

Lolcats and Lolspeak: the importance of the Internet culture for English professionals
Lolcats e Lolspeak: a importância da cultura da Internet para profissionais de Inglês

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Resumo: *A cultura dos memes é uma manifestação crescente da cultura pop jovem na internet. Um dos mais famosos memes são os Lolcats, imagens de gatos com legendas escritas em um dialeto do Inglês rico em abreviações e variação gramatical chamado Lolspeak. Essa variedade, porém, não é explorada por linguistas e professores, que poderiam utilizá-la para pesquisa sobre variação escrita e aulas de língua contextualizadas culturalmente. No presente artigo, o conceito de meme e o contexto de Internet dos Lolcats será explorado com objetivo de proporcionar aos leitores contextualização cultural, e uma breve explicação teórica sobre variação escrita em Inglês da Internet dará suporte à teoria de que Lolspeak é importante para aprendizes e profissionais do Inglês. Trinta legendas em Lolspeak foram traduzidas para Inglês e tiveram as palavras em Lolspeak contadas para a criação de um glossário.*

Palavras-chave: *glossário, internet, cultura, variação, Lolspeak*

Abstract: *The meme culture is a growing manifestation of young pop culture on the internet. One of the most famous memes are the Lolcats, picture macros of cats with captions written in an English dialect rich in abbreviations, idioms and grammatical variation called Lolspeak. This variety, though, is not explored by linguists or teachers, who could use it for written variation research and contextualized language culture classes. In this paper, the concept of meme and the Internet context of the Lolcats will be explored in order to give readers a cultural background, and a brief theoretical approach to variation in written Internet English will support the theory that Lolspeak is important for English learners and professionals. Thirty captions written in Lolspeak were transcribed into orthographically correct English. After that, the original Lolspeak words were counted and classified in the form of a glossary of terms and uses.*

Key words: *glossary, internet, culture, variation, Lolspeak*

1 Introduction

The massive access to the Internet in the last twenty years has awakened a general desire to participate in the events that occur worldwide through web connection. These participations take form as protest, jokes, criticisms, reviews, complements etc., and have created an enormous and complex online culture, composed by different manifestations of the

Internet users. The fraction of this gigantic world which will be presented in this article, the “Lolspeak” and the “Lolcats”, belong to the meme culture.

A meme [‘mi.im] is a concept that spreads via the Internet. It can take the form of a sentence, a picture, a link, a video or even a word or phrase. Most of the famous internet memes come from the site *4chan.org*, a forum where each and every user can be anonymous, and are spread afterwards via other sites which are dedicated to the meme culture.

Many memes have already been translated into various different languages, such as the Bachelor Frog and the Socially Awkward Penguin, but the Lolcats have not. This happens because most of the other memes relate to everyday situations: the Bachelor Frog represents all the men who live alone; the Socially Awkward Penguin represents people who cannot deal well with social situations. Both have a template used for all the macros, and the different versions rarely vary from the original. In spite of this, the Lolcats use the combination of a “cute” or foolish picture of a cat and a caption exploring the Lolspeak, a written dialect of English, which gives the macro a silly atmosphere.

This means that, without minimum knowledge of English, one would not be able to understand the Lolcat jokes. Also, more than reading and writing ability is needed, because knowing the most common pronunciations of the letters and letter combinations in English is sometimes required, since reading the text aloud might be the only way to understand it.

The present study has, as its main objective, to make a glossary of meanings and uses of popular expressions from the “Lolspeak”, providing both language professionals, such as teachers and translators, and lay internet users a quick way to decipher and use the “Lolspeak”. The concepts of “Lolcat” and “meme” will also be explored, in order to give a cultural background to the reader. In addition, a theoretical approach to variation in written Internet English will be presented, in order to support the theory that the Internet culture is important for language professionals.

