
653



English and Leetspeak A Step Towards Global Nerdism

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I. Abstract

It is common for any language to develop different speech styles that are to be used depending on the situation. Different groups of people, be it a professional milieu or a city district, tend to create new modalities of the language. We call those slang or jargon. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a jargon would be “special words and phrases which are used by particular groups of people”, and its main difference with slang would lie in the familiarity of this last one, as well as in the use itself of this speech: Cambridge Dictionary states very clearly that slang “is usually spoken rather than written”. However, this definition is somehow incomplete if we think of the greatest phenomenon of our era, that is, the Internet. In this Research Article, a special jargon born on the Web and its possible influence on English will be the main focus.

Keywords: Internet, slang, Leetspeak, Leet, 1337 nerdism, web, net, jargon, English online.

II. Introduction

The Internet allows people to communicate without distance being a determining factor for the utterance, thus helping people who share common beliefs or thoughts get in touch through the Web (Preece, 2001, 29). This virtual gathering of people can be done in many ways. It is natural nowadays for web surfers to communicate through online chats, blogs, forums, and using software that is programmed for that purpose, such as Windows Live Messenger or Skype. But the most outstanding form of communication that has appeared on the Internet is probably the social network. Websites such as Facebook, Tuenti and Twitter gather millions of people daily.

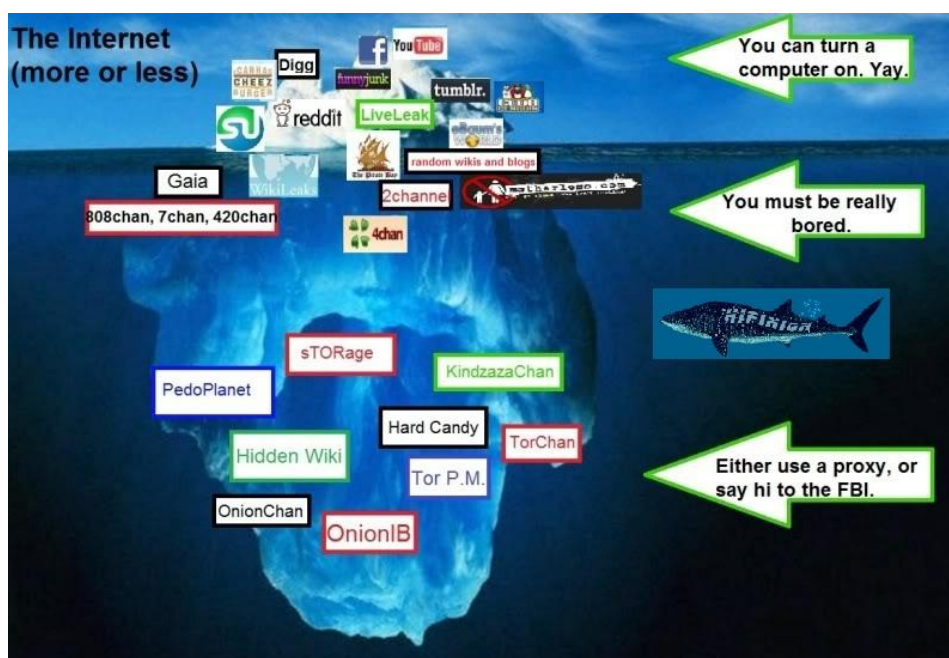
Having this context in mind, it is normal that people create and join to groups known as '*online communities*'. Jenny Preece's definition of 'online community' is “*any virtual social space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn, or to find company*” (Preece, 2001: 3). These groups have in common that they are using the Internet to communicate, so the Internet could be considered a gathering of communities, thus a macrocommunity. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that some members of this giant community use a slang to communicate with each other, namely, Leetspeak.

1. Leetspeak and Netspeak quick overview

1.1 The origins of Leetspeak

There are different types of Internet users. Everyone surfs the Web according to his/her needs, and so some surf deeper down the wave of information than others. Those who dive down to the bottom of the iceberg (see Fig.1) are considered to belong to an 'elite' among internauts. That zone is known as *the deep web*. Surfing there could be dangerous, for many of the websites that are to be found in the abyss of the Internet may be illegal.

