

ARE YOU WITH ME? HOW ONLINE CONVERSANTS MAKE L33T CONNECTIONS

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R yuo a l33t h4x0r? Can j00 pwn n00bs? “1|=| Ou |{4N r34|) t|-|15t|-|3N\| Ou i5 t3-| |_337” (Blashki 81). If the preceding puzzles the reader, I can understand. My first encounter with l33t—a shortened form of elite, alternately written l337, leet, or leet speak—left me feeling much the same way about this online linguistic phenomenon. I wanted to know more. As a student of English literature and a lover of language, what I found sent shivers up my spine: an alternate alphabet with as many as a dozen options for each standard letter; a wildly shifting substitution-cipher approach to spelling that mixes letters, numbers, and other keyboard characters; a new morphology (patterns of word formation) with its own unique word endings; a dizzying array of acronyms for conversational use. I had the impression that a whole new language was forming before my eyes, or rather behind my back, for I could make little sense of this new and unfamiliar linguistic arena. I had been left behind on the information superhighway, and I could not even read the signs! As I began to investigate further, I soon realized that l33t, while generally not as difficult to decipher as I had initially feared, presents a fascinating and rapidly evolving sociolinguistic development in certain online communities.

From l33t’s origins in hacker and gamer communities to its present-day use in online discussion forums and social networking

sites, l33t has been used to help identify its user communities in an environment with unique linguistic needs. Remarkable especially for its streamlined nature, online conversation strips communication of all its physical properties—gesture, inflection, and facial expression—so that text must stand alone. Of course, communication by the old-fashioned written letter also uses only text, but that form of exchange does not operate with the immediacy of online communication where real time, turn-based conversations between two or more persons, some half a world apart, take place regularly. Furthermore, where letter writing allows for more expansive expression, online conversation favors quick, concise response. Internet communication channels such as Twitter actually limit users to messages of one hundred forty characters or fewer. In such an environment, l33t has become one available tool for satisfying that need as well as several others. Although L33t-users do employ this linguistic tool for a range of purposes—from password creation to word filter avoidance—my research centers on the ways that certain Internet communities use l33t to determine in-group and out-group status and to strengthen social connections, all within the context of written language. These functions are under ongoing continual evolution, even as l33t itself changes in response to the needs and demands of Internet culture.

I am focusing primarily upon two l33t using communities: gamernode.com, a gamer's discussion forum, and digg.com, a social networking site, as well as including a limited number of examples from other sources. I chose gamernode.com because its user base participates heavily in the gaming community, and they frequently use l33t in their forum posts. As part of my investigation, I read archived threads extensively and researched posters' self-generated forum biographies. I chose digg.com as one of my primary locations for observing l33t for similar reasons—the users often include l33t expressions in their posts, although l33t is by no means dominant on either website. Rather, l33t augments the posters' usual English communication in ways that I will argue are employed to enhance their sense of community. I spent many hours reading and scouring both these sites for examples of l33t usage that illustrate my thesis. Actually, such examples are not difficult to find. I selected conversations for analysis based upon their clear use of l33t as in-group/out-group status identifier or as community affirmation expressions.

The use of l33t has generally been the purview of young, educated males who are at least sufficiently affluent to have access to the necessary electronic hardware that gaming, hacking, and being online require. The online linguistic quirks and creations of hackers and gamers have perhaps been considered by the academic community as a passing fad or a minor Internet phenomenon of little significance. L33t may have been fostered in marginalized communities, but the Internet provides a rapid-growth medium for such social developments. L33t has already transcended its beginnings in hacker and gamer culture and has filtered out into the Internet community at large—sometimes to be embraced and sometimes disdained. The use of l33t has spread worldwide to be used in variation by diverse language groups, and it is

rapidly invading the offline world as well. That means, as they say in l33t, 'irl'—in real life. L33t may now be found in a variety of non-Internet media as well as online. The l33t word "pwned" was prominently featured in a print ad for the University of Advancing Technology that appeared in the October 2008 issue of PC Gamer. The NBC show Numb3rs uses l33t spelling in its title, and the show Kidnapped recently featured an episode that flashed a screenshot of a l33t email, followed by a brief explanation of l33ts's origins as part of the plot. Automobile owners are buying vanity license plates printed with l33t meanings. A l33t word, "W00t!" has been accepted into Webster's canon for its dictionary. Recently, even TV commentators can occasionally be heard to include in their news analysis words and phrases that have become part of the l33t vocabulary.

