

MODERN ENGLISH INTERNET SLANG.LEETSPEAK

АндрееваЕ. А.,

научныйруководительканд.ист. наукБуденковаА. В.

Сибирскийфедеральныйуниверситет

Leetspeak (also known as “eleet”, “leet”, “1337” or “L33t5p34k”) is an alternative alphabet for the English language that is used primarily on the Internet. It uses various combinations of ASCII characters to replace Latin letters. For example, 1337 and l33t are leet spellings of the word “leet”; “eleet” may be spelled 31337 or 3l33t [1].

The term “leetspeak” is derived from the word elite. The leet alphabet is a specialized form of symbolic writing. Leetspeak may also be considered a substitution cipher, although many dialects or linguistic varieties exist in different online communities. The general theory states that leetspeak was developed to defeat text filters created by system operators for message boards to discourage the discussion of forbidden topics, like cracking, hacking or pornography sharing. In this stage, leetspeak was nothing more than an alphabet. Leetspeak then further developed in online multiplayer games, IRC channels and on bulletin boards. Gamers used the slang to send secret game messages to each other. Only a small group of insiders understood what was being said, creating a strong gap between the elite (or the “leet”) and the newcomers (or the “newbies”). The latter were thus excluded from communication. At this point leetspeak became more than just an alphabet, as new lexicon was created. This new vocabulary is of course related to the world of gaming. Some grammatical changes can be noticed as well.

The use of leetspeak on message boards and IRC channels caused the slang to spread to a larger group of people. As the original purpose of the slang was to hide messages, leetspeak is often with good reason considered to be incomprehensible by outsiders. Because of the increasing popularity of the slang, this group of outsiders is becoming smaller and smaller.

Ironically, this could become the slang’s death. Some original leetspeakers do not like the spreading of the slang, which was supposed to be part of their private subculture. Other leetspeakers, however, continue to play with language and keep on pushing the limits of legibility. The term “leet” can either refer to the language or the subculture. The increasing popularity of leetspeak also caused some resentment among Internet users.

According to some, leetspeak has exceeded its expiration date. The slang was supposedly “cool” ten to twenty years ago. People nowadays use leetspeak to show that they are part of the subculture or precisely to mock the existence thereof. Leetspeak is no longer solely the language of hackers, or even gamers. It has become the language of “residents” of the Internet, where English is the dominant language. A study [4] shows that as of December 2013 about 57% of all websites use English as their content language. Other top languages which are used at least in 2% of websites are German, Russian, Japanese, Spanish, Chinese, French, Italian and Portuguese. This means that when two people are communicating online, they are most likely to use the English language. It is not difficult to imagine that a slang originated on the world wide web, is based on English.

Leetspeak can be seen as a transformed or deformed version of English. It seems to corrupt the commonly accepted spelling and grammar rules, as its original purpose was to be used as an encrypting code. In addition to this, it adds new words to the English vocabulary.

The most striking feature of leetspeak is its alphabet. The new alphabet is limited by hardware and software. Firstly, people are bound to the series of characters the keyboard provides them with. Secondly, the program used needs to recognize the symbols.

Any given letter from the Roman alphabet can be replaced with any other character or a series of characters. The replacement of the letters is based on similarity in either typography or sound. The number “3” can replace “e” because it looks like a reversed capital “E”, and with a little bit of imagination we can see a capital “E” in the following combination of a square bracket and hyphen “[−”. Both of these can therefore be used to substitute for the letter “e”, but both will never occur in one single message. One should be consistent when translating a message into leetspeak, and can therefore type either “r3sp3ct” or “r[-sp[-ct”, but never “r3sp[-ct”. “Ph”, on the other hand, replaces “f” because of their similar pronunciation.

One of the most common misconceptions concerning leetspeak is that its encoding is confused with rebus writing. This is a process in which syllables or entire words are replaced with a single character, for example “u” for “you” or “2” for “to”. The purpose of rebus writing is saving time, which does not coincide with the aims of leetspeak. People who disapprove of rebus writing think it is a demonstration of laziness and carelessness. Phonetic spelling is often mistaken for leetspeak as well. Words are being written in the way which they are pronounced, for example “nite” instead of “night”.