Figure 1. The Internet (more or less) – surface and deep web



This difference among users has always been there. Even before most of these illegal sites' creation, the Internet already had its very own crooks, known worldwide as *hackers* and *crackers*, and thought to belong to the elite among Internet users.

The origins of leet are closely attached to hacking and cracking. Since these are legally depreciable activities and the Net could be under surveillance, these elite web users needed to find some way to avoid their existence and activity being targeted. The answer they found was using “an ever-changing language deliberately intended to obfuscate and evade grokking and detection” (Lundin, 2010).

Probably inspired from ASCII¹ Art, this new language started as a mere

1 American Standard Code for Information Interchange

code where normal graphemes are replaced by others similar to them. Its simpler version merely replaces some letters with numbers, while the most hardcore users of this code avoid using letters, and prefer using symbols from the ASCII. Figure 2 shows an example of how a sentence would change into the code.

Alex is a boy. 413x !z 4 b0j. 413>< !2 4 30`/.

Figure 2. Transformation of a sentence into leet graphism

This code has been previously referred to as being a language (Lundin, 2010), but calling it a slang would be more accurate, since it could be considered a new way to speak and write English developed on the Internet for a very specific community of users. It has been even given a name: leetspeak (or leet). Its name states its purpose very clearly: it is the slang of the elite Internet users. *Leet* is a derivation of the term *Eleet*, which is a misspelling of the word *elite* itself, and *speak* obviously refers to language. One can find references to Leet on the Internet easily, in the form written by leetspeakers, 1337.

1.2 Popularization of Leetspeak

It was not until the American video game development company Id Software made it possible for Doom and Doom II players to play online in 1994 that Leetspeak became popular among Internet users. The will to distance oneself from others and belong to the elite groups among web users, such as hackers, pushed the players to use sentences such as '*1 4m 133t'* (h2g2², 2002).

Leetspeak has been used for this same purpose since then. Leet users choose to speak Leet because of its reputation. However, typing hardcore leetspeak takes too much time, and therefore it is not often used in current conversations between gamers, which prefer using lighter Leet. Hardcore Leet is more often seen in forums or blogs nowadays.

1.3 Leetspeak and Netspeak

Leetspeak is not the only way used by web surfers to communicate. There is another slang among websurfers, which does not need of any character replacement, known as Netspeak. It simply modifies the orthography of English, but not randomly. There are conventions among

²<http://h2g2.com/dna/h2g2/A787917> <http://h2g2.com> is a website belonging to the BBC, thus the author has considered it is a trustworthy source.



netspeakers, which will be further explained in the following section. However, most of these changes have their origin in Leetspeak, and this is the reason why, from now on, Leetspeak will not only refer to Leet, but also to Netspeak in this paper.

2. Basic Grammatical features of Leetspeak

The particularities of Leetspeak are not merely an alternative graphic representation of language. This jargon has developed its own grammatical rules, as well as some words of its own, some of which are not rooted in English. This section will give a brief overview of Leetspeak's most outstanding linguistic features.

2.1 Affixes

2.1.1 Suffixes

The *-Or* suffix can often be found in Leetspeak. Even though it is most commonly used on verbs generated on the Internet (see 1.2.3), it can also replace the *-ed* and *-er* English suffixes (h2g2, 2002). However, the meaning is not quite the same. Upon using this suffix, leetspeakers create a word belonging to two grammatical categories at the same time: noun and verb (in its past participle form). The resulting word expresses both the fact of *being* something and *undertaking the action* that makes it be.
Example: Alex rocks → Alex roxxorz → Alex is rocking/Alex rocks.

The *-age* suffix already exists in real English; however, it is abusively used on Leetspeak. Adding it to any verb automatically turns it into a common noun, and the resulting noun, even if there is already a word in English for that, is fully understood and used by other leetspeakers.

2.1.2 Prefixes

Writing the prefix *uber-* before a word, be it a noun, an adjective or a verb is basically the same as adding the prefix *-over* in English; it can be easily noticed that this prefix's meaning comes from the same German prefix. It is not surprising to know that German has left its mark on Leetspeak, since it is a language used to code computers due to its mechanical and precise configuration.