2 Lolcats and Lolspeak

One of the most popular memes is, as shown by the number of monthly submissions to its official site and the number of years the meme is on, the Lolcats. A Lolcat is an image composed by a picture of a cat and a text intended to contribute humor (in other words, an image macro). The text is written in what may seem, to an unaware reader, a totally misspelled language, referred to by the users as Lolspeak. The Lolspeak is, according to the Urban Dictionary, “...writing words with different letters (but which sound the same) than the original spelling”.

Although some people think any kind of misspelling, as long as it preserves the phonetic form of the word, is welcome, there are established patterns in the spelling of the

Lolspeak. The sentence “*Teh kitteh iz kyoot*” (The kitten is cute), for example, is acceptable, while “*Te kitte iz kut*” is not. These patterns are set according to the number of occurrences and popularity, just like in any natural language: first, there is variation, and then one of the variants is chosen to be the used one.

Some of the words in Lolspeak are very similar to their orthographically correct relative and, therefore, they are easy to understand. It is the case of “the” and “teh”. But in some cases it is necessary to read the text aloud and listen to the words in order to understand its meaning. This adapted lullaby verse, taken from a Lolcat picture, is a good example: “*Nao ai lay me daon to rest / A pyle of buuks up on mah deskkk / If ai shud dye bfore ai wakes / Dats won less test i habs to takes.*”¹

This extract shows clearly that some words are completely different from their correct form. The word “one” is written as “won”, which shows that the Lolspeak focuses on changing only the writing, not the sound of the words. A good example would be the word “now”, usually written in Lolspeak as “nao”. The phonetic transcript of both written forms is [‘nau]. Some small variations may, however, happen. The sound produced by “oo” (/ u /) in “book” would not have the exact same sound as “uu”, but it is understandable when heard.

The most popular site dedicated to Lolcats is icanhascheezburger.com/lolcats. It was created specifically for the community creation of Lolcat macros and is considered to be the official Lolcats webpage. Any user can upload pictures of her/his own cats as well as write captions for all the available images. A page in the website allows users to rate the others’ creations, and the top rated macros are displayed on the main page. Because of this very democratic system, it is not rare to see the same picture on the home page twice with different texts, but reposts or plagiarisms are not accepted.

3 Modern variation on written English

Variation in written language usually follows changes in spoken language, and not the opposite. Usually, the process of acceptance of a different written form of a word as correct takes more than half a century, unless there is a formal spelling reform establishing new correct ways of spelling certain words. However, this long process has been accelerated by the use of technology such as cellphones, computers and tablets (Crystal, 2005, chapter 3).

Communication via the web is easy and fast. If, in the past, letters were the only way to communicate with someone who was far away, today all that is needed is a computer with internet connection and the distance seems not to exist. This happens because of the various

¹ “Now I lay me down to rest / A pile of books up on my desk / If I should die before I wake / That’s one less test I have to take.”

software programs that allow users to message each other instantaneously, via text, sound and video. Social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, also permit users to share their thoughts, what they like, what they are doing.

The speed of these interactions requires writing to be quick, short and of easy understanding. Some of the social networks even restrict the number of characters that can be used in each message or post. Thus, the use of abbreviations is highly popular on the internet. However, it is not possible to generalize the language used on the world wide web, since there are too many kinds of sites with different approaches to language. According to David Crystal (2004, p. 15),

The Internet world is an extremely fluid one, with users exploring its possibilities of expression, introducing fresh combinations of elements, and reacting to technological developments. It seems to be in a permanent state of transition, lacking precedent, struggling for standards, and searching for direction.

This means that the Lolspeak is only one out of hundreds of different dialects which are used online; and the choice of what dialect to use is made based on the same principles we use to decide what to say on our daily lives. Bagno (1999, p. 129) states that, “To use the language, in its written or spoken form, is to find balance between two axis: the one of suitability and the one of acceptability.”²

These statements lead us to two main questions: What is the Internet situation that requires/allows the use of Lolspeak? Is it important for English learners and professionals to know this dialect?