The study of l33t and its communities falls under the discipline of sociolinguistics: the study of language in its social context. Sociolinguists recognize that language is not "a simple, single code" but a deeply "variable phenomenon, and that this variability may have as much to do with society as with language" (Trudgill 32). Researchers in sociolinguistics concern themselves with the ways in which language reflects users' physical environments, social environments, and values, recognizing that changes in any of these factors may produce "corresponding linguistic change" (27-9). L33t is a linguistic change that has grown in the rich soil of an altered physical and social milieu—the computer-mediated environment—and in this context, l33t performs many of the same functions that language always performs.

At its most fundamental, the function of language is to express the thoughts of speakers. Most languages have a range of styles for expression that vary in formality. At the outer end of the scale in informality is

the linguistic style termed slang (Trudgill 83). Slang develops, in part, as a way for speakers to stretch the capacity of their language to accommodate their thoughts. Such change is an “unstoppable given in linguistics” (Pinker 149). Slangs commonly evolve among those who “consider themselves members of a select or separate group. [...] [The slang] tests who belongs to the group and who is an intruder, [and is] fully intelligible only to only the initiated.” According to Peter Farb, these groups often have extremely severe standards for the use of such slang—more than “any schoolmarm or grammarian” (78). In describing the study of “special parlances,” classical languages, “craft jargons, secret argots, and the like,” John Gumperz observes that these linguistic constructions may result from “seemingly intentional processes of distortion. He cites the examples of tribal secret languages and the child’s play language Pig Latin, which both may involve “phonetic and grammatical elements [...] systematically reordered. Similarly, Gumperz explains that “thieves’ argots, the slang of youth gangs, [and others], obtain similar results by assigning special meanings to common nouns, verbs, and adjectives” (117). At a somewhat more complex level, the restricted use of classical languages such as Latin and Sanskrit can be noted. Historically used by scribes and clerics to record legal, historical, and theological documents, these languages have served a comparable purpose in maintaining a restrictive “social status . . . where their use is limited to a relatively small [group of] elites” (117).

From creative informality to playful distortion to exclusionary restrictiveness, each of the preceding observations about special sub-languages or academic languages applies, at least in part, to l33t and its use in online communication. The focus of my research is to elaborate and understand how l33t contributes to building a sense of community among users, to describe how users give clues

and cues about themselves through their linguistic choices, and to examine l33t users’ attitudes toward its use. Blashki observes that among the l33t-using members of the university discussion board which was the focus of her study, “certain ‘rules,’ or boundaries, were imposed (although unwittingly) by the group to determine correct usage and to monitor ‘trolling’ (abuse)” (84). Many l33t users claim that l33t is a joke, but their use of it and their reactions to it belie that assertion. Rather, l33t seems to be quite serious linguistic business.

L33t has its beginnings among hacker communities during the early days of the Internet. The hacker group Cult of the Dead Cow is widely credited with originating the term l33t or l337. Their Windows 95/98 hacking program Back Orifice preferred to access systems through UDP 31337. These numbers correspond to the letters e-l-e-e-t, or leet/l33t/l337. The use of certain l33t terminology and the substitution cipher, however, predate these late 1990s events. The 1988 hacker e-zine Phrack references the even earlier use of “ELITE” as a password. For a self-proclaimed “l337 hax0r,” the appellation connoted mastery of the arcane world of computer code and the ability to use the complex systems of electronic technology with skill and finesse. By 1997, hacker newsletters were featuring extensive use of alphanumeric substitution and other display alterations in their text:

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We ArE tHe HaX0R bRoThErZ, AnD
SiNcE aLl oF yOo aRe LaYmOrS aNd
WeRe k-RaD HaX0Rz wE dEcIdEd To
TeAcH yOu Of OuR k-RaD wAyZ. ThIs
Is OuR flrZT NeWzLeTtEr, BuT eXpEct
AlOt oF uS iN tHe NeAr FuTuRe yOu
FuXiNg lAyMoRs!! NoW rEeD oN tO
bEcOmE a LeEt HaX0R!
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During this time, more and more aspiring “hax0rs” were coming online, diluting the ranks of this previously elite group with

computer-enamored teens who generally had more show than substance in their hacking skills. These “script kiddies” and AOL chatters were often the object of scorn and ridicule for their apparent beliefs that using l33t was the same as being l33t. This divide contributed to a sense of sarcasm and mocking irony in l33t that continues to be one of its major features.