2.2 Simplification of the grammatical structure of English

Leetspeak tends to eliminate unnecessary grammatical elements when it comes to convey a message. Thus, most articles are eliminated, as well as other function words, even the verb *to be* would be hard to find on a leet conversation.

If we take the sentence *Andrew is an elite hacker*, it will undertake a series of transformations, from graphic to grammatical changes, to become *4ndr00 1337 h4xx0rz*. Now, if these three words are written as they sound with the letters they are representing, it would turn into *Androo leet haxxorz*, which sounds like *Andrew leet haxxorz*. The transformation process on the proper name, with *ew* turning into *oo*, as well as for the *ck* going *x*, will be further described in 1.2.4; for the grammatical aspect of the sentence, it is quite clear that it has been extremely simplified.

This kind of simplification is always present on Leetspeak. It helps the speakers to distance themselves from new players if on a MMOG³, or to create a barrier between Internet users, usually the one that can be appreciated in Fig.1; most often the line represented by the water surface on that picture is the point in which the web user starts using Leet.

2.3 New words

First of all, I would like to point out that only the most common Leetspeak expressions will be treated here. These are mainly related to the gaming world, but they have transcended it due to their flexible meaning that is non-related to only one specific object or item.

For instance, the word *noob* derives from *newbie*. It is used to designate a new player or member of the community in which it is used, whom are lacking experience and knowledge. For this reason noobs tend to look stupid in front of more experienced users, thus it is a pejorative term.

The verb *to own* expresses domination over someone, or is simply used as an expression of owe (h2g2, 2002). It takes another form, which is *to pwn*. The *o* has been replaced by a *p*. This second spelling probably comes from a typing mistake, as more terms do in Leetspeak, due to speed typing (Blashki&Nichol, 2005). However, since they are so common mistakes, they have evolved into accepted Leetspeak terms.

2.4 A new orthography

As it has already been previously stated, the main objective for Leetspeak is enable the web users to distance themselves from other web users, by belonging to an elitist group of slang users. It is normal then to notice that leetspeakers tend to look down on almost everyone and everything, including English language itself. It is funny for leetspeakers to reproduce graphically letters that are not those used in real English for a word with their own graphic code, but letters which would come to

³ Massively Multiplayer Online Game



represent the same sound.

The most clear example would be the short *u* /w/. It can be transcribed with *ew*, *u*, *oo*, and *w* in English. Leetspeakers like to use any of these but the actual grapheme to replace the sound /w/. As we could see in 1.2.2, *Andrew* becomes *4ndr00*, *dude* is either *d00d* or *d3wd* and *you* becomes *j00*.

In the last example, the letter *j* has replaced *y*, and it most often will, even on the lighter leetspeak versions (see 1.1.1). It is rare to find a *y* in Leetspeak, as well as *f*, which will be replaced by *ph* (h2g2, 2002).

Regarding punctuation, full stops are not used on Leetspeak; since it is mostly a written language, whenever one wants to end the sentence, typing Enter is enough, because each message comes out separately in online chatting. However, exclamation marks are the most used punctuation marks by far; it is not surprising, since leet is most commonly used in an expressive way (h2g2, 2002).

3. Purpose of this Research study

Taking into account everything that has been stated until now, the most logical conclusion is that Leetspeak is indeed an elite slang, since it requires an extremely deep knowledge of the language; if someone mispronounced some word in English and transcribed it as it sounded for him/her, other Leetspeakers would not understand him. It would be considered as if that speaker did not have enough knowledge on Leet, and thus would be labelled as being a 'noob', and looked down upon by other leetspeakers.

This deep knowledge of the English language implies that most Leetspeakers are English natives. Is it logical, then, to think that Leetspeak will remain on the Internet forever? Since new words have been created to be used on the English language (see 1.2.3), it is only natural that native English leetspeakers would use them in an oral or informal written conversation. The purpose of this paper is to determine whether Leetspeak is influencing real English or not. Further details will be explained in the method.

III. The Method

As previously mentioned, the goal is to determine whether Leetspeak has any kind of influence on English or not. For this purpose, it is necessary to work with native English speakers who live in England.

