

## NETSPEAK AWARENESS

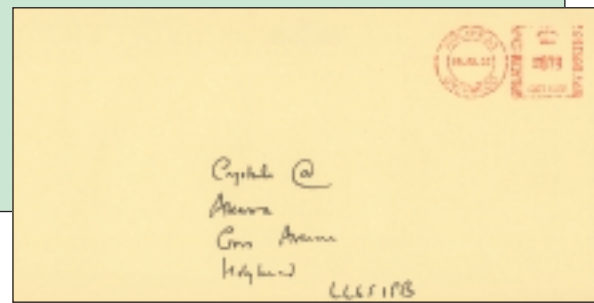
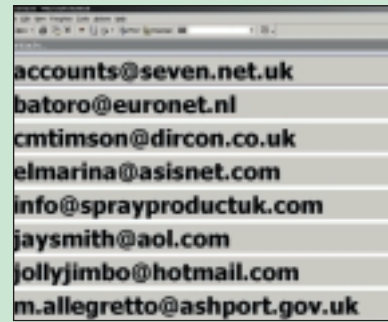
A sure sign that a new variety has arrived in the language is when its distinctive features come to be used and recognized outside its original situation. Legal and biblical English, for example, may be encountered in all kinds of other settings, from the scripted lines of television sitcoms to the spontaneous world of everyday jokes. In the case of Netspeak, several of its distinctive forms can be encountered in the 'real world' (defined by netizens as 'that which cannot be accessed via a keyboard'), as the illustrations on this page show. At the same time, a great deal of the lexicon of Netspeak has entered the general vocabulary, and continues to do so. The following remarks from contemporary everyday speech illustrate the trend (a gloss is provided for those nonfluent in Netspeak):

- *Let's go offline for a while* (= let's talk privately)
- *He started flaming me for no reason at all* (= shouting at me; see p. 431)
- *I'll ping you later* (= get in touch to see if you're around)
- *I need more bandwidth to handle that point* (= I can't take it all in at once)

### SPREADING THE WORD

There seems to be no limit to the range of situations where an @ sign may now be found. Here are four uses encountered during the 1990s. From its original use as an electronic address locator, the use has extended to such areas as the names of businesses and shops, the titles of books and articles, and even postal address conventions. Three of the illustrations show the form used as a separate word ('at'); the fourth shows it prefixed to another word, to make up a name.

However, full integration of the new symbol into society is still some way off. For example, registering '@Work' as a company name proved not to be a problem, but the company's bank account, credit cards, and cheque books have had to show the name as 'At Work' because the banking system could not cope with the @ usage.



### ENTERING THE COMMUNITY

All the distinctive Internet prefixes and suffixes found a wider community presence during the 1990s, as illustrated by these shop frontages in Cambridge and Brighton, UK, and by an organization whose aim is to bring the Internet to rural communities in the Indian sub-continent. In 1998 the American Dialect Society voted e- 'Word of the Year' as well as the one 'Most Useful and Likely to Succeed'. Their prediction was accurate. Indeed, it became an unavoidable feature of the London scene around the turn of the millennium, when taxis displayed it in the names of products and firms which were being prominently advertised on their doors. With such frequency of use, however, the word is likely to generate antagonism, and already some electronic style manuals have begun to inveigh against what one (*Wired Style*) has called this 'vowel-as-liche'.

## LEXICAL DISTINCTIVENESS

As the examples on p. 428 indicate, a great deal of the linguistic distinctiveness of Netspeak lies in its lexicon. All methods of word-creation (p. 128) are used, including several ludic innovations.

- **Compounding** *mouse* in such forms as *mouseclick*, *mousepad*, *mouseover*, *ware* in *firmware*, *freeware*, *groupware*, *shovelware*, *wetware* (the brain); *web* in *webcam*, *webmail*, *webmaster*, *webonomics*, *webster*, *webzine*.
- **Affixation** *hyper-* as a prefix in *hypertext*, *hyperlink*, *hyperfiction*, *hyperzine* (see also *cyber-*, p. 424); *-bot* (an artificial intelligence program, from *robot*) as a suffix in *annoybot*, *chatterbot*, *knowbot*, *cancelbot*, *softbot*, *mailbot*, *spybot*.
- **Blends** *netiquette*, *netizen*, *infonet*, *cybercide* (the killing of a persona in a virtual worlds game), *datagram*, *infobahn*, *Internaut*, *Bugzilla* (a bug-tracking agency).
- **Creative forms** the replacement of a word-element by a similar-sounding item, as in *ecruiting* (for recruiting), *ecruiter*, and *etailing*; the retention of the period found in electronic address within certain compounds, as a kind of infix, seen in *net.legend*, *net.police*, and *net.citizen*, with the punctuation mark often spoken aloud as 'dot'.
- **Conversations** word-class changes, usually from noun to verb: *to mouse*, *to clipboard*, *to geek out* (talk technically); reduced sentences used as words, such as *whois* (an instruction for looking up names in a remote database) and *whowhere* (a place to find a person's e-address by entering name and location).

