

The nature of Leet Speak in online communication

Nicholas V. Passalacqua, MS
Michigan State University
Dept. of Anthropology

354 Baker Hall
East Lansing, MI 48823

Passala5@msu.edu

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to define and discuss Leet Speak, an online form of communication in which traditional English letters are substituted for symbols and numbers. There are different levels of Leet fluency as well as specific rules related to its' proper usage. Through this framework Leet banter is used to negotiate status and power in an online forum where unfamiliar persons interact with one another. The true nature of Leet Speak is not easily accessible without understanding its relationship to other forms of online communication and its role in social networking. The misuse of the term and ideology behind Leet Speak has created a massive amount of confusion when dealing with letter substitutions and acronyms in type written English. It is not without understanding the relationship of Leet Speak and Netspeak as well as the context specific roles of leets versus noobs that these misunderstandings can be brought to light.

Keywords: Leet Speak, Language, Online Communication, Gamers, Banter, Status, noob

Introduction: 63+ 1+ 0\|!

Language can be broadly understood as a shared symbolic system by which people communicate, be it spoken or written. However writing is also a process which is much different from spoken language. Just as spoken words can be played upon using puns, etc., written words can be played with; however along this same vein, writing can also be thought of as a technology; a tool which is created and manipulated by language speakers (Ong 2002). This is particularly evident with the advent and mass popularization of computers and the internet, written language has changed, or at least has begun to change adopting many nuances now available due to this new medium (Crystal 2005). The idea of *netiquette* or etiquette concerning Email or digital writing, has developed recently (Booher 2001), and illustrates how through this new communication medium, a shared sense of courtesy has evolved. There have however been other innovations in communication thanks to the massive use of digital communication; most apparent may be the new words which have developed via this new format for writing. One researcher has gone so far as to state that because of these technological advances “we’re in the midst of a literacy revolution” (Andrea Lunsford, cited in Thompson 2009)

Typing lends itself to a greater amount of speed in producing words and documents than handwriting, but at the same time, it lends itself to massive amounts of typos. There are many forums where typing is used that require speed and particular typos have been repeated so many times that they have actually begun to replace their correct countertypes (ie. “teh”, for “the”). Other words have simply arisen from internet related activities such as: ping, lag, firewall and w00t (Abely 2008). Here, some words refer either to aspects of computer software or hardware however “woot” is one example which is particularly interesting.

Both the creativity and popularity of online language may be best expressed with the word “Woot” (usually spelled w00t, w007, or \\\00+). Further, w00t, was titled the 2007 Word of the Year by Merriam-Webster Inc, the runner up being “Facebook” (Szep 2007). Here the usage of numbers in w00t’s spelling is said to reflect the direction of American language with the increased usage of computers and text messaging; spawning from “esoteric computer hacker language” (Szep 2007). Not only does this suggest that internet based language and writing is becoming more widespread, but that “Leet Speak” is becoming more mainstream.

Leet Speak: ^|23`/0|_|\$3|210|_|\$(|^|2|<?

Leet Speak (“1337 5p43k” or “|33+ \$|*3@|<”) previously referred to as our: “esoteric computer hacker language” is defined as the replacement of letters with numbers for type-written English and thus cannot be spoken (Blanksi and Nichol 2005). Unfortunately, this definition of Leet Speak (sometimes just “Leet”) is both simple and problematic which stems largely from its socially applied context. The origin of Leet Speak itself is somewhat arguable, the most convincing coming from the fact that it was originally associated with online hacking and pirating as a form of code which would not alert authorities (Blanksi and Nichol 2005:81). Because English letters were not actually being typed, but instead forms of words using symbols, search engines were not flagging them as possible threats. Today, the most popular usage of Leet Speak is in online forums and most particularly a computer game called *Counter-Strike: Source* (CS), although it may still be used for hacking and/or pirating (Blanksi and Nichol 2005:80).

