Language and the Internet
In his book *A brief history of the future: the origins of the Internet*, John Naughton says: 

The Internet is one of the most remarkable things human beings have ever made. In terms of its impact on society, it ranks with print, the railways, the telegraph, the automobile, electric power and television.
In Weaving the Web, Tim Berners-Lee comments:

*The Web is more a social creation than a technical one.*

And:

*The dream of people-to-people communication through shared knowledge must be possible for groups of all sizes, interacting electronically with as much ease as they do now in person.*
The emphasis, which formerly was on technology, has shifted to be on people and as the Internet comes increasingly to be viewed from a social perspective, so the role of language becomes central.

Notwithstanding the remarkable technological achievements, what is obvious when engaging in any of the Internet’s functions is its linguistic character.

That’s why it is important to analyze the role of language in the Internet and the effect of the Internet on language.
Concerns have been expressed about the effect of the Internet on language and languages. For many authors the Internet will put an end to languages. Do the relaxed standards of e-mails mean the end of literacy and spelling as we know it? Will linguistic creativity be lost as globalization imposes sameness?
Fears have always accompanied the emergence of new communication technologies. In the XVth century printing was perceived by the Church as an invention of Satan due to the fact that the dissemination of uncensored ideas could lead to a possible breakdown of social order. Steps had to be taken in order to limit its potential evil effects.
Frankfurt had established a state censorship office to suppress unorthodox biblical translations and in 1501 Pope Alexander VI extended censorship to secular books. Similar concerns were expressed about the telegraph, the telephone and broadcasting technology.
In each case, the anxiety generated linguistic controversy. Printing enabled vernacular translations of the Bible to be read by thousands, generating the debate about the use of local languages in religious settings.
When broadcasting allowed some voices to be heard by millions, there was an immediate debate over the right pronunciation and the use of accents and dialects.
What is the Internet? The Internet is an association of computer networks with common standards which enable messages to be sent from any central computer (host) on one network to any host on any other. It developed in the 1960s as an experimental network.
Now it is the world’s largest computer network, enabling numbers of people to be in touch with each other.

Some commentators have likened the Internet to an amalgam of television, telephone, and conventional publishing.

The term *cyberspace* has been coined to capture the notion of a world of information present or possible in digital form.
The Internet is the first such technology to be conventionally identified with an initial capital, which stresses its extra significance.

What is it like to be a netizen, a regular citizen of the Internet? Shawn Wilbur describes what a virtual community means to him. He says: «Sometimes it is a realtime communication. More often it is asynchronous and mostly solitary, a sort of textual flirtation that only occasionally aims at any direct confrontation of voices». 
David Crystal doesn’t want to investigate on the consequences for individuals of lives lived largely in cyberspace. He wants to explore the ways in which the nature of the electronic medium as such is having an effect on language in general, and on individual languages in particular.
The electronic medium facilitates and constrains our ability to communicate in ways that are different from those found in other semiotic situations.

So, first of all, it is important to investigate the linguistic properties of the so-called «electronic revolution» in order to take a view on whether the way in which we use language on the Internet is becoming so different from our previous linguistic behaviour that it might be described as revolutionary.
The linguistic consequences of evolving a medium in which all the world partecipates are far-reaching. Somebody talked about the so-called «global village». This concept raises linguistic questions. A village is a small community, traditionally identified by a local dialect which distinguishes its members from those elsewhere.
If there is a global village, it is important to find out what is its dialect and which linguistic features give the community of users their sense of identity.

It must be investigated whether the Internet is emerging as a homogeneous linguistic medium, a collection of different dialects or an aggregation of trends and idiosyncratic usages which defy classification.
Internet situations

What does it mean *language variety*?
A variety of language is a system of linguistic expression whose use is governed by situational factors (regional and class dialects, legal language, creative expression, etc.).

Varieties are systematic and predictable. It is possible to say how people from a particular region will speak, how lawyers will write and so on.
To change an important element in a situation is to motivate a change in the language people use there, if they wish to behave conventionally. All language-using situations present us with constraints which we must be aware of and must obey if our contribution is to be judged acceptable: “anything goes” is never an option. There are sociolinguistic expectations that you must consider if you expect your speech to be considered appropriate.
The distinctive features of a language variety are of several kinds.

Many stylistic approaches recognize 5 main types for written language: graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical and discourse features.