1. A survey in the University of Bath, England

Thanks to the Internet, working with English native speakers has been possible. The author contacted a student in the University of Bath and sent him a survey to be filled by male and female English native speakers. The results of the survey helped to determine an answer to the question on Leetspeak's influence.

The survey (see appendix 1) has been filled by twelve male and nine female English college students. It contains questions on their knowledge of Leet, where that knowledge comes from and about the use they make of it. However, the survey has been done in a way in which those who are not conscious of using Leetspeak terms due to a lack of knowledge would not know what the main theme of the survey was, and would simply answer single questions.

The results of this survey are shown in the following graphics. There will be two for each result, one for male students and another one for female students. The code will be: blue and yellow for male and female positive answers, respectively, and red and green for the negative answers. The reason for distinguishing female and male students is because in this survey, the males were gamers and the females were not. However, they had siblings who did play videogames on the web.

1.2 Results from the questionnaire

1.2.1 Use of smilies online

The first question of the survey is related to the use of smilies while online chatting. Since the origins of Leetspeak are rooted in ASCII Art, it was interesting to see whether the use of the most basic form of ASCII Art (i.e, smilies) is some kind of doorway to Leetspeak.

As shown in Figure 2, 91.6% of the male students often use smilies when chatting online. There is not a significant difference between this result and the one obtained by female students, which is 100% of positive answers. That obviously means that all the female participants use smilies when chatting online.

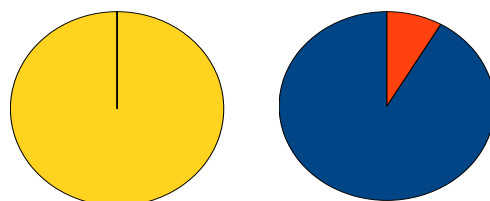


Figure 2. Male (left) and female (right) results for the use of smilies online

1.2.2 Knowledge of Leet vocabulary

The next questions of the survey are centred on the knowledge of Leet vocabulary; These three questions look into a specific term of Leet. The students had to answer whether they knew it or not. It seemed natural to ask only for the three most common Leetspeak words, which are *noob*, *own* and *pwn*.

As Figure 3 shows, there is a significant difference between male and female students. In this sense, 61.8% of male students have basic knowledge of Leetspeak vocabulary, whereas only 20% of the female participants knew the meaning of those three terms.

All the male students had one thing in common, namely, they knew these words for five years. One of them left a very interesting comment: *'I know these words since I started using Facebook'*. Taking into account that Leetspeak was meant to be an exclusive language, this comment might be an evidence that this language has probably transcended mere hacking or gaming.

For the female students, those who knew these words were using them since around three years ago, which means that the male students had heard them before the female students did. One of them also indicated that she learnt them by using Facebook as well, and another one said she started using them after her brother got an Xbox 360 and started playing online, which might mean that the ones who used Leet at first from all the people surveyed were the male students.

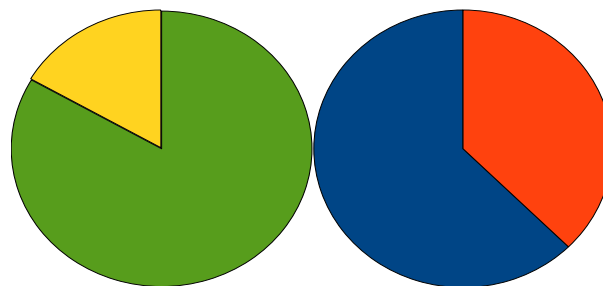


Figure 3. Male (left) and female (right) results for the use of Leet vocabulary

1.2.3 Knowledge of Leet grammar

Rather than designing an exhaustive grammar exercise to determine if the participants of the study got basic Leet grammar skills, I preferred asking them a simple question. This question deals with the use of the suffix *-or*, *which* is the most common in Leet. The survey simply asked the participants about the difference, if any, between *roxxor* and *rockor*.