3.1 The context of Lolspeak

David Crystal (2004) introduces the concept of Internet situations. According to the author, the web has different varieties of language, as does the real world. Texts in traditional varieties, such as journalistic, academic, scientific and literary, can be found on the Web, but the need for new varieties has come along with the globalization of the Internet. Some of the varieties which are not traditional and are easily found online are not at all new: the Internet users have borrowed styles from situations such as talking on the cellphone, making internal jokes with friends, texting and broadcasting. But there have also been transformation and renovation of these varieties, creating some refreshed versions of the existing styles.

Mememes originate from conversations, from the interaction that online forums and chatrooms allow. They can be compared to the internal jokes of a group of friends: there is a

² Usar a língua, tanto na modalidade oral como na escrita, é encontrar o ponto de equilíbrio entre dois eixos: o da adequabilidade e o da aceitabilidade.

very funny situation, and then that group creates a joke, a phrase, a word or even an image (in the form of a drawing, for example) that brings the situation to the mind of all the members of the group when mentioned. The main differences reside in the facts that the group is the whole online world and that each person can adapt the meme to situations of their own lives.

But, even inside the “meme Internet situation”, there is variation. The rage comics, for example, use pre-set characters named by words or phrases that represent them and daily life situations, combining the characters to create a kind of humor that is rather similar to the one explored by sitcoms. There are also memes in form of videos, such as the Nyan Cat³, and of practical jokes, like the Rick Roll⁴. The image macros are only a part of the enormous meme culture, and are also fractioned by different styles: the Annoying Facebook Girl⁵ captions are all written in a very dull, attention-calling way; the Philosoraptor⁶ captions are all philosophical, intelligent seeming questions; and so on. It can be said that there is a meme *culture*, composed by different *varieties* of meme manifestation.

These varieties have not yet been explored by Crystal or any other researcher, for they are very recent and volatile. Not all memes that are born live more than a year: the Rick Roll, for example, was widely spread in 2008, but is rarely used nowadays, although it is known by almost every meme user. Also, new memes are generated all the time, making it difficult to make studies that generalize the manifestations, since there are many factors that influence their classification.

When describing the main distinctive features of a linguistic variety, David Crystal points to five main criteria accepted by many linguists: graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical and discourse features (2004). Describing the Lolspeak according to these criteria is essential for the understanding of the Lolspeak Internet situation.

Distinctive feature	Lolspeak
Graphic	The text is always accompanied by a picture of a cat in a funny or cute situation. Font and size may vary. The color is usually white with

³ Animated video of a fictional cat whose body is a pop tart flying across the sky with a rainbow trail in an infinite loop. All the while, an addictive melody plays on the background.

⁴ A prank that consists in posting a link that instead of redirecting to where it is supposed to, redirects to Rick Astley’s video clip “Never gonna give you up”.

⁵ An image macro that represents annoying people who we might find on Facebook and other social networks.

⁶ An image macro that depicts a velociraptor striking an insightful pose. Captioned on the image, there is a philosophical question.

	black edges, but colorful captions are not rare.
Orthographic	The use of capital letters is facultative. There is exchange between the letters b and v, and s and z. Differences in orthography tend not to change the phonetic form of the word.
Grammatical	The syntactic order of the sentences is the same as regular English. Verbs in the present tense referring to the first-person and second-person singular are all inflected in third-person singular. Sometimes, when referred to the third-person singular, verbs in the present are inflected in first-person singular. All verbs inflected in the past tense end in “ed”, even the irregular ones.
Lexical	The vocabulary has a few distinctive words which relate to regular English words, such as “noms” (food).
Discourse	The text can be written using different structures, depending on the intention of the captioner. Mostly, the captions are written as if they were being said by the cats, which are describing their actions, lecturing the humans, saying what they want to eat and so on.

As we can see, writing in Lolspeak requires attention to the graphic pattern, as well as knowledge of the spelling and grammar that is common to all the Lolcat meme. It is also very important that the person knows about cat habits in order to make the macros funny and believable. For example, if a photo shows a cat with a happy expression, it is unlikely that the caption will relate to going to the vet or taking a bath, because cats do not like these activities.