A second feature which characterizes the leetspeak spelling, are typographical errors. Hackers deliberately put typos in their texts for the same reason they encoded their messages: escaping word filters. For example the term “pron” instead of “porn” would not be picked up by filters. There has always been a strong desire in people to mention linguistic taboos, but at the same time there was fear of crossing the interdiction of naming certain things. In the case of hackers, the fear was not so much social stigma, but getting caught during illegal activities.

Moreover, the text rendered in leet is often characterized by distinctive, recurring forms. Suffix -xor is parallel with the English -er and -r suffixes, thus “hacker” “h4x0r” in leet. Suffix -age is used for nominalization of verbs, creating nouns such as speakage (the act of speaking), leetage (the act of speaking leet). Suffix -ness is used to create nouns from adjective stems, much like in normative English. Nouns such as “lulzness” and “leetness” are derivations using this suffix. When forming a past participle ending in -ed, the leet user may replace the -e with an apostrophe, as was common in poetry of previous centuries, (e.g. “pwned” becomes “pwn’d”). Sometimes, the apostrophe is removed as well (pwnd), or the word ending may also be substituted by -t (pwnt). Words ending in -and, -anned, -ant, or a similar sound can sometimes be spelled with an ampersand (&) to express the ending sound. This is most commonly used with the word banned as “b&” [2].

Like other hacker slang, leet enjoys a looser grammar than standard English. The loose grammar, just like loose spelling, encodes some level of emphasis, ironic or otherwise. A reader must rely more on intuitive parsing of leet to determine the meaning of a sentence rather than the actual sentence structure. In particular, speakers of leet are fond of verbing nouns, turning verbs into nouns (and back again) as forms of emphasis. E.g. “Austin rocks” is weaker than “Austin roxxorz”, which is weaker than “Au5t1N is t3h r0xx0rz”, which is weaker than something like “0MFG D00D ^Ü571N 15 T3H 1_183Я 1337 Я0XX0ЯZ” (OMG, dude, Austin is the über-elite rocks-er!). Added words and misspellings add to the speaker’s enjoyment. Leet, like other hacker slang, employs analogy in construction of new words. For example, if “haxored” is the past tense of the verb “to hack” (hack → haxor → haxored), then “winzored” would be easily understood to be the past tense conjugation of “to win,” even if the reader had not seen that particular word before.

Many words originally derived from leet slang have now become part of the modern Internet slang, such as “pwned”. The original driving force of new vocabulary in leet were common misspellings and typing errors such as “teh” instead of “the” (generally considered lolspcak), and intentional misspellings, especially the “z” at the end of words (“skillz”). Another prominent example of a surviving leet expression is “w00t”, an exclamation of joy. “W00t” is sometimes used as a backronym for “We owned the other team”.

New words (or corruptions thereof) may arise from a need to make one's username unique. As any given Internet service reaches more people, the number of names available to a given user is drastically reduced. While many users may wish to have the username "CatLover", for example, in many cases it is only possible for one user to have the moniker. As such, degradations of the name may evolve, such as "C@7L0vr". As the leet cipher is highly dynamic, there is a wider possibility for multiple users to share the "same" name, through combinations of spelling and transliterations.

Terminology and common misspellings include "warez" for software (typically referring to pirated applications), "haxor" for hacker, "suxxor" for "sucks" (the same as the English slang), "kekeke" – an expression for laughter coming from Korean "keke", "n00b" meaning "newbie", "owned"/"pwn" for "owned" (same meaning as in English slang), "pr0n" for pornography and many others.

Though abbreviations and acronyms are associated with Leetspeak, they are not a distinguishing feature of the slang. They are popular in any type of electronic communication, because they enhance typing speed. Leetspeakers' fondness of abbreviations results not only from its time-saving advantage, but from its obscurity as well. A user has to be familiar with an abbreviation in order to understand it. In leetspeak, abbreviations often occur in sequence, with or without spacing left between them.