By having a simple glimpse at these graphics, it can be easily deduced that these students lack of grammatical Leet knowledge. Only 8.3% of the male students (out of twelve, it means one single person) could establish a difference, and none of the girls thought there was a difference at all. The answer that this student provided when asked for a further explanation on a difference between these two terms was *'rocker is a type of person but if u say roxxor it is like an exclamation of something being awesome or proper 1337'*. This answer is obviously correct, but the term *roxxor* can also be applied to a person, with the meaning *as being awesome or proper 1337*. Even if this person did not specify this last thing, it is pretty clear that he fully understood the term.

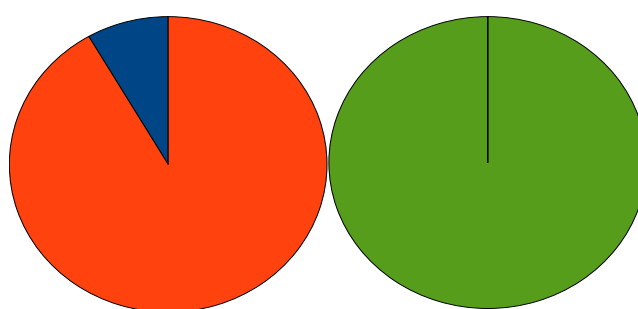


Figure 4. Male (left) and female (right) results for the knowledge of Leet grammar

1.2.4 Use of Leet in real life

Finally, the participants that answered positively about vocabulary and grammar questions were asked whether they used any of these expressions or grammatical structures when talking with other people outside the Web. After all the previous results, the following ones are not really surprising.

A total of 80% male students and 28.5% of female students who have basic Leet knowledge use words and expressions that were originally created in the Leetspeak slang. Most of them use them when talking to friends and brothers or sisters.

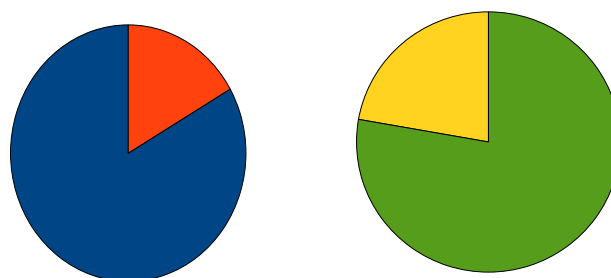


Figure 5. Male (left) and female (right) results for the use of Leet in real life



2.2 What is 1337 to you?

Apart from the previous questions already discussed, all of the students were asked what '1337' meant. Surprisingly, only two male students and one female student knew what it stood for. The answers from the male students were: *Leet speak, like cool internet speak; How you talk to other pros online. Means you're over 9000.* These students seem to consider Leet as being something 'cool', something that is exclusive to a little group of people, which is what it is actually meant to be.

On the other hand, the only female student who knew what 1337 stood for did not seem to have a so high opinion of Leetspeak: *Isn't it the stupid language nerds use?*

IV. Conclusions and Further Research

From all the results obtained in this research, we could conclude that Leetspeak is somehow leaving a mark on current English.

Obviously, further research should be undertaken, since the limitations of the study open up new research possibilities. Indeed, the study should be carried out with direct contact between the participants and the researcher in order to avoid misunderstandings, and not through the help of other students. Recording conversations between young English speakers could be useful.

On the other hand, I think that the distinction that has been done between male and female students was a right decision, since the results reveal significant differences in the results obtained. However, in a future research on this field another distinction should be made, that is, between gamers and ordinary Web users, and even a third group could be added. This third group would be people who do not access the Internet very often, but who know people who do, to see if they are influenced by those people or not.

V. Acknowledgements

A very special word of thanks for Sean Flanagan, who is currently studying Economics and International Development at the University of Bath, for looking for native English speakers to fill the survey I sent him. And, obviously, to the students of the University of Bath for filling it.



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VII. Annex

I. THE SURVEY

The following text is the one that Sean Flanagan was sent and interviewed people with. The students from the University of Bath filled this very survey in, and the author has worked with the results obtained from it, which are in Annex I.2 and I.3.

This survey is anonymous and for academical purposes. Thanks for your help. Do not tip the delivery boy.

