

SUMMARY BECAUSE INTERNET

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Summary of «Because Internet» by Gretchen McCulloch

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Learn how the internet has changed the way we communicate and what our online interactions reveal about who we are.



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Introduction

Language is the world's most ongoing project and the internet is making our language change faster than ever before. With numerous apps, forums, and social media platforms, internet conversations are structured accordingly to keep up with the times and constant changes. Because of these changes, Gretchen McCulloch sought to discover why internet language has become what it is today. According to McCulloch, your age and how you were introduced to the internet can determine how you communicate online. For instance, some prefer to use "LOL" over "lol" while some generations can have entire conversations using only emojis. We are writing informally more than ever which means the basic rules of grammar and syntax are radically different. Throughout this book, you'll learn how internet culture has changed our language and how emojis and memes have allowed us to perfect our online communication with one another.

Informal Writing

When you think about writing, what do you think of? Likely your mind might go to books, newspapers, articles, magazines, and probably even those school essays you wrote that tried to emulate them. As a whole, we learn how to write through such mediums, and we are taught to fear the red ink or make any spelling and grammatical mistakes. Writing involves following a set of rules, but times have certainly changed. With the rise of the internet and mobile devices, we have seen an explosion of writing by *normal* people.

In today's society, writing has become a vital conversational part of our lives. We write all the time now, and a large part of our writing is informal. Our texts, emails, social media posts, and captions are quick and conversational. I mean, you don't have a copy editor checking your spelling and grammar before posting that Facebook post, do you? This explosion of informal writing has changed the way we communicate. Think about it, we've always known the difference between formal speech and informal speech. Formal speech is heard in speeches and on the news, whereas informal speech is heard in everyday conversation. As a society, we've been shortening words for centuries but still maintain meaning, so how do we accomplish this in writing?

For instance, when saying the word "usual" or "casual" many people shorten these words simply by saying the first syllable, but how would you write this? Do you write "yooj"? "uzh"? "cazj"? How to write out these shortenings is unclear, but in speech, everyone understands and just moves right along. However, acronyms are the perfect example of how we have shortened language in our informal writing. Acronyms allow us to reduce the number of letters we type, but not necessarily the number of syllables. For example, "I dunno" would be appropriate for speech and "idk" is efficient in writing. Both versions, however, have the same amount of syllables.

Additionally, we have introduced visuals into our writing which contributes to the informality of writing as well. If you were to observe people conversing with one another in a coffee shop, what might you see? Likely, you'll observe people using their hands and gesticulating when talking. When speaking informally, we use our hands and our bodies frequently because it helps us convey our message. For instance, when expressing sarcasm or annoyance, a teenager might roll their eyes. Nowadays, we do the same in our writing through the use of gifs, memes, and emojis.

This evolution goes to show how we no longer accept the rules of writing as prescribed to us by society's language professionals. Instead, we create our own rules. This evolution of language has created a gap between those who use the internet frequently and those who don't, but through this book, we can learn how to bridge that gap.

Language and Society

No matter where you live or what language you speak, there are probably areas in the same country as you who pronounce words differently or use different dialects. For instance, in the United States, you'll likely hear a person in the south refer to a group of people as "y'all" as in "What are y'all doing today?" However, as you travel farther north, you'll probably hear "What are youse guys doing today?" People communicate differently all around the world, even the people in your own country, but why is this?

With the introduction of the internet, answering this question has become a whole lot easier. Before, linguists had to send out surveys and observe conversations to study this phenomenon, which was both time-consuming and didn't produce accurate results. But today? Linguists have access to the internet which gives them an endless supply of resources to analyze language and how people communicate with one another. So why do we speak differently?

First, we are largely influenced by our *networks*. In other words, we adopt certain slang and dialect as we observe the language by our friends and family. For instance, family dialects can be adopted by cute words that kids say when they are too young to pronounce words correctly. Like Queen Elizabeth II who was apparently nicknamed "Gary" when Prince William was unable to say "Granny" yet. However, our language is largely influenced by our peers when we are at one of the most critical stages of life: teenagehood.

