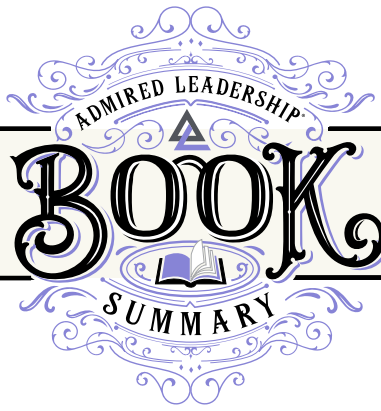




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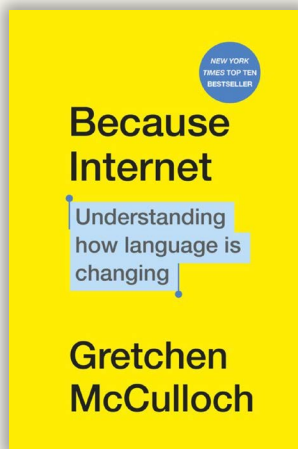
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# Because Internet

Understanding the New Rules of Language

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Gretchen McCulloch is an internet linguist who has explored the digital forces that shape and influence human language. The internet has undoubtedly morphed the English language, and McCulloch is on the forefront of this linguistically inventive revolution. She identifies the important distinctions between formal, written communication and the unedited way that people interact in person or online. She believes the internet is changing interactions in communication and language and explains why that may be a good thing. This book serves as a guide for readers seeking to navigate the often-perplexing internet communication landscape and offers insight into what our online interactions reveal about who we really are.

## Key Quote

“Our collective societal relationship to technologically mediated communication is changing. At the moment, there’s still a generational gap. But the gap isn’t really about whether you know what the acronyms stand for or which buttons to press: it’s about whether you dismiss the expressive capacity of informal writing or whether you assume it” (p. 271). — Gretchen McCulloch

## KEY POINTS AND CONCEPTS

### Informal Writing

“Internet acronyms are a perfect example of the intersection between writing and informality. Their form comes from the writing side: acronyms reduce the number of letters you type, although not necessarily the number of syllables you articulate. Their function comes from the informal side: the phrases are personal expressions of our feelings and beliefs” (pp. 1-11).

Formal writing is disembodied; images presented in formal writing represent the content, not the author (p. 13).

Conversely, “images in informal writing restore our bodies to our writing, and give a sense of who’s talking and what mood we’re in when we say things. We use emojis less to describe the world around us, and more to be fully ourselves in an online world” (p. 14).

Writing must no longer be lifeless, or only convey our tone of voice roughly and imprecisely. The internet has created new rules for the typographical tone of voice (p. 15).

## Language and Society

We speak the way we do because of where we live and our influences. These factors dictate which linguistic tendencies we subconsciously adopt (p. 17).

An effective way to analyze why we speak the way we do is to examine “unselfconscious” speech on the internet. Speech on the internet is often unselfconscious because a person’s mental model of their internet audience causes them to self-edit less than they would in a formal setting (pp. 21-22).

Twitter research has helped map language in society. Tweets tagged with geographic coordinates create a county-wide map of where Americans use different terminology for words with the same intended meaning (“pop” versus “soda”). Studies like these show us that we often keep our local ways of speaking when we use social media (p. 22-27).


In his book, **Kitchen Table Lingo**, “linguist David Crystal called ‘**familects**,’ the private and personal word-creations that are found in every household and every social group, but which never get into the dictionary”. These familects influence the way we speak within our families, in our careers, and in our social circles (pp. 27-28).

Linguistic growth follows a similar pattern of adolescents learning to swear. Early adolescence is the stage when linguistic influence shifts from caregivers to peers, and young teenagers begin speaking like their friends. They learn how to swear from an older sibling or someone around their age (p. 28).


“There is an age curve to linguistic growth, twelve-year-olds keep imitating and building on the linguistic habits of their slightly older, cooler peers as they go through their teens, and then plateau in their twenties. This age curve is important when we think about when young people start using social media: age thirteen or younger” (pp. 28-29).