Gender:

Age:

	Yes	No	Idk
1. Does the number 1337 ring a bell? If not, skip question 2.			
2. Please explain what 1337 means, according to your own oppinion.			
3. Do you use smileys on chats/forums/anywhere?			
4. Do you think you use many different smileys or just a few?			
5. Do you know what the word 'noob' means? If not, skip to question 8.			
6. Do you use that word often?			
7. Since when do you use it, approximately?			
8. Do you know what 'owning' and 'pwning' mean? If not, skip to question 11.			
9. Do you use these words often?			
10. Since when?			
11. Do you think there is a difference between 'rocker' and 'roxor'? If not, skip the next question.			
12. What is the difference?			
13. From the words mentioned earlier, do you use any of them in real life? If not, you're done.			
14. Do you use any other words that might come from the internet?			
15. How often? (→ very often, usually, sometimes)			

16. Who are you talking to when using them? Friends, relatives...?	
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666

UNIVERSITAT
JAUME I

II. RESULTS OBTAINED FROM THE MALE STUDENTS

The contact with Sean Flanagan was established through mail and Facebook. The following data has been taken from his reply to the author, which got all the results, separated into males and females, as was previously accorded.

	Yes	No	Idk
1. Does the number 1337 ring a bell? If not, skip question 2.	2	8	2
2. Please explain what 1337 means, according to your own opinion.	<i>Leet speak, like cool internet speak How you talk to other pros online. Means you're over 9000.</i>		
3. Do you use smileys on chats/forums/anywhere?	11	1	0
4. Do you think you use many different smileys or just a few?	3	7	2
5. Do you know what the word 'noob' means? If not, skip to question 8.	4	6	2
6. Do you use that word often?	0	12	0
7. Since when do you use it, approximately?			
8. Do you know what 'owning' and 'pwning' mean? If not, skip to question 11.	11	1	0
9. Do you use these words often?	6	5	0
10. Since when?	<i>5: not sure, Idk 6: since about 3 years ago since I started using facebook 2 years or a bit longer since I was about 14 (5 years ago) like 4 years since 2007</i>		



11. Do you think there is a difference between 'rocker' and 'roxor'? If not, skip the next question.	1	2	9
12. What is the difference?	<p><i>Rocker is a type of person but if you say roxor it is like an exclamation of something being awesome or proper 1337</i> <i>no dif: they both mean rocker, which is like a person who doesn't really care about society and likes heavy metal</i> <i>no dif: they both mean a type of person who is sort of a goth with long hair</i></p>		
13. From the words mentioned earlier, do you use any of them in real life? If not, you're done.	10	2	0
14. Do you use any other words that might come from the internet?	2	1	7
15. How often? (→ very often, usually, sometimes)	0	1	1
16. Who are you talking to when using them? Friends, relatives...?	<i>friends</i>		

III. RESULTS OBTAINED FROM FEMALE STUDENTS

	Yes	No	Idk
1. Does the number 1337 ring a bell? If not, skip question 2.	1	8	0
2. Please explain what 1337 means, according to your own opinion.	<i>Isn't it the stupid language nerds use?</i>		
3. Do you use smileys on chats/forums/anywhere?	9	0	0
4. Do you think you use many different smileys or just a few?	7	1	1
5. Do you know what the word 'noob' means? If not, skip to question 8.	0	9	0
6. Do you use that word often?	0	9	0
7. Since when do you use it, approximately?			



8. Do you know what 'owning' and 'pwning' mean? If not, skip to question 11.	3	2	4
9. Do you use these words often?	0	4	3
10. Since when?	<i>I don't know after my brother got an Xbox and started to talk using them I started to use them too 4 years I first started using them on facebook... joined up about 3 years ago</i>		
11. Do you think there is a difference between 'rocker' and 'roxor'? If not, skip the next question.	0	3	6
12. What is the difference?	<i>All of them were thinking it was an Internet spelling for 'rocker'</i>		
13. From the words mentioned earlier, do you use any of them in real life? If not, you're done.	2	7	0
14. Do you use any other words that might come from the internet?	0	0	2
15. How often? (→ very often, usually, sometimes)			
16. Who are you talking to when using them? Friends, relatives...?			