High school is a place where we observe just about everything about our peers, including the vowels they use. In a 1980s study, linguist Penelope Eckert observed schools in Detroit where people pronounce the word "bus" differently. She noted how those that identified as "burnouts," who were apathetic about their social status, pronounced the word as "boss" due to the street-smart connotation that pronunciation had. However, the jocks of the school pronounced the word like "bus." Despite all the students living in

the same neighborhood, their networks were different and influenced the way they talked.

Throughout our lives, our networks are likely to change. So how does the internet play a role in the way you speak? According to a study done by Lesley Milroy, our networks are also composed of strong and weak ties. Strong ties refer to our close relationships with friends and family, whereas weak ties refer to our relationships with casual acquaintances. Milroy concluded that weak ties lead to more frequent linguistic change because of the speaker's exposure to numerous ways of talking. As you may know, the internet is a hub of weak ties as we follow people we don't know in person on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. Therefore, we expand our networks and become susceptible to frequent linguistic change.

Internet People

What was your childhood like? Did you have a home computer? How did you contact your friends? Did you walk to their house, call their home phone, or send them a quick text? How you communicated as a child says a lot about your communication habits today.

For instance, perhaps you belong to the first group called *Old Internet People*. This group of people consists of those who were online when the internet was still in its infancy. They are the most influential in the development of internet language because of what linguist Salikoko Mufwene considers the *founder effect*. The effect suggests that the earliest members of a language group exert the most influence later on in its development. Old internet people are distinguished as those with a high level of computer literacy.

In its infancy, navigating the computer required using coding commands and knowledge of programming language which attracted those who had a passion for technology. These people developed acronyms that are still used today such as “BTW” for “by the way,” and “FYI” for “for your information.” They also developed basic emoticons to convey emotions such as :-) and :- (.

The next groups of people are what McCulloch considers *Full Internet People* and *Semi Internet People*. Both groups of people began using the internet around the late 1990s and early 2000s when the internet became easily accessible. The difference is that Full Internet People were younger and still in school, they were discovering the web with their classmates and were using services like MSN Messenger and AOL Instant Messenger to communicate with their peers.

Semi Internet People, however, were older and while they were learning their way around the internet, they were likely using it for work and maybe reading the news. This group of people uses the internet nowadays to maintain relationships with old friends and relatives; however, they are

skeptical about communicating with strangers and they are likely skilled in programs like Microsoft Office and Photoshop.

The last groups are what McCulloch calls the *Pre* and *Post Internet People*. Post Internet People are those who are too young to remember a time without the internet. They grew up with social media like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as their main form of communication with friends. On the other hand, Pre Internet People are those who avoided using the internet because they either didn't need to, or it was too intimidating to learn. However, they have become forced to use the internet due to its necessity for tasks like checking the weather or renewing their passport.

Typographical Tone of Voice

Throughout the years, the way we communicate online has changed considerably. As we message each other in chat-style conversations, the messages that we send one another can be seen on a single screen. This format of how we view our messages has changed the way we use punctuation. Nowadays, one of the biggest changes we have seen is the meaning of the period. What was once seen as a way to end a sentence has now become a sign of passive aggression.

You see, because we can view our messages on a single screen, we no longer use a period to end a sentence, instead, we simply just send a new message. This trend isn't just seen in the messages we send, however, it's also become mainstream in publications like the *New Republic* who picked up on this change as early as 2013. With the absence of body language and facial expression, we've had to come up with ways to express emotion through text.

Another way people have learned to communicate via online interaction is through the use of capital letters to express emphasis or to show that you are SHOUTING. In-person, if we want to shout, we simply shout! If we want to emphasize a word or a point, we simply change our tone of voice; however, we can't do that when we communicate online, so the use of capital letters is our way of filling that void.