There is a discussion on whether or not leetspeak should be considered as a slang. Unlike slang, it originated in a written medium, instead of an oral one. It does not fit into the traditional language description, because before the rise of the Internet, language variation arose only out of spoken communication. Written communication has been around for a long time, and yet this is the first occasion in which a slang develops out of it. In fact, classifying online communication as "written communication" and therefore limiting it to the characteristics associated with the written medium is not entirely correct. Any language used on the Internet can be placed under the umbrella term "speech", because the online communication resembles speech acts in great amount. For example, the element of turn taking is present in both computer-mediated conversation and face-to-face talk. Some words and phrases are already being transmitted to oral language situations, such as "owned" and "noob". Like any other slang lexicon, some of the leetspeak vocabulary might be included in dictionaries in some point in the future. This acceptance depends on popularization; the aforementioned verb "to google" derives from leetspeak. Though the leetspeak lexicon is being transmitted to oral language use, and might at one point even be accepted in standard language use, true leetspeak is in some way bound to written communication. One of its main characteristics is the special alphabet, which is completely lost in oral language use.

Many of the original leetspeakers are not happy with the increased popularity of leetspeak. The language was considered to be preserved for the elite only. It was used for a small group to communicate, while the others (the so-called "n00bs") were unable to understand what was being said. Many have turned against the slang, and consider the excessive use of leetspeak on message boards as wannabe-behavior. While the slang used to be perceived as the language of geeks, haters now often associate it with teenagers who think it is still "cool" to talk that way. In fact, this assumption is based on a misconception: leetspeak is often confused with AOL speak. The latter is used by teenagers on chat sites.

The use of slang is ubiquitous in colloquial speech. Even the most refined of individuals use slang whilst speaking with family and friends. Slang is also present within popular media such as newspapers and magazines and it is used excessively in movies and television. Due to the nature of human language, slang is causing an explosion of neologisms and synonyms. Slang often involves the creation of new meanings for existing words. It is common for such novel meanings to diverge significantly from the standard meaning.

Slang can be regional or belonging to a specific subculture, such as music or video gaming. Nevertheless, slang expressions can spread outside their original areas to become commonly used, thus passing from special slang into general. Some words eventually lose their status as slang and become accepted in official dictionaries.

Internet slang differs from other groups of slang, embracing people of very different social background as well as different geographical regions. The term refers to a variety of slang languages used by different communities on the Internet. It is difficult to provide a standardized definition of Internet slang due to the constant changes made to its nature. However, it can be understood to be a type of slang that Internet users have popularized. It is characterized by use of letter homophones, abbreviations and acronyms; absence of punctuation and capitalizations; stylized spellings and deliberate typos and keyboard-generated emoticons and smileys. Those features can be explained by linguistic economy, time delay and other peculiarities of written communication.

New dialects of slang, such as leetspeak, develop as ingroup Internet memes rather than time savers. Leetspeak was originally popular only among certain Internet subcultures, such as crackers and online video gamers. During the 1990s, and into the early 21st century, however, leet became increasingly more commonplace on the Internet, and it has spread outside Internet-based communication and into spoken languages.

Leetspeak is notable for its unique approach to orthography, using substitutions of other characters (numbers, ASCII symbols, diacritics) to represent a letter or letters in a word. The primary strategy is to use symbols that closely resemble the letters for which they stand. Intentional misspellings are also encouraged. Moreover, leet has a certain number of derivational suffixes, which results in a rather rich vocabulary. Lots of words originally derived from leetspeak have now become part of the modern Internet slang.

Nowadays, many people use the same abbreviations in texting and instant messaging, and social networking websites. Although Internet slang began as a means of “opposition” to mainstream language, its popularity has resulted in a unique online and offline community and even shifted it into a part of everyday language, where it also leaves a profound impact.

References

1. Bullard, W. History of Slang / [Электронный ресурс] – Режим доступа: <http://www.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/1914-/language/slang.htm>.
2. Coin, R. Trolling For Slang: The Origins of Internet Werdz / [Электронный ресурс] – Режим доступа: <http://theunderenlightened.com/trolling-for-slang-the-origins-of-Internet-werdz/>.
3. The online dictionary of playground slang / [Электронный ресурс] – Режим доступа: <http://odps.org/>.
4. Usage Statistics of Content Languages for Websites/ [Электронный ресурс] – Режим доступа: http://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language/all.