Over the next several years, l33t moved out from the hacker community into the gaming world and beyond. For gamers, l33t became a means for expressing dominance and for trumpeting superior game-playing abilities. As with the hackers before them, gamers too, used l33t as a marker of community status. To be accepted in the virtual gaming environment, one must possess “l33t skillz”, both at the game and at decoding the rapid-fire l33t text streams (Beavis). In both these communities, l33t’s coded expressions not only reinforce ties to the group, they also permit outsiders to be easily identified and allow users to communicate surreptitiously, if they so desire.

This element of secrecy and the covert nature of hacking makes early l33t a sort of linguistic argot, an anti-language used by underground or outlaw groups to conceal their communication from outsiders. As a hacker code, for example, l33t was sometimes used as a way to avoid word filters set to exclude certain taboo phrases or as a method of avoiding “the prying eyes of keyword searches” (Carooso). L33t could also be employed in creating stronger passwords. Finally, leet adds to its characteristic differences a pervasive sense of irreverence and playfulness. Blashki describes leet as “highly metatextual [and] characterized by increasingly complex layers of signification with each subsequent use of the term coined in the discussion and constant reference within the word itself to its previous iterations” (83). This dynamic can be seen at

work, for example, when one l33t user begins with ‘OMG’ and another follows with ‘zOMG’ or ‘omgwtf.’ Additional iterations could include ‘OMG11!!!one!!1 or OMGWTFBBQ!!1. Similarly, ‘lol’ (laugh out loud) becomes ‘lols,’ ‘lulz,’ or even “lollerskates.” ‘Rofl’ (rolling on the floor laughing) can become ‘roflcopter’ and tl;dr can morph into ‘teal deer,’ with each subsequent offering raising the level of irony or emphasis.

Continuing its gradual infiltration into the wider Internet culture, l33t has fed into and incorporated elements from other nascent systems of online communication along the way. Lolcat speak, and the rapidly churning world of Internet memes (culturally replicating units of thoughts, e.g., catchphrases) have each contributed to l33t’s expanding vocabulary. L33t’s flexibility—as well as an emphasis on speed—also encompasses a vast array of acronyms, many blended in from gaming, text messaging, and IRC (Internet Relay Chat). Some of these acronyms have become quite widely used and may be recognized by even the most casual Internet user. Who has not seen ‘LOL’ (laugh out loud) or ‘OMG’ (oh, my god)? Dozens of other acronyms are available to the l33t user, and increasingly, to the average Internet user as well. Some express positive emotion (lol, rofl, roflmao); some give information about the users’ activities (afk—away from keyboard; g2g—got to go; brb—be right back); some express irony, disdain, or anger (wtf—what the f**k, stfu, gtfo); some embody longer messages (tl;dr—too long, didn’t read; kthxbai—OK, thanks, bye). Online dictionaries house hundreds of acronyms, and it is these shorthand expressions that have been the source of some of occasional negative press reports concerning l33t. Acronyms such as ‘pos’ (parents over shoulder) and ‘nifoc’ (naked in front of computer) have raised some alarm bells in some circles; however, these are a

minor element of what l33t has come to encompass. L33t's fluid edges and the rapidly shifting tastes of its users make any attempt to draw a discrete boundary around l33t next to impossible. Nevertheless, through all these infusions, l33t retains its defining features: visual creativity (both representational and denotational), irreverence, sarcasm and irony, and a sense of exclusiveness and competence.

These elements shape the bonds of camaraderie among those who use l33t to affirm in-group status or to recognize out-group poseurs. Users need information about the disembodied presences on the other end of a line of text in an online message or conversation: Is it a n00b or is it a l33t user or player? Blashki concludes that users may also employ l33t as a means to express their humor and creativity, their disdain for convention, their sense of irony, and as a means to stake out their marginalized territory apart from the world at large. This mostly younger group seeks to maintain its sense of exclusivity and mastery over the realm of the Internet and computer-mediated communication—an environment that many older persons find less familiar. L33t may be one way the younger generation shows that it does not “wish to be constrained by the rules and boundaries of previous generations” (82). L33t allows such users to express textually their departure from convention through their alteration, personalization, and control of the very language they use to maintain the new boundaries they set for themselves.