We’re especially likely to pick up new words when we’re first entering a community. People are also more open to new vocabulary during the first third of their lifespan, regardless of whether that lifespan is online or offline (pp. 31-32).

Research has found that women lead linguistic change. “Young women are consistently on the bleeding edge of those linguistic changes that periodically sweep through media trend sections, from up-talk (the distinctive rising in intonation at the end of sentences?) to the use of ‘like’ to introduce a quotation. Men tend to follow a generation later; women tend to learn language from their peers; men learn it from their mothers” (p. 34).



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Linguistic change can be linked to a concept in social science called strong and weak ties. Strong ties exist with people you spend a majority of time with; weak ties are had with acquaintances. Weak ties are a greater source of new information, ranging from impactful knowledge to simple gossip. Weak ties lead to more linguistic change (pp. 35-36).

“The internet makes language change faster because it leads to more weak ties: you can remain aware of people who you don’t see anymore, and you can get to know people who you would never have met otherwise” (p. 39).

Social networking sites that prompt you to interact with weaker ties are linguistically innovative. “Twitter encourages you to follow people you don’t already know, and has given rise to more linguistic innovation than Facebook, where you primarily friend and interact with people you already know offline” (pp. 38-39).

Our digital devices have given us a new form of linguistic authority and impose a seemingly omniscient rule-set for the English language. Tools like spellcheck, grammar check, auto complete, and speech-to text are hard-coded invisible authorities “that we can defy but not avoid” (p. 45).

### **Internet People**

People can be categorized by their relationship to the internet. Old Internet People are the founding population. They had the highest level of average technological skill because early internet navigation required a significant level of savviness. Their greatest linguistic contribution was their state of mind around how to convey emotion in informal writing (pp. 65-76).

The next two groups came from the late 1990s to early 2000s. Full Internet People fully embraced the internet as a medium for their social lives and became the first social media users. The other, the Semi Internet People, used the internet as a tool but mostly kept their social lives as separate, gradually developing internet-mediated friendships (pp. 76-92).

The third wave of internet people also contained two groups that came online after the population as a whole had already done so, when avoiding the internet became impossible. “The Post Internet People are too young to remember life before the internet and started going online as they learned how to read and type. The Pre Internet People consist of people who thought they could just ignore this whole internet thing but eventually, belatedly, decided to join” (pp. 92-107).

“The difference between how people communicate in the internet era boils down to a fundamental question of attitude: Is your informal writing oriented towards the set of norms belonging to the online world or the offline one?” (p. 108).



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— continued

## Typographical Tone of Voice

Informal writing happens in near real-time, making it impossible to develop drafts or revise statements.

- Emotions need to be expressed in writing while you're still processing them (p. 110).

A standard is needed to determine typographical tone of voice. This baseline is – “a normal kind of communication from which any deviation has an emotional impact” (p. 110).

Interpreting punctuation as a marker of the typographical tone of voice clarifies meaning. “Just as a question mark can indicate a rising intonation even without a question, the period can indicate a falling intonation even when it is not serving to end a statement” (p. 114).

When studied in email exchanges, people who typed the most words produced a significantly higher ratio of polite words than those who typed fewer (p. 122). “People who were more fluent at typing used their increased facility to be more polite...they did this by including hedges, honorifics, or simply [writing] more words” (p. 122).

Adjectives used in excess lose their impact, and hyperbolic punctuation (multiple exclamation marks) has the same effect (p. 125).

A prominent example of creating shared references that an online in-group understands is hashtags.

- These exclusive references build a sense of community and shared emotion (p. 126).

Ironic typography introduces dissonance that makes the reader look harder to find double meaning. Any variation from the expected baseline of typographical tone of voice creates this dissonance, whether that's intentionally leaving words lowercase or asking a rhetorical question by omitting a question mark in a sentence that seemingly warrants one (pp. 135-149).

“When we learn to write in ways that communicate our tone of voice, not just our mastery of rules, we learn to see writing not as a way of asserting our intellectual superiority, but as a way of listening to each other better” (p. 154).

