

War for the Word

by Celine Chong

In our world, technology and pop culture are being hailed heroes, but in the face of a literary downfall, should it really be “out with the old and in with the new”?

It's no question that the technological advance in the last century has been remarkable. Where once, Christmas cards would be opened in February (after a good dusting off), now, regardless of a sub-par wifi connection, any message, for any occasion, can be sent and received before anyone can say “slow internet sucks”. But all is not fine and dandy as we navigate the frontlines of what's in, hip, and happening. The fact of the matter is, the onslaught of social media and popular culture is truncating our language, moulding us into an army of tech-savvy, banal-brained robots, completely devoid of thought, emotion and individuality.

Humans have always been visionaries, creators and dreamers: from ancient Hindu paintings of flying rockets, to Einstein and his genius Theory of Relativity. A desire to progress and improve on what has been done is in our nature. But in our current age of finger-tapping screen-starters, we may be on the cusp of an intellectual backward spiral.

We've all fallen victim to the terrors of text-speak, of which monosyllabic “LOL” is undoubtedly leading the siege. Originally meaning “laugh-out-loud” is now, in all its straight-faced glory, everyone's go-to phrase in “what-you're-saying-is-mildly-interesting--but-tbh-I-don't-really-care” situations. And don't deny it, we've all been there and said that.

And that's just it. The internet is silently enslaving us all into groupthink by allowing phrases like “LOL” to go viral, sparing 100% of the population (minus that one guy who said it before it was cool) the hard labour of coming up with their own witty sayings. Had Jane Austen's ‘Pride and Prejudice’ been written in the last ten years, Darcy's “in vain I have struggled, it will not do ...” would have been met with an indifferent “Lol” from Elizabeth and a 21st century version of William Blake's ‘The Garden of Love’ would probably read: “The Church. Lol.” In short, if “writing is ... an attempt to ...create an identity” (Stephen Fredman), then right now, we would all be pretty similar. By simplifying our language, the idiosyncrasies in each individual's expression is fast becoming a relic of the past.

And it's not just in our speech and writing. Popular music is also joining the clash of the complex words, or lack thereof. Take love song, “Baby I” by Ariana Grande, past its prime, but will have to do for our purposes. When the chorus repeats the words “oh baby, my baby” for 30 seconds, you'd think she'd get to the point. But she doesn't. And what's really frightening is when Ariana croons “words, they only complicate it”.

How can Grande feel the love that she's singing about if she can't even find the words to describe it? More importantly, how can her listeners understand what she means? Similarly, when “all the feels” became ‘a thing’, it became the norm for people to express their aching ‘feels’, while leaving them completely undefined. Despite the cracks in communication, however, nobody seems to mind and we all live happily ever after,

wallowing in our mutually ambiguous 'feels'. Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' provides a timely reminder: "every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller..." So how can we feel these emotions if we have no word for them?

Nek minnit. Why use language at all when we have emojis? With 1 in 10 tweets including these innocent pixels, they can really pack a punch. To your vocabulary that is. Why think to express your idea with words, such as 'exuberance', 'jubilation', or even 'hedonism', when all you need to type is the 'red dancing lady' emoji? Or one of the 700 other pre-programmed expressions ready and waiting on the emoji keyboard. And with Fred Benenson's aptly titled 'Emoji Dick', an emoji translation of Melville's 'Moby Dick', soon, we'll be saying, in the words of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "the pen- sorry, predefined PIXEL is mightier than the sword."

By using our beloved emojis, we are banishing many powerful words, to the realms of the unused. The rejected. The socially-strange. In using the 'thumbs up' emoji rather than 'exceptional', 'exemplary' or 'outstanding' or the 'no good' emoji instead of 'abhorrent', 'abominable' or 'detestable', "we are [becoming] dry in terms of the cues we use to signal exactly what we mean". That's coming from Tyler Schnoebelen, who wrote his university thesis on the nuances of the emoji language. Legit. And he's not far off the mark. In the reduction of the use of complex words, we are narrowing our range of thought and giving rise to our very own real-life Newspeak, or should I say, Nospeak.

People, we are looking at the surrender of words from, not just English, but all languages as our vocabulary continues to plummet to depths of unparalleled vacuity. And if the limits of language are the limits of the world (Ludwig Wittgenstein), it's REALLY going to be a small world after all. Don't forget to open up 'thesaurus.com' every time you try to write anything longer than a Facebook message.

So maybe technology has conquered us, making us crave convenience and simplicity in our language, Shelley's 'Frankenstein-complex', so to speak: "You are my creator, but I am your master--obey". We are merely slaves to our invention and our intellectual demise a consequence of our own creation.

Or perhaps change is truly the only constant, and our battered and broken language is the reward for our victory over hardship and struggle, a manifestation of humanity's need to endlessly make things easier. Technology is here to make our lives better, but in our world, has better become a synonym for easier? If, as Dumas says in 'The Three Musketeers', "the merit of all things lies in their difficulty", then who has really won the battle?

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