Creating community online has become a process with almost as many manifestations as users. I am approaching my analysis of l33t usage on gamernode.com and digg.com as two points on a spectrum of Internet life. In his study of l33t use on the website SomethingAwful.com, David Heineman suggests that consideration of identity construction in Internet subcultures should

include the interrogation of “relationships of power in cyberspace” along with “the existence (or non-existence) of hierarchical structures” in connection with the power and privilege that various groups—such as hackers—stake out for themselves. Although l33t has grown out of its hacker origins, still, l33t and its evolving frontiers perform a role in defining the power relationships among users. The two sites I am focusing upon (gamernode.com and digg.com) each contain both hierarchical and egalitarian characteristics, but in differing proportions. In each of these sites, no one sets l33t use up as a yardstick for acceptance or rejection. Instead, the ways that l33t comes to be used and perceived follows a more rhizomatic process. Described by DeLeuze and Guattari, a rhizomatic structure operates similarly to the biological development exhibited by tuberous root systems that spread underground to form new nodes of growth, all without any hierarchical direction (Colman 231-2). Rhizomatic growth results in what DeLeuze and Guattari call plateaus, assemblages of the networks connections of growth that do not depend upon a “point of culmination or an external goal” (Lorraine 206-7). These plateaus arise and resonate organically, and their observable points of emergence may appear in multiple places at once without visible connection. Such a model well suits the increasingly general appearance of l33t in many, many Internet communities and in non-Internet environments as well.

The methodologies for my investigations into l33t usage in gamernode.com and digg.com are a combination of discourse analysis and conversation analysis. Discourse analysis seeks to look at a text not only for what is in the text but also for what assumptions are made by the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. What inferences and gap-filling are necessary to process the text? Discourse analysis charges that the reader, not

the text, must necessarily be responsible for the process of interpretation. This practice of interpretation that takes so much for granted is part of how a discourse “establish[es] and consolidat[es] solidarity relations among members of a particular social grouping,” and the ability to process such a text is “an important sign that you ‘belong’” (Fairclough 83-4). The tools of discourse analysis are description, interpretation, and explanation. Description covers the experiential and relational values of the words used (i.e., the ways that euphemisms may be used to avoid unpleasant relational associations), the types of metaphors used, pronoun choices, and other features of the text itself. Interpretation examines the situational context, including possible intertextual histories; it asks who is involved and which direction the power is flowing in the text (146-9). Evaluation seeks to situate the text’s discourse as part of a social process determined by social structures. Discourse analysis sees the discourse “as part of social struggle, within a matrix of relations of power” that encompass the societal, the institutional, and the situational perspectives (163).

The intersubjective approach of conversation analysis seeks to understand how conversation participants create their shared understandings through turn taking. The methodology also focuses on “adjacency pairs” (e.g. greetings and expected responses) (Drew 197). These sorts of “normative frameworks” contribute to participants’ understanding of one another’s contributions to the conversation, including the possibility of deviancy from expected norms (198). Standard conversation analysis employs a set of notation symbols to mark aspects of a conversation outside the sentences and words—things such as facial expression, gestures, and laughs, gasps, or sighs. Since the Internet conversations I am analyzing have none of these, that element of conversation analysis is not relevant to my

discussion. What that means for the conversation participants is that they must rely much more on the power of their words and symbols alone to communicate what would ordinarily come from various physical interactions in a conversation.

In analyzing the l33t conversations I have collected, I am using elements from both these methodologies. The conversation conducted on October 2006 by forum members on gamersnode.com offers a fascinating portrait of l33t in action. In this extended exchange, a newly registered member—3vil—makes an initial post written nearly entirely in l33t and other fractured English. This forum is devoted to gaming and gamers’ talk. L33t expressions would be expected there, and they are not difficult to find among the posts. Many posters’ screen names use l33t (bu11eTJuNkiE, Si13ntKill3r-1S, D3TON8R). Nevertheless, other posters respond to 3vil’s post with derision and laughter, castigating him for using l33t. Eventually, after ten pages of turn-based conversational sparring, 3vil is banned by the forum moderator. Several factors come into play during the incident, including the flow of power in a social hierarchy. My conversation analysis of the interchange will highlight and scrutinize a notable paradox of the conversation: Even while condemning 3vil for his particularly inept use of l33t, the complaining posters sometimes chose to use l33t expressions themselves.

