

THE NEW RULES OF LANGUAGE

Do you ever feel worried that the online world of gifs, memes, and emojis is dumbing down our collective discourse – and our language?

Relax.



Internet linguist **Gretchen McCulloch** (Artsci'11) is here to reassure you: this is all part of the natural evolution of language. And the gestures, acronyms, punctuation, and images of the internet not only have real meaning and purpose, they can help us be better communicators.

BY ANDREA GUNN





inguist Gretchen McCulloch's approach to language is an analytic, not a prescriptive one. She has little patience for outdated grammar rules that don't work in the modern world.

"There's a tendency," she says, "among people who like language, or consider themselves language enthusiasts, to think that they have to express that liking by being the most persnickety or being the most angry about language. But you can like language – and you can *appreciate* language – as a way to connect with people. And a way to appreciate people on their own terms."

"We study how the world is actually working," she says of her research as an internet linguist. "If you study birds, you don't go to a bird and say, 'Excuse me, you're not tweeting correctly.' No, you're analyzing the birds for how they are."

In McCulloch's new book, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, she combines her scientific approach to studying the effect of technology on language (right down to the minutiae of punctuation in texts) with an unabashed excitement at the potential for language to change.



Language is a network, not a straight line

When you think of language, do you think of a book? When Gretchen McCulloch searched for the term "English language" in Google Images and other websites, what she found were pictures of books. There's a reason for that:

The late 1700s and early 1800s saw the beginnings of a massive trend in publishing dictionaries and grammars and books about "the English language." On the one hand, this period brought us the first incredibly cool dialect maps... On the other, this detailed record-making was a way of constructing what it meant to be the English language, or even a language at all. And what it meant to be a language was to be a book. As late as 1977, a Merriam-Webster ad campaign proclaimed, "Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary: it's where the words live."

But, says McCulloch, the metaphor of language as a book has run its course. "Language is *living*; it lives in the minds of humans. There was a time when there were no books in English, and yet there were speakers of English. The inverse is not the case. So, language lives first and foremost in the minds of the people who speak it. And when you think of how living beings create something, it is through contact with each other. And when you have something that's created through living beings, it's not linear; it's not static. It is always changing.

"A more interesting and accurate way of thinking about language is in terms of a network, one that exists in the minds of people, and exists in the space between us," she says. "Let's say you are with a group of friends having a conversation and you go into the bathroom. When you come back, you don't expect the conversation to be exactly where you left off. And the same thing is true of the English language writ large. It doesn't stay exactly the same, even if you think you've stayed the same. Because it exists in the minds of people.

"People are constantly being born and dying and coming in contact with each other and adopting new words or using old ones less often. And this is very exciting."





Everything old is new again

Our bodies are a big part of the way we communicate, McCulloch points out. As she writes in *Because Internet*,

If someone stamps into a room with a furrowed brow, slams the door, and proclaims, "I'M NOT ANGRY," you believe their body, not their words.

The notion that written text should be composed solely of words is a fairly modern concept, she says. "There are historic examples of written texts that consists of letters and pictures together, whether these are handwritten letters in which people drew doodles in the margins or illuminated medieval manuscripts. And in the era of the printing presses, the typewriter, these technologies made it very easy to type letters, but harder to type other types of things."

Even so, gestures found their way into text, thanks to the human need to emphasize emotion or important information. Take, for example, the manicule, or printer's fist.

It was used from the 12th century well into the 19th century, pointing, from the margins of manuscripts or texts, to call attention to a particular passage or note a correction or addition to the text.

The modern emoji isn't so different from the manicule.

"Emojis," McCulloch says, "are like gestures. And people have often lamented how, in writing, it can be hard to tell whether someone's being ironic or being sarcastic or joking, because you don't have the gestures and the vocal inflections that you do in a face-to-face contact. So these gestures help us convey our intentions more clearly in writing."

It's hard to convey sarcasm or irony just in text. Well before the creation of the rolling eye emoji,



#sarcasm, or mock `</sarcasm>` code, other characters were proposed, from mirrored question marks



to upside-down exclamation points.



But as McCulloch writes,

The problem with adopting new irony punctuation is that if the people reading you don't understand it, you're no better off than without it. Pointing out after the fact that you're using a new sarcasm punctuation mark is about as much fun as explaining the joke.





The democratization of language

"I've often compared language to an open source project or a participatory democracy," says McCulloch. "Every time you pick one word or another word, you're casting a type of vote for that word."

"And over a long period of time, maybe that word that you choose will be picked up by people in your social circle, and then it may become more widely used. But just like you got to vote, everyone else also gets to vote. If your word appeals to them, they may cast your vote with you."

But what about the feeling that the new language of the internet is an ever-more exclusive one, its memes and slang leaving older folks feeling left out of the conversation? After all, there are a lot of linguistic changes going on, whether they are happening in texts, on Twitter, or through online chat. You probably know by now that LOL means "Laugh out loud" and not "Lots of love," but there are other subtle shifts in language going on, shifts that can project moods and motivation in just a few characters.

Take for instance, the ellipsis. Used formally in written English to show the omission of words in a sentence, the dot dot dot of an ellipsis also has a long history in informal writing, from scribbled postcards to jotted-down recipes.

*Having a
wonderful
time...
wish you
were here*

DROP LEVEL
TABLESPOONS
OF DOUGH ONTO
GREASED
BAKING SHEETS...

BAKE IN MODERATE
OVEN (350°F)...

McCulloch delves into the generation gap of the ellipsis:

For people whose linguistic norms are oriented towards the offline world, the most neutral way of separating one utterance from the next is with a dash or string of dots.

If you're writing informally and you don't want to bother deciding whether your string of words is a full sentence or merely a causal fragment, one way to split the difference is to punctuate ambiguously – to use an ellipsis or a dash.

But, as she says, "[f]or people whose linguistic norms are oriented to the internet, the most neutral ways of indicating an utterance is with a new line or message break. Each text of chat message in a conversation automatically indicates a separate utterance."

So, this innocuous message from a boomer employer to a millennial employee may be interpreted by the recipient as passive-aggressive.

hey. how's it going...

just wondered if you wanted to chat sometime this week.....maybe Tuesday....?

When different personal preferences in punctuation become public, the actual message can be open to misinterpretation.

So how do we bridge those gaps in communication? McCulloch has some reassuring words:

[I]f conversational norms are always in flux, and different at the same time among different people, let's not be over-hasty to judge. Let's ask clarifying questions about what other people mean, rather than jumping to conclusions. Let's assume that communicative practices which baffle us do have genuine, important meaning for the people who use them. We don't create truly successful communication by "winning" at conversational norms, whether that's by convincing someone to omit all periods in text messages for fear of being taken as angry, or to answer all landline telephones after precisely two rings. We create successful communication when all parties help each other win. ■

Gretchen McCulloch has a BA in linguistics from Queen's and an MA in linguistics from McGill. She is the co-host of the podcast *Lingthusiasm* (lingthusiasm.com).

Follow her on Twitter: **@GretchenAMcC**
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