It is very important to remember that Lolspeakers are usually cat lovers, and a great number has cats as pets. Many of the Lolcats macros relate to situations often present in the life of cat owners, such as the cats’ love for food, independency and need for at least sixteen hours of sleep per day. Therefore, the abbreviations, idioms and words used in the Lolspeak dialect focus not on quick communication or character economy, but on representation of the daily interactions between cats and their owners or other cats.

Summing the linguistic aspects to the extra-linguistic ones, what we can deduce is that the Lolspeak is acceptable and adequate only in the Lolcat meme situation, since its whole structure is focused on the Lolcat context.

3.2 The importance of Lolspeak for English students and professionals

The study of the English language is not an exclusivity of English speaking countries anymore. English is taught as a second language worldwide, and is one of the most spoken languages around the globe. The fact that English is so present in the daily life of millions of people internationally has many consequences, of which two are essential to this work: the great number of EASL (English As a Second Language) schools and the increase on research about English linguistics by non-native English speakers.

The EASL schools use mostly grammar teaching books, which rarely provide real and recent cultural material for the students. But nowadays the subjects explored by these books only serve as (failed attempts of) attention-catcher for the students, since the great majority of English learners worldwide have Internet access. This means that, although there are English classes which focus on teaching only decontextualized grammar, the students are interacting with the live, fresh language on the internet. They are not simply learners of the English language anymore, they are users of it, they are the ones keeping it alive. According to the site InternetWorldStats.com, it is estimated that Brazil is the fifth country with more Internet users around the world (3.6% of the users are Brazilian).

For these users, mostly teenagers and young adults, English is not a simple tool to be used in school or work; it is their main medium of entertainment. And of course one can learn alone the different dialects of Internet English, but that takes time and, sometimes, leads to wrong concepts of the variations. If teachers used these dialects as a way to explain variation (subject practically unexplored in English classrooms) and to give context and use to English, students would be able to take part in online interactions sooner, practicing and keeping the language fresh.

The Philosoraptor, for example, could be used to teach conditionals, since the questions captioned on this macro are usually written using this structure; Both Scumbag Steve⁷ and Good Guy Greg⁸ have captions in the present, so they could be used to teach the simple present tense

⁷ According to the site KnowYourMeme.com: “an image macro series featuring a kid with a sideways fitted cap standing in a hallway. The overlaid text generally centers around unethical behavior regarding drugs, partying, and other hedonistic behaviors”.

⁸ According to the site KnowYourMeme.com: “an image macro series featuring a photo of a square jawed man smiling at the camera with a joint in his mouth. The overlaid text generally depicts acts of kindness, generosity or a general empathetic attitude, and is meant to be the antithesis of [Scumbag Steve](#).”

when used to say something that is a routine or happens very often; and so on. The Lolcats and the Lolspeak could be a good manner of showing students the different sounds letters might have in English and of teaching them about variation. Also, the Lolcat macros could be used for exercises on irregular verbs and spelling.

In the field of linguistics research in English, the use of Lolspeak and other Internet dialects is even more needed. The meme culture spreads quickly through the web and has more adepts each and every day. In his book *Language and the Internet* (2004), Crystal analyses four varieties of Internet English: e-mail, chatrooms, virtual worlds (such as role playing games' worlds) and the variety group "language of the web" (everything else). It is implied that the Lolspeak (and the whole meme culture) belongs to the last category, but today (Crystal's book dates from 2004) this classification can be considered superficial. Saying that the meme culture is part of the "all there is" online is very general and ignores the fact that it is a worldwide phenomenon that involves many linguistic characteristics.

The lack of deeper linguistic researches on the field of Internet culture linguistics might be a sign that linguists are ignoring the development of the Internet varieties. Even though some linguists study Internet variation, usually they focus on the already existing varieties and their new online relatives, for example letter – e-mail, informal talking – instant messaging. However, they rarely take time to study the Internet culture. One of the reasons which may be behind this fact is the speed language changes in online interactions, since this accelerated changes occur in a fraction of the time variation usually takes to happen.