However, capital letters and punctuation aren't the only ways we have adapted online speak. Remember the smiley face emoticon we mentioned earlier? What was once seen as a simple disarming grin is now something much more ambiguous. With the absence of facial expressions, a simple smile emoticon is a great way to clarify a joke or tone down the aggression of a text. For instance, texting your best friend "you're a terrible person" sounds pretty straight forward, right? However, if you add a simple smiley face emoticon to the message, it shows that you are simply joking and that you don't find your friend terrible at all!

Lastly, the acronym “lol” has come to know several meanings over the years as well. Old Internet Person, Wayne Pearson, invented “lol” in the 1980s originally used to indicate laughter; however, it soon evolved into what it means today. Nowadays, “lol” can mean a few things, it can be used as a sign of appreciation for a joke, to defuse an awkward situation, or more importantly, to indicate irony.

This last one is the hardest to convey online, so hard in fact, people for centuries have been trying to set rules for communicating irony in writing. In 1688, British philosopher John Wilkins proposed using an inverted exclamation mark as a symbol to indicate irony; however, this rule never gained traction. While irony is certainly hard to communicate online, sarcasm might be just as difficult. One way we can indicate irony and sarcasm is through the use of sarcasm tildes. For example, you might type “I’m ~so~ glad to be at my parents’ house for Christmas.” By adding tildes, the writer indicates sarcasm and suggests that she might not actually be so glad to be at her parents’ house for Christmas.

Emojis and Other Internet Gestures

What is it about emojis that people love to hate them? Perhaps people believe that these colorful symbols are cheapening the way we communicate, but regardless of how people view them, emojis are now a staple of mainstream pop culture.

Invented by Japanese cell phone carrier SoftBank in the 1990s, emojis gained popularity in the 2010s when Apple and Android phones added them to their keyboards. Originally, the keyboards offered 608 symbols, but as their demand and popularity increased, the number of emojis rose to an astounding 2,800 symbols. But how did the emoji become a critical part of the way we communicate online?

As mentioned previously, communicating online means there is an absence of facial expressions and body language, so the use of emojis work to fill that void. Emojis serve as *emblem gestures*, a gesture is simply a physical action you may use to communicate a message. For instance, when trying to say you love your child “this much,” you may spread your arms wide to indicate just how much. Some emblem gestures even have a specific name. For instance, if you give someone a thumbs-up, English speaking persons will understand that you are indicating a “good job.” Now, we can give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down sign over text. Not only that, we can wave to someone, wish someone luck, and even roll our eyes through the power of emojis.

In addition to emblem gestures, we also have the power of *illustrations*. Illustrations allow us to reinforce the meaning of a message and perhaps illustrate context. One of the biggest examples of this is through the sending of birthday messages. Today, when you send a birthday message to a friend, a wide range of illustrations can be accompanied with the text including a birthday cake, balloon, or gift emoji to illustrate context. Additionally, many emojis like the confetti or heart emoji can also be added to show excitement and love for another person.

At the end of the day, emojis have become a popular form of communication and they serve to help us bring meaning to our informal online conversations. They allow us to communicate online and convey humor, irony, and sarcasm despite the absence of facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice.

How Conversations Change

Have you heard of the term *third place*? Most English speaking people probably have, but in this sense, it doesn't mean earning the bronze medal. Ray Oldenburg coined the term in 1989 as a reference to social spaces that are outside the usual home and work realm. For instance, the *first place* refers to the home, *second place* refers to work, and the third-place refers to atmospheres that are used for recreation, relaxation, and conversation. And while pubs and cafés are certainly great examples of such places, social media has quickly joined the ranks of becoming the third place as well.

So how can social media be similar to a pub or café? Well, when you log onto your social media network, you have the option of communicating and socializing with people you've never met before. Additionally, you can keep up with the lives of acquaintances and old friends which negates the need to catch up with them because you already know the major events going on in their lives. Before the internet, making plans or a phone call was necessary to figure out what was going on in a person's life. Nowadays, a quick search on social media can usually tell you all you need to know about what a person has been up to lately.

