**Your Ability to Can Even: A Defense of Internet Linguistics**

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The first time I consciously realized that there was something unique about how we speak on the Internet was when a friend’s post popped up on my newsfeed. It was a link to something awesome and it was captioned: “I have lost all ability to can.”

I’ll be honest. I don’t remember what the link was. It’s statistically likely that it was either a wittily executed “How the Hetero Capitalist Able-Bodied White Patriarchy Ruined the World” article or yet another set of*Mean Girls* gifs explaining the most topical event of the time. Regardless, it was the phrase that gave me pause.

“I have lost all ability to can.”

A playful riff on the more frequently used Internet expression: “I can’t even.”

Loose translation: “This link is so amazing that I have lost my ability to express my appreciation for it in fully formed sentences. All speech has been reduced to this ill-formed sentence. Thus is the depth of my excitement about this. Click on it. Click on it if you too would like to experience this level of incoherent excitement.”

How did I get all of that from one sentence? My immersion learning of Tumblr-Internet-speak was so gradual that I hadn’t even noticed it was happening. One day, scrolling through Facebook I happened to notice that this phrase, a fairly non-standard sentence, was itself a variation of another Internet expression. I was only able to understand it because of a wealth of reference points from other places on the Internet. The friend who posted the comment was tapping into a shared cultural knowledge that I understood. I was fairly certain that someone lacking this shared reference point would not only find the sentence jarring but also mildly confusing.

To confirm this, I asked a non-Internet-obsessed friend what he thought the phrase meant. I even showed him the original post.

“Ummm…like canning? Canning food items? She can’t can things? Is that article about canning something, maybe?”

So I explained the phrase and he seemed fairly disgusted in a what-are-these-people-doing-to-our-language way. My first instinct was to agree with him, until I realized: Isn’t this what language is supposed to do? Isn’t it supposed to flex and shape itself to convey what we mean to say as directly and efficiently as possible?

There is just something about “I have lost the ability to can” that can’t be captured by “this is so great, it’s driving me crazy” or any variation thereof. Internet language does this all the time. Sometimes “AODEHwhddhwdwebw” is far more eloquent than saying “I’m so overtaken with emotion, I can barely type so I smashed the keyboard with my forehead.” The phrase “right in the feels” may, in fact, express more than “wow, [insert name of most popular BBC show of the day] made me so sad that I felt the pain as one would a physical blow.”

That’s when you know something interesting is happening linguistically. When the new grammatical structures and phrases express something that conventional language simply cannot. Sure, this new grammar-bending, punctuation-erasing, verb-into-noun-turning, key-board-smashing linguistic convention doesn’t dominate the whole Internet. While it is mostly Tumblr that generates this language, let’s remember that there are only virtual borders on the Internet. Users of one social media platform are likely to be users of several and they take the language with them across Internet borders. So language generated on Tumblr is is now becoming Facebook and Twitter language and influencing language everywhere from Buzzfeed to Autostraddle.

As with all other things, once I noticed the effects of the Internet on language use around me once, I noticed it all the time. It was there in day-to-day vocabulary people use, vocabulary that would be impossible without the Internet: “She was trolling that entire conference.” I caught myself emailing friends links to articles that I agree with, providing only the simple explanation: “THIS.” It was in the way my friend said about her coworker’s incomprehensible desire to wake up at six in the morning to play golf: “what even though, you know?” Author and Tumblr-parental-figure John Green has [noticed this phenomenon](http://fishingboatproceeds.tumblr.com/post/59536714456), as have other Tumblr users, leading to some [great tongue-in-cheek jokes](http://fishingboatproceeds.tumblr.com/post/37357967439/frezned-rocketfists-fishingboatproceeds) about Internet Language.

The linguistic study of the Internet is a very young field but it does, in fact, exist. A quick search confirmed that I was (of course and alas) not the first to look at what is happening and think: Internet linguistics. David Crystal, one of the notable linguists working on this topic may, indeed, have penned the term. Crystal, along with Deborah Tannen, has jumped to the defense of the Internet community, fighting against the notion that the Internet is [ruining the English language](http://www.webshoo.com/5-ways-facebook-twitter-and-the-internet-are-destroying-the-english-language/). Conventional wisdom portrays this form of linguistic flexibility and playfulness as the end of intelligent human life. The Internet has been blamed for making children illiterate, making adults stupid and generally tarnishing the state of modern discourse.

Not only are these allegations not true. David Crystal’s research actually points to the opposite. Those who use technology read more on a day-to-day basis than non-tech users and are, therefore, faster and better readers. For all the stereotypes that tech-language is ridden with incomprehensible abbreviations and misleading punctuation, Crystal actually finds that less than 10% of texters abbreviated any words at all. A remarkable number of people are simply using technology to communicate more quickly without altering the rules of language.

Other critics don’t quite accuse the Internet of making us illiterate but question its use of language nonetheless.  Critics such as Robert McCrum of *The Guardian*, recognize that language is normative, subject to change and that it cannot be policed but still warn us: “To paraphrase Orwell, the English of the world wide web – loose, informal, and distressingly dyspeptic – is not really the kind people want to read in a book, a magazine, or even a newspaper… The violence the Internet does to the English language is simply the cost of doing business in the digital age.”

Critics of Internet language owe a letter of apology to George Orwell, who (along with Ayn Rand, Ronald Reagan, and Jesus Christ) belongs to an exclusive club of people who are conveniently reanimated whenever someone wants to win an argument without actually being clever.