What seems to be unnoticed by the linguists is that this speed, which at first seems to be a disturbing element, can be very useful. To analyze and study the development of languages over time, researchers have used mainly written fonts and needed samples from the writing in different stages of the subject language. These samples should date, at least, from different centuries, so that the spoken changes had time to be absorbed by the writing. But the Meme culture, for instance, has various examples of written language being changed while the spoken substance does not change at all. This is a totally different paradigm and, although not at all new, since written variation has existed for as long as writing exists, is being accelerated and driven by the ever growing use of the Internet.

This means that researches on the development of written language and on language variation in general could be made using the vast, diverse and unexplored dialects that are created on the Web.

4 A Lolspeak corpus

To make the glossary, twenty two Lolcat macros from the site icanhascheezburger.com were transcribed and then translated into orthographically correct English. The macros were selected using the following criteria:

1. They had to be from the month of September of the year 2011;
2. They had to be a Lolcat macro; no animated gifs (animated images) or videos were part of the research;
3. They had to present the use of at least 3 words in Lolspeak.

The transcription was compared to the original Lolcat orthography and the number of occurrences of each form was counted. All the forms appear in the glossary, even if more than one refers to the same word.

Also, eight macros with at least six words on Lolspeak were analyzed in the same ways as the others, but they were chosen only by this criterion, not necessarily from a specific date, since most of the captions have less than ten words total.

4.1 Considerations

The syntactic structure of the sentences were not analyzed, nor were the verbal inflections. In case a grammatically wrong verb form appeared, such as “I is”, “is” was classified as the Lolcat equivalent to “am”, the correct form. The glossary does not display meaning of words or expressions in common English language; if there is a word such as “vidyo”, its only translation is “video”, and readers are expected to have previous knowledge of the regular English words.

4.2 Results

A total of 371 words, between Lolspeak and English language, were counted, summing the thirty macros. From these, 190 words were written in Lolcat, which is more than half of the total (figure 1, pg. 11).

The number of occurrences of each word was not surprising. From the 133 different words written using the dialect, 107 appeared only once, and among the 25 with more than one occurrence, 14 appeared twice. The word with the greatest number of occurrences was “Ai” (I), summing 9 appearances (figure 2).

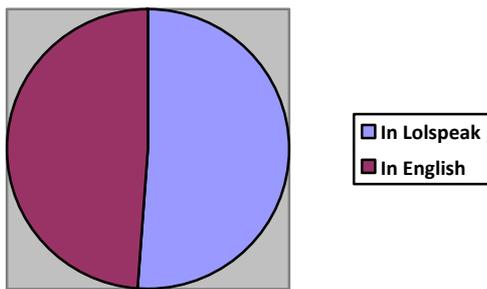


Figure 1

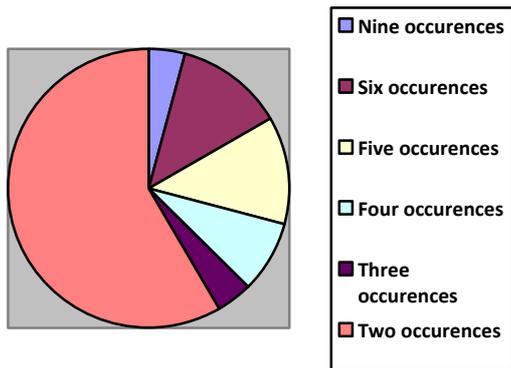


Figure 2

5 Attachments

Final glossary

Word in Lolspeak	Word in English	Number of Occurrences
Acupunkshur	acupuncture	1
Aftr	after	1
Ai	I	9
An	And	2
Anythin	anything	1
Ar	are	1
Aseep	asleep	1
Baffroom	bathroom	1
Bettr	better	1
Bfore	before	1
Boks	box	1
Bout	about	1