So how has social media affected teenagers who never knew a pre-internet world? Well, several studies suggest that teens now turn to the internet to chat with their friends, meet new people, post updates, and even flirt. This means that they are no longer hanging out in person as much as teens did in previous generations, which also means post-internet teenagers aren't having as much sex or drinking as much as the generations before them.

Some of the largest third place platforms today are Facebook and Reddit, both of which allow you to communicate with people you know in real life and those you don't. Reddit is currently the most popular forum on the internet with 1.2 million different communities, all centered around specific topics. So if you are interested in something like makeup artistry, you can find a community to share tips, tricks, and pictures of your work to

strangers on the internet who also enjoy makeup artistry. In the past, people would attend classes to share and hone their interests, and while classes certainly still exist, the internet has opened a new world of possibilities for creating communities of artists, computer nerds, pop culture lovers, and more to come together and share their interests. These tight-knit communities allow people to make real online connections that may be stronger than their real-life connections.

Mememes and Internet Culture

As you scroll through social media, you will likely see an endless number of memes that serve to entertain you, make you laugh, and even prove a point. Everyone loves a good meme, but did you know that memes have been around longer than the internet? Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins actually coined the term in 1976 to cover how ideas, behaviors, and styles spread from person to person within a culture. In other words, a meme is a shareable piece of cultural information that survives through social selection.

Mememes were certainly popular before the internet ever began, they were just shared in other ways like on posters or even as graffiti. For instance, internet scholar Limor Shifman describes the pre-internet meme “Kilroy Was Here” which is a graffiti sketch that features a large-nosed man peeking over a wall. This image became extremely popular in Europe during World War II and is a great example of a meme that existed long before the internet did. Today, however, internet memes are simply digital images that feature superimposed text that convey a message of some sort. These types of memes gained traction in the early 2000s, the earliest popular meme that many remember is from 2005. Popularly known as “lolcats,” these memes featured funny pictures of cats with witty captions.

What made lolcat memes so popular? Was it relatability? Humor? Its popularity was largely in part due to the purposeful use of incorrect grammar and spelling. Surely a cat can’t speak English, so lolcat memes featured captions like “I CAN HAS PROM DATE?” to reflect a cat’s poor grasp on the English language. Similarly, the successful “doge” meme also shared linguistic errors. Doge itself is a misspelling of “dog” and was based on a photo of Japanese teacher Atsuko Sato’s pet Shiba Inu. The meme typically featured the dog with text that revealed the dog’s inner thoughts, all with improper spelling and grammar. The meme was then shared around different subcultures to share jokes within communities that people could relate to.

One reason the meme has become part of mainstream culture is because of its easy creation and distribution. Simply putting text onto a digital image and posting it onto various forums and social media makes it simpler than ever to create a viral image that entertains the masses. Additionally, understanding a meme typically requires one to be an insider to a particular community which reinforces a sense of belonging between members of the community. This sense of belonging builds a bond between people who have never met in real life but allows people to feel a sense of support they may not have in the real world.

Final Summary

The changes in the English language have been ongoing for centuries. The introduction of the internet, however, has changed our language faster than ever before. What used to be saved for diaries, journals, and letters, the internet has allowed people to bring their informal writing to the masses. With social media, blogs, and online forums, people can write however they wish without the fear of an editor or teacher marking up their work with a dreaded red pen. Additionally, we have now perfected the way we communicate online with the introduction of emojis and memes which allow us to avoid miscommunication. Emojis and memes don't just add color and humor to our messages, but they also allow us to convey humor, sarcasm, and irony in ways that make it feel as if we are having a face-to-face conversation. This feeling of belonging has allowed us to make connections with people online that are even stronger than our real-life connections and allows us to find a community of support from the comfort of our home.



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