What is problematic with the definition of Leet Speak, is that traditional Leet Speak encompasses much more than just the replacement of certain letters with numbers. Traditional

Leet Speak actually involves the re-shaping of all the English letters using standard keyboard symbols/strokes. An example of a sentence in *traditional* Leet (“I love my linguistics class”) may actually look like this: “1 |0\3 |\|’/ |1|\6_|1\$+1(\$ (@\$\$” and in *casual* Leet, like this: “1 |0v3 my |1n6u1571c5 c|455” (one may note that in traditional Leet, it can become difficult to separate out words due to spacing issues). Thus traditional (also referred to as “hardcore Leet”) Leet Speak is actually much more complicated than what is generally discussed or attributed as Leet. In essence, there may be considered two forms or degrees of Leet fluency; one where only numbers are substituted for the letters they somewhat resemble (casual), and another where all letters are substituted or transformed (traditional) (see Table 1). This is even further complicated with the borrowing of Leet ideas into other text forms (Netspeak, Textspeak) and internet slang.

These two forms of Leet have likely arisen from the lack of fluency in traditional Leet Speak and the rushed typing which does not allow for the careful construction of symbol letters. Today any time a number is substituted for a letter, it is generally considered Leet Speak even though this is no longer the traditional Leet form (“H3y dud3” versus “|-|3`/ [|_|[]3”). The creation of these two forms of Leet leads to an interesting development involving the secondary usage (and name of) Leet Speak as well as how we should understand and approach type-written language both on and off the internet.

The nature of Leet Speak: |-|3 ^|1|\|+ 3\3|\| |-|1++1|\|6 |\|3!

The name “Leet Speak” itself derives from the word “elite”, as in those that can read this pseudo language are of an elite group; their language now being elite (leet) speak. As this language or code disseminated through the internet, it became a tool to see who is Leet and who is not;

further, as more and more computer gamers began to pick up the idea behind Leet Speak, it became more and more involved in competition and showmanship in relation to the status of being Leet. Those that fall short of this title are often considered beginners or “newbies” (usually: noob, n00b), either new at a computer game or Leet Speak, generally the Leet community. Noob has since evolved into a synonym for people that do not respect the rules of other players and/or the general online community, and as such, are most commonly described as being annoying, poor sports, stupid and/or childish.

There are in fact websites dedicated to teaching Leet Speak with examples of how not to look like a noob and further how to pwn (“own”, meaning to dominate or humiliate) noobs with Leet Speak (e.g.: <http://the.mysterious.alex.googlepages.com/home>). This is important because these more complex usages can be understood in terms of group dynamics and social acceptance in the faceless world of internet interactions. In José Limón’s *Carne, Carnales, and the Carnavalesque* (1998), he discusses the role of social banter between *chingaderas*. In this example, friends and acquaintances use play banter to reaffirm social bonds and negate their social status in their surrounding world (Limón 1998:193). This verbal combat is essentially used to humiliate each other while reframing it as playful banter, illustrating a discourse in terms of power relations (Limón 1998:185, 190). This usage of slang and humor inverts the power structure imposed by the dominant class by exaggerating the dichotomies of submission and oppression (Bourdieu 1991:93-94). Here, the marginalized gather together and while participating in a common activity, teasing each other; they reestablish their identities amongst themselves as friends and are able to negate their more worldly social status (Limón 1998:193).

Transposing this on the general community of Leet Speakers, we are presented with a bunch of computer gamers, which are likely considered to be “nerds” with a marginalized social

status in the real world. Unlike the *chingaderas*, during Leet Speak discourse, these individuals are in an alien world where they usually do not know anyone else that they are interacting with over the internet. These Leet Speakers then use Leet as an identifier in order to find out who is similar to their social status and banter back and forth both to create and test these bonds and rankings. One may imagine that a person fluent in traditional Leet may be more marginalized in the real world than someone that only knows casual Leet; thus in the forum of the internet; the traditional Leet user can marginalize others (noobs) so as to reaffirm their social status in this new forum.