Bred	bread	1
Collekshun	collection	1
Colorz	colors	1
Cudnt	couldn't	1
Da	the	2
Daon	down	1
Dat	that	5
Deskkk	desk	1
Dis	this	5
Dizneeland	Disney Land	1
Doant	don't	1
Doin	doing	1
Dont	don't	1
Dun	done	1
Dwarfs	dwarves	1
Dye	die	1
Ebidens	evidene	1
Fotograffik	photographic	1
Frum	from	2
Fwench	french	1
Fwiendz	freiends	1
Fwies	fries	1
Gits	gets	1
Gitz	gets	1
Gud	good	2
Gurls	girls	1
Habs	have	1
Haf	have	1
Has had	have had	1
Haz	has	4
Hed	head	1
Hiz	his	1
Howz	how is (how am I)	1
Impreshon	impression	2
Inna	in a	1
Iz	is (I am)	3

Jus	just	2
Karpet	carpet	1
Karv	carve	1
Kitteh	kitten	2
Kno	know	1
Kold	cold	1
Leev	leave	1
Lern	learn	1
Liek	like	1
Luk	look	1
Luvz	love	1
Mah	my	2
Mai	my	1
Meh	me	2
Mesin	messing	1
Motocycle	motorcycle	1
Muther	mother	1
Myz	my	1
N	and	1
Nao	now	2
Nawt	not	1
Naychur	nature	1
Neber	never	1
Newz	news	1
Nex	next	1
Noth	not	1
Ob	of	5
Okaiz	okay	1
Onli	only	1
Opin	open	1
Owt	out	1
Paints	paint	1
Peptow	pepto	1
Plz	please	1
Pryvit	private	1
Puhleeze	please	1

Purrsuasive	persuasive	1
Pwreety	pretty	1
Pyle	pile	1
Rawnd	round	1
Reed	read	1
Scéen	screen	1
Sebben	seven	1
Sed	said	1
Shud	should	1
Skare	scare	1
Slow	slowly	1
Sposed	supposed	1
Srsly	seriously	1
Stoopid	stupid	1
Stranglee	strangely	1
Sum	some	1
Ta	the	1
Takes	take	1
Teh	the	6
Tha	the	2
Trustiz	trust	1
Tryin	trying	2
Tu	to	1
Twwy	try	1
U	you	6
Unner	under	1
Ur	your	4
Urs	yours	1
U-toob	YouTube	1
Uuz	use	1
Uv	of	1
Veelowsor raptor	velociraptor	1
Wai	way	1
Wakes	wake	1
Wen	when	1
Wher	where	1

Wif	with	1
Won	one	1
Wot	what	1
Wubs	love	1
Wun	one	2
Wunts	want	1
Wuz	was	2
Yewr	your	2
Yoo	you	1
Yu	you	6
Yur	your	1
Yuz	you are	1

Conclusion

As shown by the Glossary, the Lolspeak is very rich in its variations, having many ways of writing the same word and exploring all phonetic possibilities of the English language. Certain words, such as “ai” (I), appear several times, which shows that they are accepted as the main way of writing that word. The same can be said of “ob” (of) and “dis” (this), with five occurrences each. However, the forms “yu” and “u” (you) are still competing to be the standard form, as both appear six times.

This analysis is needed to emphasize the previous statement found in this article: that Lolspeak is important for language learners and professionals. With such diverse corpus, it is hard not to wonder why it is not the object of any deep linguistic research. The creation and constant mutation of Lolspeak can be compared to the evolution of languages, with different forms coexisting before one becomes the standard, but faster and with huge database that dates from its beginning.

Also, as Lolspeak is very recent and famous on the Internet, it can be used in many different and attractive exercises for English learners, since they are appealing for people of all ages. The combination of funny and charming elements can be an ally of teachers, who sometimes fail to catch the students’ attention. Language variation, vocabulary, phonetics, and spelling are only a few of the contents that Lolspeak and Lolcats can help teaching, and any dedicated professional can find various ways of using the macros inside the classroom.

Lolcats and Lolspeak, as well as the whole meme culture, deserve more attention from language professionals. The advantages of the use of Lolspeak, as described in this article, are various, and the potential researches on Lolcats and Lolspeak are many. Linguists and teachers

should not ignore this fresh and inexhaustible source for research and study, as it can help them in many ways.

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