## Emojis and Other Internet Gestures

The advantage and disadvantage of writing is that it removes the body from the language. Punctuation is good at representing tone of voice, but it still misses the embodied component. This absence can be filled with emojis and emoticons because they give us a quick way of representing the functions behind the critical gestures of our informal communication (pp. 155-160).

“These nameable gestures are called emblems in the same way that a Jolly Roger is an emblem of a pirate. Emblem gestures can easily fit into a linguistic frame, but they're also perfectly meaningful without speech at all” (p. 161).



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We should think about emoticons as deliberate cues to the intention of what we're saying because they guide readers to the intended interpretation of the words they accompany. "Sending emoji[s] indicate more active listening responses: not just 'I've seen this,' but 'I hear you and understand you'" (pp. 186-189).

The simple act of exchanging messages back and forth is a way of digitally hanging out. The sending of messages itself is the message (p. 189).

### How Conversations Change

For any conversation, people are interacting because it meets a need for them (pp. 197-198).

"Social phrases are known as phatic expressions, and their meaning is more about the context you say them in than the individual words. 'How's it going' and 'What's up?' have the same function: they both acknowledge the presence of someone you already know in a way that's slightly more elaborate than a simple greeting, but doesn't go so far as to be an original conversation" (p. 200).

Shifts in greetings are especially noticeable on email. Embodied communication gives us extra cues for selecting a greeting that email cannot (p. 204).

"When we look at informal writing, we should expect to find both a high information density and a lot of interruptions." These interruptions could be receiving another email, an online message, or any other kind of distraction that wouldn't occur during an embodied interaction (p. 215).

Online chat or texting is the purest form of informal writing. "With chat (any virtual instant messaging), the audience is known and the time horizon is fast. The other person can literally see that you're typing, so it's better to just get something out there than worry about composing the perfect message" (p. 215).

Chat has replaced the set of norms that phone calls used to assume. Technological interruptions of phone calls have become an unwelcome inconvenience, and chat has become the most feasible way of reaching someone without inconveniencing them. The generational gap between younger and older people is apparent in younger people viewing unplanned phone calls as a gross interruption because calls instantly and unpredictably demand attention (pp. 216-219).

The "third place" was the original lure of the migration to online ecosystems. "The idea of a third place is often invoked to explain the appeal of a Starbucks: the first place is home, the second place is work, but people also need a third place to socialize that's neither home nor work." Social media platforms are a viable third place. The connections made in online third places foster "repeated and unplanned interactions that sociologists have identified as crucial for the formation of deeper relationships" (pp. 220-227).



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“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 telephone (calls) after precisely two rings. We create successful communication when all parties help each other win” (p. 236).

### A New Metaphor

The English language is a constantly evolving network, “the ultimate participatory democracy,” that couldn’t fit into any set of books or be completely documented (pp. 264-267).

Language is spread through our interactions, and our speech is informed by our entire unique linguistic history and influences (p. 267).


Thinking of language as a book constrains it to a static or authoritative position. The flexibility of language is integral to its strength (p. 268).

“Our collective societal relationship to technologically mediated communication is also changing. At the moment, there’s still a generational gap. But the gap isn’t really about whether you know what the acronyms stand for or which buttons to press: it’s about whether you dismiss the expressive capacity of informal writing or whether you assume it” (p. 271).

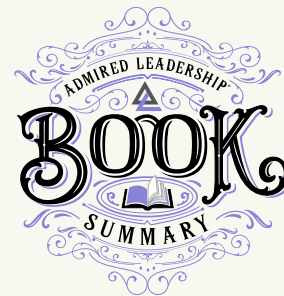
The perpetual evolution of language is its strength. If language was only spoken the way our ancestors spoke it, it would be archaic in the same way that ancient techniques have been lost (p. 273).

“...now that we can think of language like the internet, it’s clear that there is space for innovation, space for many Englishes and many other languages besides, space for linguistic playfulness and creativity” (p. 274).

McCulloch, G. (2019). **Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language**. Penguin Publishing Group.



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