In these instances, Leet fluency, or the ability to banter in traditional Leet Speak, is praised, but also used for its power and ability to marginalize. The Leet individuals now identify with one another and band together, similarly those identified as noobs often gain support from each other. In both ways social bonds can be formed as well as constrained as competition through game performance and comedic banter escalates (Blanksi and Nichol 2005). It should be noted that too much banter/trash talk from someone more Leet than others, or less Leet than others, will result in the shared status players complaining and teaming up against them, suggesting that there are social limits to the appropriateness of Leet banter (Thon 2006:262).

The distinction between a noob and Leet can be further discussed as to the interaction between players in competition. A person can be a beginner (noob) at playing a game and get their player killed embarrassingly (pwned), or attempt to talk trash in poor Leet Speak to someone who is fluent (Leet) and get trumped (pwned); or someone can be a noob simply by being annoying in any sense to the general community. Leet Speak can then be used to deal with the trouble makers through its role as a high status language and its ability to marginalize those non-speakers participating in a common forum and competing in two directly associated

avenues; one, being through the rules of a computer game, the other through banter and the rules of Leet Speak.

If the Leet speakers playing a computer game become irritated with a noob (usually a non-Leet speaker), often they will band together in efforts to eject the disruptive player (<http://the.mysterious.alex.googlepages.com/home>). By these examples it becomes apparent that access to the language of Leet Speak allows these Leet individuals to control the flow and participation of individuals in this online environment. In essence, if someone does not play by the tacit rules-of-conduct in a game, Leet players will band together and either actually ban the social disruptor (noob) using administrator privileges, or use Leet Speak to harass the noob until they leave on their own accord. In cases where the Leet players are overwhelmed by noobs they often leave the forum and start their own game on a different server, etc.

The Usage of Leet Speak: +|-|1\$ 1\$ ||0+ ||@|V|; +|-|3|23 ^|23 |2_||3\$.

Unlike instant messaging and text messaging, where conversations generally occur between two people that know each other, in most forums where Leet is used, the speakers usually do not personally know the individuals they are interacting with. In Leet forums (mostly online computer games) all other players (who tend to be strangers) can at least read if not participate in most of the gaming dialogue and the usage of Leet Speak. This becomes important as instant messaging is mostly for passive conversation between friends, and Leet Speak is used mostly for banter and status ranking in unfamiliar environments.

When it comes to Netspeak (internet slang) anyone can use it and as there are really no rules dealing with its proper/improper usage; one cannot really be ridiculed for their spelling or

grammar as the goal of Netspeak is to manipulate Standard English without uniform principals. Leet has only a few rules, but they are very specific in how and when to really use Leet Speak. Most importantly, traditional Leet Speak requires that one *never* use an actual letter. In addition, one should only use “1”s with “!”s and all capital letters once they are established as Leet (as this is considered more casual). Otherwise these actions are considered typical of what a noob would do. Leet can of course be used between friends, but to use casual Leet when talking to someone that is fluent in traditional Leet is an offense (a noobish act), unless all parties are established as Leet. Interestingly, once one has been established as Leet, they can get away with using more casual Leet Speak to other individuals which recognize their Leet status.

Leet may be better understood through Bourdieu’s notion of slang and model for popular speech. Here the model of popular speech is defined more in relational terms between those that use it (Leet) and those that do not (noobs) (Bourdieu 1991). This may also be understood as those that participate in the framework of Leet Speak or Standard English (if they are considered mutually exclusive), reassert the power dynamic of each system respectively, in addition to the dominant form, here: standard English (Bourdieu 1991). Further, this may be context specific as in standard daily affairs (ie. formal Emails) a Leet individual may use proper English and be praised, then in an online gaming scenario also be praised for their Leet prowess. This too follows Bourdieu’s model of popular speech as a pursuit of distinction from the dominant language form (Bourdieu 1991:94)

Leet Speak, Netspeak and the online community: |”VV|\|3)!