Graphic features: the general presentation and organization of the written language.
Orthographic features: the writing system of an individual language.
Grammatical features: the many possibilities of syntax and morphology (word order, sentence structure).
Lexical features: vocabulary (set of words given distinctive use within a variety).
Discourse features: the structural organization of a text.
At present, the use of spoken language in Internet is limited, but the use of speech will grow as technology develops. Therefore we must consider also:

Phonetic features: the general auditory features of spoken language.

Phonological features: the sound system of an individual language.
The first question to ask is:
Is the Net an homogenous language-using electronic situation, likely to generate a single variety of language?
Do the users of the Internet use the same kind of graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical and discourse features?
To answer this question it is important to find out firstly how many different situations the Internet contains. Secondly, we need to describe the main linguistic features of each situation and finally to identify variation in their use. It is possible to identify 7 broad Internet-using situations.
1) **e-mail**: the use of computer systems to transfer messages between users, chiefly sent between private mailboxes. It takes up only a small domain of Internet space, but it exceeds the Web in terms of the number of daily transactions made.

2) **Chatgroups**: discussions on a particular topic, organized in “rooms” at particular Internet sites. There are 2 situations, depending on whether the interaction takes place in real time (synchronous) or in postponed time (asynchronous).
4) Virtual worlds: imaginary environments which people may enter to engage in a text-based fantasy social interaction. From the early notion of a MUD (multi-user dungeon) several adventure genres developed. Many MUD’s, while reliant on the use of a shared virtual space and role playing identities, moved away from the creation of adventure worlds, constructing worlds within education or business contexts. That’s why the acronym MUD is also glossed as multi-user domain or multi-user dimension. Sound and video functions can supplement or replace text to enable participants to take up an avatar.
5) World Wide Web: the full collection of all the computers linked to the Internet which hold documents mutually accessible through the use of a standard protocol (HTTP – Hyper Text Standard Protocol), abbreviated to Web or W3 and presented as the acronym www. It was devised in 1990 as a means of enabling high-energy physicists to share information.
6) Instant messaging: an instant messaging service allows electronic conversation between people who know each other to take place in real time (MSN, ICQ).

7) Blogging: it came into prominence in the early 2000s. It is a shortened form of weblog and it takes the form of a personalized web page where the owner posts messages at intervals.

The totality of blog-related websites is called the blogosphere. Linguistically they have 1 thing in common: the written language is unmediated, in blogging there is no editorial process.
These 7 situations are not mutually exclusive. It could be possible to find sites in which all elements are combined or a situation is used within another. The language of Internet users is in a state of transition. Individuals have tried to solve the problems of an electronically constrained communication medium in many ways. Many participants are highly motivated individualists. They are usually referred to as *geeks*. 

Too much idiosyncracy creates problems of intelligibility and pressure towards conformity is strong in the “communities”. Is it necessary to talk a special language, “netspeak”, in order to be a netizen?
Crystal suggests the term “Netspeak” as an alternative to other terms such as “Netlish”, “Weblish”, “computer mediated communication” and so on.

“Netlish” is derived from “English”, but the Net is multilingual. “Computer mediated communication” focuses on the medium itself. “Netspeak” has become quite popular. As a name it is functional enough, but it must be remembered that “speak” refers to writing as well as talking and that contains a receptive element, including listening and reading.
On the Internet the language that one produces is far exceeded by the language received. As the Internet is a medium almost entirely dependent on reactions to written messages, awareness of audience must hold a primary place in any discussion. Interactivity is one of its main features. The fact that people refers to “Netspeak” in other linguistic situations could be a sign of its existence. The influence is mainly on vocabulary.
Examples

*She’s multitasking* (said of someone doing 2 things at once)

*Are you wired?* (are you ready to handle this?)

*He’s living in hypertext* (he’s got a lot to hide)
In English the Internet entered in many different ways. *Dotcom* has come to be used as a general adjective (dotcom organizations).

It has also come to be used in many ludic ways (www – web without worry, in a British Telecom advertising campaign). The “dot” element has been introduced into all kinds of phrases (slogans as: get around the www.orld or www.alk this way).
A similar ludic trend applies to the symbol @. It replaces the “a” or “at” in organizations and words (business @ the speed of thought – Bill Gates’ book).

The –e prefix has been used in many expressions (e-books, e-government, e-shop, e-cards, etc.). It is not possible to say how many of these developments will become permanent, but there are reactions against some of the above usages.
It confirms that a notion of “Netspeak” has begun to evolve. It only needs to be described. A first step is to explore Netspeak in its different situational manifestations.