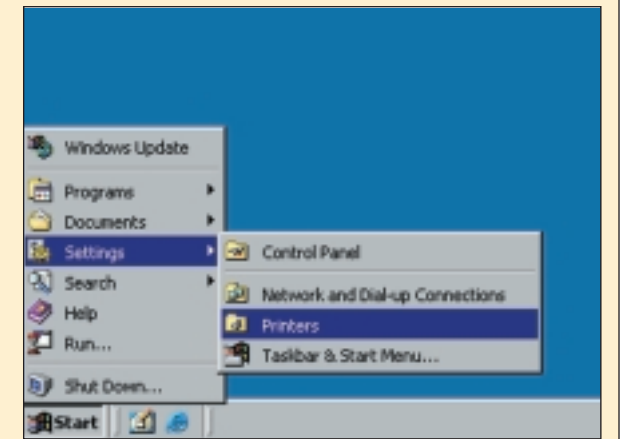
Other means of word-creation are also used, at least in the playful jargon used by hackers. It is not clear just how widespread or influential these coinages are, but in aggregate they are a noticeable feature of netizen conversations. Lexical suffixes are often extended. For example, the noun-forming suffix *-ity* (as in standard English *brief* → *brevity*) might be used in *dubiosity* (from *dubious*), *obviousity* (from *obvious*), and other such *-ous* instances. Other popular ludic Netspeak extensions include *-itude* (*winnitude*, *hackitude*, *geekitude*), *-full* (*folderfull*, *windowfull*, *screenfull*, *bufferfull*), and *-ification* (*hackification*, *geekification*). In a development which will cause delight to all Anglo-Saxonists, the *-en* plural of *oxen* (p. 200) is found with some words ending in *-x*, such as *boxen*, *vaxan* (VAX computers), *matrixen*, and *bixen* (users of BIX, an information exchange system).

### NETLINGO

Many Netspeak terms are associated with the software which enables people to use the Internet, encountered as soon as a program is visible on screen.

- Some have a permanent presence (often in hidden menus), in the form of the labels used to designate screen areas and functions, and to specify user options and commands: *file*, *edit*, *view*, *insert*, *paste*, *format*, *tools*, *window*, *help*, *search*, *refresh*, *address*, *history*, *stop*, *contact*, *top*, *back*, *forward*, *home*, *send*, *save*, *open*, *close*, *select*, *toolbars*, *fonts*, *options*.
- Some terms appear only at intervals on a screen, depending on circumstances – usually when things are going wrong – in the form of error messages: *forbidden*, *illegal operation*, *syntax error*, *file not found*.
- The various types of abbreviation have been one of Netspeak's most remarked features. Acronyms (p. 120) include *BBS* (bulletin board system), *BCC* (blind carbon copy), *DNS* (domain name system), *FAQ* (frequently asked question), and *URL* (uniform resource locator), and the names of many firms and sites, such as *AOL*, *IMB*, and *IRC*.
- Several terms are associated with the use of computer hardware: *freeze*, *lock*, *down*, *hang*, *crash*, *bomb*. And a proliferation of terms has emerged for the population of Internet users themselves: *netizens*, *netters*, *netties*, *netheads*, *cybersurfers*, *nerds*, *bozos*, *newbies*, *surfers*, *digerati*.

Most Netspeak jargon is the result of everyday words which have been given a fresh sense in an Internet context. Quite a large number are slang (p. 182), used by groups of specialists within their own institutions, and subject to frequent change.



### ROOM 404

It does not take long for an Internet user to encounter a 404 File Not Found error message, which turns up on a screen when a browser makes a faulty request to a server. Usually it tells the user that a page or a site no longer exists. The expression derives from the 'file not found' message sent out as a response to a faulty enquiry by staff in room 404 at CERN, Switzerland, where the Web was originally devised.

The fact that it is a numerical expression has not stopped it developing a range of extended uses in Netspeak slang. It is found in at least three senses as an adjective, applied to humans:

- 1 'confused, blank, uncertain': *You've got a 404 look on your face*
- 2 'stupid, uninformed, clueless': *Don't bother trying to get an answer out of that 404 head-case*
- 3 'unavailable, not around': *Sorry, Mike's 404* (= not in his room, and I don't know where he is)

And as a verb it is used in the sense 'make no progress': *Looks like Mike's 404-ing* (= he's not getting anywhere).