But what about “w00t”? This word is still Leet and has been described as arising from Leet Speak, but is used by a huge variety of individuals with varying degrees of Leet fluency, ranging from fluent to not realizing they are even using Leet Speak. This is because the casual form of Leet Speak today has been absorbed into the amalgamation of numerous styles of text based language coding, each with different attributes, but most often associated with, or inappropriately designated as Leet Speak (Blanksi and Nichol 2005, LeBlanc 2005). It is essentially an example of hybrid literacy practices in which parts of Leet Speak have been adopted into casual Leet and Netspeak. However, this adoption or hybridism actually goes both ways. Here, this new distant language (Leet Speak) is taken and applied to local or familiar forms, creating a hybrid by which it is neither Leet Speak nor Standard English (Street 2003). However, many other forms of internet language which rely heavily on acronyms and wordplay find their way into Leet Speak. The result is individuals using Leet Speak with other forms of internet language and shorthand, which is likely the origin for much confusion as to how to understand and classify Leet Speak.

Due to these high levels of mixed internet languages, LeBlanc attempts to define and categorize different types of online language usage, and does so by creating multiple subgroups each with their own style of linguistic coding under the umbrella group “Pen” (LeBlanc 2005). However, here these typologies will be lumped together and considered as parts of Netspeak or Textspeak for multiple reasons. First, the LeBlanc definitions are all arbitrary and structurally undefined, thus switching between or blending of these typologies often occurs within the same sentence, or during the usage of Leet Speak (i.e., “I’m l33+ :P”). Second, the usage of Netspeak and Textspeak is quite fluid and creativity (in the form of making new words/acronyms and its usage for comedy/banter) is heavily supported by the language community (thus easily absorbing the other subgroups); third, Netspeak is used by such a diverse community that shares similar but

different understandings and degrees of fluency that there is really no definition users identify with. Basically there is no homogeneous speech community on the internet and [internet] language usage is always changing and evolving (Thurlow 2001:287).

Netspeak can be understood as the usage of abbreviations, acronyms, and short hand words to communicate; but often with grammar change/omission reflecting user slang, usually just for added humor. This added change in grammatical rules is on one hand completely random and only for added humor, however, on the other hand it can also be critiqued as in the case of the particular “lolcats” (see Abley 2008:173). These critiques may simply be other users trying to make the statement funnier by making the grammar sound more ridiculous, but even so, this essentially is an attempt to suggest rules or guidelines to something which is only funny because it breaks the normal rules of English grammar; thus by doing so it is now establishing its own rules and style. Aside from the grammatical changes, the most obvious feature of Netspeak is the heavy emphasis on acronyms and abbreviations as well as new word ending morphologies which one usually needs previous knowledge of in order to decipher them.

Acronyms have always been heavily used on the internet and many words take their origin out of necessity from the computer game/s played by the users. Writing in acronyms and abbreviations saves massive amounts of time and the usage of numbers helps, such as in “l8r” versus “later” (Abley 2008:178). Not only must one type quickly while playing a game, but they must use abbreviations so as to get as much information across as quickly as possible. The result is many of the words that are now associated with Netspeak originated as common misspellings of other words (remember: teh instead of the), abbreviations or acronyms. Many of these new words are also context specific, at least in origin. The word/term AFK for instance, is actually an

acronym for Away From Keyboard, which originated to explain why certain people were not actually playing a game/responding to chat messages.

One of the more interesting aspects of Netspeak is the actual creation of additional endings to words which essentially act as multipliers. An example of which is “-x0r/z0r”, as in “you got wreckxored” (you got wreck-xor-ed). The adding “xor” to a word makes it more extreme or significant. Another example may be “-age” as in “that was teh pwnage” (that was the own-age); again here “-age” acts to make the event more extreme. These morphologies and grammar changes of Netspeak have become so commonplace with internet speakers that they are very commonly found within Leet Speak as well. Part of the problem here is that Leet Speak has become synonymous with internet and text messaging due to this usage of numbers to create a short hand, even though Leet Speak is actually quite different. Netspeak is used for general communication and time saving, while Leet Speak is actually used as a complex system of interpersonal competition and segregation. One could then use Netspeak while speaking in fluent Leet and be perfectly fine, however if one was using casual Leet and Netspeak they would be considered a noob.