The conversations I have collected from digg.com illustrate l33t as an expression of social camaraderie and cohesion. This social networking site centers its activities on collecting news and other items of interest from all over the Internet and bringing them together for members to read and discuss. The discussion is only occasionally turn-based; sequential comments dominate among perhaps dozens, sometimes even hundreds of entries under a single heading. The

community forms around posters' individual contributions to the extended comment list. L33t does not constitute a principal proportion of the language used on digg.com, but it does frequently surface—usually in expressions of exaggeration or of sarcasm. In these cases, l33t often becomes a point of commonality in a group with extremely diverse interests. The following brief examples show l33t used as a marker of community solidarity in a digg.com submissions:

Posters discuss a news item reporting the story of two parents fighting over which street gang their toddler should join:

amdforever: I wanted to post a witty digg comment here, but I am just completely SPEECHLESS right now. WTFBBQ

oblique63: dugg for wtfbbq

J0415: mmmm...bbq...mmm...

MrMacMan: mmmm...wtf...mmm..

Four different posters participate in this conversation, each making only one comment, yet, using l33t expressions, they manage to create a text that displays their sense of community and common culture. The initial poster incorporates the l33t acronym WTFBBQ to express dismay over the topic of the article under discussion. Three others follow up, but they do not comment on the gang parents. Instead, they divert the conversation to focus on the l33t. Oblique63 writes “dugg for wtfbbq,” meaning that (s)he approves of the l33t irony in the comment and repeats it for emphasis. J0415 takes the game a step further, honing in on just the “bbq” and playing with its food associations as well as intensifying its l33t significance. MrMacMan continues with the food motif begun by J0415 but returns to “wtf,” bringing the conversation full circle. Each poster reinforces the

previous one's l33t acronym, with a light dash of ironic humor.

In another digg.com exchange, posters respond to an article about new music manipulation software that corrects vocal imperfections:

ginestony: So Hanna Montana doesn't actually sing good??? oh noes!

Onyxblaze: Well

In this very short exchange, l33t usage gets a positive reception. In response to poster ginestony's l33t expression “oh noes!”, Onyxblaze types “well.” With this one word, Onyxblaze diverts the topic of the thread from the news article to ginestony's usage of l33t. Onyxblaze corrects ginestony, but not for the l33t, rather for the incorrect use of the adjective ‘good’ where the adverb ‘well’ should have been used. The correction pointedly ignores the l33t and in doing so, emphasizes its value in the exchange. The l33t word works here to promote community.

In a further parallel example, digg.com users play with l33t's creative flexibility in the following excerpt from a thread that discusses a screen shot revealing some disturbing information about a poster who wears diapers:

LiamIsOnFire: OH MY LOLLERCAUST.

jon30041: Aw damn, and I've got all that chocolate to eat still... Blech!

Beanstudd2: I just went LOLLERSKATING!

Building on the basic l33t acronym ‘lol’ (laugh out loud), the first poster intensifies the ironic laughter with “LOLLERCAUST,” pulling in an allusion to the holocaust with reference to the beyond-belief information in the article. The third poster in the chain retains the ‘lol’ word base but returns the tone to a more playful one with “LOLLERSKATING.” In this exchange, the

article becomes secondary once more to the camaraderie of word play featuring l33t.

Communal sequences such as this one occur regularly on digg.com, and some display a high degree of awareness of the linguistic process that the posters participate in together. Active manipulation of the language, using l33t and its ebbs and flows into the larger online culture, becomes a mutual exhibition of cultural sophistication and mastery for the diggers. The collections of l33t expressions and Internet memes used in such a digger conversation enter a realm of spiraling self-referentiality that reflects the intensely interconnected virtual world these Internet denizens inhabit.

What happens, however, when the l33t and the memes filter out fully into the mainstream, when they become part of the larger culture? The communities that have created these innovations abandon the old new, for the new new. They may express disdain for those who use the expressions they now see as outdated, or worse, having lost their cutting edge. 'Old' is one of Internet culture's most potent insults. Yet, over and

over again, in conversations on the very boards that complain about the use and misuse of l33t, l33t is decried in one line and casually employed in the next. The passage through this ubiquitous self-policing seems to be the price for entry into these communities. To the uninitiated, the learner, such a vetting procedure may seem quite a contrast to the ways that people generally learn language, for example, as children learn from their parents. The online world does not coax, but demands competence with language. Above all else, l33t in its various forms has become a lightning rod for online discussions about language. Although the Internet is changing the way we communicate, the need for speakers to navigate their relationships to others face-to-face or online persists. In its ongoing evolution as a tool of communication, l33t offers its users a means of solving an old problem in an innovative way. The rapidity with which the Internet spreads new ideas, linguistic ones too, makes understanding these new onramps to the information superhighway a necessity for those who want to stay ahead of the curve.

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