese people learning English as a second language. They too use computer keyboards with Roman characters but an Input Method Editor translates the words into Japanese characters on the computer screen. The Japanese language uses three syllable sets – hiragana, katakana and Chinese kanji – which include thousands of characters.

"The same phenomenon is occurring in English and Japanese, in that people are increasingly relying on computers to use difficult words or difficult kanji," Sarah said.

"Often now when Japanese native speakers go to write something they type it up on the computer first – I do this myself and my students do it," she said.

"But I think it's excellent practice for them because they learn the pronunciation – you need to know the pronunciation to be able to type it into the computer. I think the only grounds for complaint is when people don't use spell check!"

Links:

abbreviations.com

Search abbreviations by categories such as business, computing or emoticons.

netingo.com/top50teens.cfm

The top 50 acronyms 'every parent needs to know' (or anyone who wants to snoop on someone else's computer monitor and understand dodgy abbreviations).

club.pep.ne.jp/~hiroette/en/facemarks/body.html

Japanese emoticons for English keyboards.

http://mixi.jp/about.pl

Make friends and practice your Japanese language skills on *Mixi* social networking website.

"It's important to remember that these kinds of debates were introduced with any kind of technology. In Japan there was a huge uproar when ball point pens were introduced because it was said to be detracting from the traditional brush stroke writing."

THE SHIFT + F7 SYNDROME BY LIV HAMBRETT*

There is a nasty, universal habit among high school and university students. I daresay it continues into adulthood, so addictive and soothing is the process. It manifests itself in essays, legal documents, bad copywriting and reveals the writer to be, well, a fraud in the world of wordsmiths.

So you have a word. And it's boring. Run of the mill, written in this context so many times by so many other people, it is losing its lustre. Your teacher/lecturer/professor will never award high marks for such an Average Joe word. The solution, of course, lies in the rapid typing of two keys, one being Shift, the other F7. Voila! A veritable plethora of synonyms at your fingertips.

People become Shift F7 addicts without even realising it. How easy it is to hit Shift with your pinky and tap F7, how much simpler it is than actually thinking?

In my days as an English and History tutor, the Shift F7 Syndrome came to dominate the landscape of my sessions with students. We'd be going through an essay and suddenly it reared its ugly head, almost defiantly. Like a sore thumb, a pink elephant, a thorn amongst roses, there would lie a word horribly out of context. Out of its depth, if you will.

The thing is, it's all very well to choose a word 'with a similar meaning' which is precisely what a thesaurus does... but need you go for the biggest, longest, multi-syllabic word available? It won't make you sound smarter; it will only reveal your dirty little Shift F7 habit. A word plucked from the thesaurus and erroneously flung into a sentence to make the author look more verbose, sits there, bristling, waiting for someone to pick it up and pop it into a sentence where it actually belongs. Type, for example, the word 'potential' and Shift-F7 it. The word 'latent' will appear as an option. The lazy Shift-F7er will think to him/herself, 'oh, why that sounds impressive' and, relying on the reader being less than discerning (which they rarely will be), throw it in. Consequently ('accordingly' is always a popular Shift F7 choice for that one) they will end up with the sentence: Pericles showed great latent as an orator, from an early age. Did he? Did he really show great dormant? Great, I don't know, let me Shift F7 'hidden'.

One of the most delicate things about the English language is context. In fact what makes the English language the hardest to master (and this goes for non-English and English speakers alike) is that we can have a million words for the one meaning and one word with a million different meanings. This of course makes the whole idea of a thesaurus somewhat problematic and a dangerous game to play. The thesaurus is like a powerful elixir. The perfect amount will spice up a dreary sentence, imbue a sleepy argument with sudden vigour. Drink too much and it bites you in the ass. If it were a fable, you indeed would turn into an ass of the equine variety.

We all do it, I know we all do it. I have Shit F7ed no less than five times in the penning of this piece. You just have to be careful and not bite off more than you can chew – in the thesaurus world, that's 'don't pick a word with a definition you don't know.' The irony is, in seeking a word to make you appear smarter, more often than not you choose one that will almost certainly make you look anything but.

Shift F7 at your own peril.

Liv Hambrett 
has a keen eye for Shift F7 offenders, developed from years of Shift F7ing herself. When she's not pointing out grammar faux pas and rescuing words from foreign contexts, she's dreaming up a suitable costume for her superhero alter ego, Grammar Girl.



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Next week:

—
Cracking
the echelons of
Australian fiction

LIKE, TOTALLY BUTCHERED BY BETH KEATING*

It can either go one of two ways:

1
Humans reach a point where we no longer rely so much on different words to communicate, but different *deliveries*. Our language will condense to a set of a few select mumbblings and a wide range of tones and emphases. Language will simplify until what is said isn't so important – it's how you say it that conveys the meaning.

2
Through our idolising and embracing of all things simple, accessible and bimbo, we ultimately dumb ourselves down so much we evolve into a species of literal idiots. A vocabulary won't be necessary if we can't understand anything more than monosyllabic mush.

These linguistically-focused evolutionary ponderings are no doubt triggered by a group of teenagers who always seem to be on the same morning train carriage as me. Their superficial discussions are verbalised so loudly that by the time the train departs at Flinders Street, I'm convinced. If these kids represent an evolutionary turning point of the English language, future generations will be born into a society of idiocy.

My beef stands with one word in particular, which I've noticed is being used by people way more than it needs to be. I'm referring to 'like'. It's being thrown uselessly between any word in any given sentence at any given time – probably on a train near you. Its inappropriate usage and abuse is an eyesore in any conversation. I remember I used to throw a few 'likes' into a sentence when I was doing an American airhead imitation, à la Valley Girl Cher from *Clueless*. But it stumps me why anyone would want to appropriate a language style that infers they're vacuous and dim-witted.

I've started to wonder if the youth of this country are so uncomfortable with their identity (individual, generational and national) that they have been forced to adopt a foreign subculture's irritating speech (is the American airhead even a subculture?). Is there really nothing higher to aspire to these days than a life of bimbo-ism? Perhaps not. Reality TV 'personalities' like Paris Hilton and Lauren Conrad (from MTV's hit show *The Hills*) aren't just considered celebrities, but cultural idols deserving of media and consumer attention. Through the dominance of reality television and the vapid ideals TV producers slather all over these shows, *Clueless*' protagonist has gone from parody to hero.

The anger that rises during my morning train trips is always followed by a concern for my tendency to overreact on issues most normal people wouldn't even notice. After all, it's just a harmless four-letter word I'm dedicating all of this energy to. Has this materialised from a desire to be a wannabe language purist? I don't think so. I suspect it comes from an ambition to be perceived as more than the Australian equivalent of a Californian airhead – call me anal, pretentious or proud. The word 'like' can be correctly used as a preposition, conjunction, verb and noun. Let's put it back where it belongs.

Images courtesy of
Julia Freeman-Woolpert