The advent of text messaging has only continued to muddy the waters of textual language and short hand. Writing messages which have small size limits has really increased the reduction of words and phrases so that the shorter message with the more information, the better. There are many similarities between Netspeak and Textspeak, the main difference being that Textspeak is used when communicating with text messages via cellphones and Netspeak is primarily used in online settings (Crystal 2008). Further, Textspeak also does not usually focus as much on grammar manipulation for humor, or use the added endings of Netspeak so much as to save time and/or message space.

Discussion: |300|V| |-|3^|) \$|-|0+!

So where does Leet Speak fit into all this text based communication? Unlike regular Netspeak which can be used universally, (traditional) Leet Speak has very particular contexts under which it should be used; either to establish yourself as Leet (by identifying with other Leet individuals) or to pwn noobs. By using Leet Speak, individuals are creating a social ranking structure by which one's rank is based on their Leet fluency. Further, Leet is then used to marginalize those without this elite linguistic knowledge. Leet Speak is thus a tool for identification and control of power in the faceless internet world. Those that are Leet literate can easily group together and seize control of a particular online forum, changing the power dynamics; on the other hand if the noobs out weigh the Leets, than the Leets will often leave the game and start another independent board. This creation of a common bond through Leet Speak and the arbitrary Leet versus noob rivalry, forces lines to be drawn and sides to be taken. But also creates these arbitrary groups which individuals can (re)identify with at anytime online.

With the usage of Leet Speak, English literacy is the dominant form however fluency in Leet is the most praised. Causal Leet users and Netspeakers may then be ridiculed, but they can save themselves by demonstrating their Leet fluency. The most marginalized group of all would likely be someone that attempts banter with a Leet using poor English (Blanski and Nichol 2005). Not only are these individuals ridiculed for being noobs, but their poor grammar is usually corrected quite mockingly (see Blanski and Nichol 2005:84). This symbolic domination

then arises as Leet becomes the prestige language and those that are Leet have the power to control the situations where Leet is present (Bourdieu 1991). There is suddenly a loss of equality and an intense complication to how power dynamics are involved in simple conversation/gameplay.

Because of the heavy usage for identification and social bonding that Leet now represents online, Leet Speak may be understood as a diglossia, or a language form (here, English) with a specific function (Ferguson 1972). While not really fulfilling the properties of a true diglossia, Leet Speak does have many similar attributes and English can be thought of as a form of high variety and Leet Speak as low variety. Traditional Leet may also be thought of as a high variety and casual Leet or non-Leet as low varieties depending on the context. General common properties Leet Speak shares with low varieties are: wide variations in form of low speech words and structure, English having a higher prestige value than Leet Speak, and there are appropriate contexts for the usage and non-usage of both. However, at the same time, Leet Speak is not a true diglossia based on Ferguson's criteria, because most low varieties are precursors to their high speech varieties, and here English must be a precursor to Leet Speak as Leet can be considered a form of English which can only be written (Ferguson 1972). In opposition, there are also cases where fluency in traditional Leet Speak are considered more prestigious than English, mainly in situations with other fluent speakers; however one would first need to be fluent in English to use Leet to begin with.

Conclusions: \/\00+!!1!1!

Literacy is a social practice, thus online forums where typing is easier or the only means of communication possible, are perfect places to examine the use of writing to communicate and different forms of literacy. What has become problematic is the ability to define what certain language types are online, and then to further elucidate the nature of their usage and social roles. Here literacy (in Leet Speak) is presented in more of an ideological context, or the social aspects of language in terms of usage, dissemination and control (Street 2003). The fluency of Leet Speak and its usage are important due to their social ramifications. Leet Speak is involved with notions of identity and knowledge and is in effect, a system of language coding that has developed to marginalize others (noobs), while at the same time creating a group bound by certain criteria and a common language (similar to national ideologies actually). This paper discussed forms of the text based writing associated with computers and messaging, focusing on the differentiation of Leet Speak from other forms of text based communication in order to illustrate how Leet Speak actually functions and further how inappropriate ideas about Leet Speak perpetuate improper terminology.

The true nature of Leet Speak is not easily accessible without understanding its relationship to other forms of online communication and its role in social networking. Leet Speak is in reality a stand-alone usage of keystrokes to represent letters and words by which others can be identified as of Leet status by their fluency. Because of the generally fluid nature of language, the internet, and relationships the contextual usage of Leet Speak is paramount and Leet becomes easily amalgamated into Netspeak when not used in its traditional form or social barter contexts. Further, this competition in the form of banter through Leet Speak can assist in bringing to light these social differences between leets and noobs. In reverse, because the nature of Leet is actually another form of type written language, it can and does, encompass many other

aspects of online language usage such as Netspeak; it just does so within its own framework. The misuse of the term and ideology behind Leet Speak has created a massive amount of confusion when dealing with Leet Speak and it is not without understanding the relationship of Leet Speak and Netspeak as well as the context specific roles of Leets versus noobs that these misunderstandings can be brought to light.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Dr. Mindy Morgan and Dr. David Crystal, as well as the following “individuals” for their contributions to the understanding of Leet Speak: AmI3vil?, Batmanwell, Bear-awesome, |3u6ei5ha, C4b0, Catboybat, Code Chino, |)0mF|213\$, Gumma, H0+--+0ddy, Kokomo Joe, |V|0k3y, and R0nin.

References:

Abley, Mark

2008 *The Prodigal Tongue: Dispatches from the Future of English*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Blanski, Katherine and Sophie Nichol

2005 Game Geeks Goss: Linguistic creativity in young males within an online university forum. *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 3(2):77-86.

Booher, Diana

2001 *E-Writing: 21st Century Tools for Effective Communication*. New York: Pocket Books.

Bourdieu, Pierre

1991 *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Crystal, David

2005 The scope of Internet linguistics. American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting, 18 February 2005.

Crystal, David

2008 Texting. *ELT Journal* 62(1):77-83.

Ferguson, Charles

1990 Diglossia. In Peir Giglioli (ed.), *Language and Social Context*, 232-251. London: Penguin Books.

LeBlanc, Tracy Rene

2005 "Is there a translator in teh house?": Culture and discourse analysis of a virtual speech community on an internet message board. MA Thesis, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College.

Limón, José

1998 Carne, Carnales, and the Carnavalesque: Bakhtinian Batos, disorder and narrative discourses. In D. Brenneis and R. Macaulay (eds.), *The Matrix of Language: contemporary linguistic anthropology*, 182-203. Boulder: Westview Press.

Ong, Walter J

2002 *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London: Routledge.

Street, Brian

2003 What's "new" in New Literacy Studies?: Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2):77-91.

Szep, Jason

2007 "W00t" crowned word of the year by U.S. dictionary. Retrieved December 11, 2007, from Reuters.com

Thompson, Clive

2009 "Clive Thompson on the New Literacy." Wired Magazine.

Thurlow, Crispin

2001 Language and the internet. In R. Mesthrie and R. Asher (eds), *The concise encyclopedia of sociolinguistics*, 287-289. London: Pergamon.

Thon, Jan-Noël

2006 Communication and interaction among multiplayer first-person-shooter games. In G. Riva, M.T. Anguera, B.K. Wiederhold, and F. Mantovani (eds.), *Communication to Presence: Cognition, emotions and culture towards the ultimate communicative experience*, 243-265. Amsterdam: IOS Press Inc.

A	^	@	4	J	_j	S	\$	5	
B	3]3	8	K	<	T	+	7	
C	([{	<	L	_			
D)])	>	M	v	V	v	v/	
E	3			N	n	^v			
F	=			O	()	[]	{}	0	
G	6			P	*	>	”	9	
H	_	#		Q	(.)				
I	1			R	2				
						X	>>		
						Y	‘/	\-/	γ
						Z	2	‘/_	

* Revised from Blanski and Nichol (2005) with additions from multiple websites. Note: this is not meant to be comprehensive, but to illustrate the range of variation used in Leet Speak.