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Additions to the ontology of the internet language in the light of Hungarian and international sociolinguistic literature

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: there has been a debate going on about the legitimacy of *internet language* and related terms since the early 2000s. The present theoretical reasoning argues for the need for *internet language* as a term, taking into consideration the not very strict criteria used to identify other language varieties as lects.

Objective: to lay down the considerations for deciding the debate on the existence of an internet language.

Research materials: the article reviews the English, German and Hungarian literature and argues for the existence of an internet language through Hungarian language examples. The Hungarian literature and example material is relevant because, alongside its English and German counterparts, Hungarian internet linguistics is among the oldest and has one of the richest histories.

Results and novelty of the research: although sociolinguists tend to question the legitimacy of *internet language* and similar terms, it is precisely from a sociolinguistic point of view that the enregistering of *internet language* can be accomplished. Even though two of the six aspects presented in the paper (the principles of uniformity and novelty) argue against the existence of *internet language*, the four remaining (quantity, community, analogy and illusorycum) guarantee its legitimacy. The novelty of the paper lies in the synthesis of opposing views on the existence of a netlanguage.

Key words: digital communication, netspeak, sociolinguistics, language varieties, language ideologies

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Заметки к онтологии интернет-языка в свете венгерской и международной социолингвистической литературы

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Введение. С начала 2000-х годов ведутся дебаты о легитимности *интернет-языка* и связанных с ним терминов. В настоящем теоретическом исследовании обосновывается необходимость выделения *интернет-языка* в качестве термина с учётом не очень строгих критериев, используемых для определения других языковых разновидностей в качестве идиома.

Цель: сформулировать обоснования для принятия решения в дискуссии о существовании интернет-языка.

Материалы исследования: сетевая лингвистика из английской, немецкой и венгерской литературы.

Результаты и научная новизна исследования. Хотя социолингвисты склонны ставить под сомнение легитимность *интернет-языка* и подобных терминов, именно с социолингвистической точки зрения может быть осуществлена перерегистрация *интернет-языка*. Несмотря на то что два из шести представленных в статье аспектов (принципы единообразия и новизны) свидетельствуют против существования *интернет-языка*, четыре оставшихся (количество, сообщество, аналогия и «иллюзорность») гарантируют его легитимность. Новизна работы заключается в синтезе противоположных точек зрения на онтологию интернет-языка.

Ключевые слова: цифровая коммуникация, сетевой язык, социолингвистика, языковые разновидности, языковые идеологии

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Introduction

A quarter of a century of research into digital communication has passed without a consensus among experts on whether or not such a thing as an internet language exists at all. The process of “enregistering” – this is the term Squires [24], Prószycki, Domonkosi and Ludányi [19, 49–50] use for the process – *internet language* has been the subject of numerous attempts, but it is still greeted with skepticism by some researchers (e. g., Schlobinski [21], Dürscheid [5], Szabó [25]). The problem is that *internet language* and related terms – e.g. *netspeak* [4, 48], *digilect* [29], *e-nyelv* ‘e-language’ [1, 30–31] – in themselves (regardless of the author’s intention) suggest the existence of some new language variety that is missing from traditional typologies of language varieties. The present paper takes stock of the principles that can be taken into account when assessing the legitimacy of the internet language as a definable entity (language variety or lect).

Materials and methods

The present paper reviews the arguments for and against the use of *internet language* as a technical term on the basis of Hungarian and international literature, using Hungarian language examples (Hungarian has one of the richest literature in internet linguistics besides English and German) [16, 102]. The aim of the theoretical reasoning (quantitative comparison of arguments) is to confirm the legitimacy of *internet language* and related terms (in contrast to the German literature in particular). The reasoning is based on the fact that since *dialect*, *youth language* and other lects have been identified as language varieties without strict criteria, it is not fair to apply strict criteria with regard *internet language* either.

Results

The principle of uniformity

Internet language and its counterparts are generally held to account for what other language varieties are not: uniformity and a quality related

to it, delimitability. The legitimacy of “traditional” language varieties (e.g., the standard, dialects, youth language) is guaranteed by tradition, so their status as language varieties is not (or even cannot be) called into question (for a comparison between *dialect* and *netlanguage*, see *The principle of analogy*). If we were to raise such a question anyway, we would most probably earn ourselves the label of “destroyer of science and culture”; however, we would only be pointing out what others have already pointed out in the context of *netlanguage*: the lack of uniformity and delimitability. After all, just as the internet language is not uniform, no other language variety is. This is so insomuch that, for example, Klára Sándor considers only the language varieties of individuals, the so-called idiolects, to be proper language varieties, and voices her criticism of any other varieties in the following way: language varieties are in fact non-existent, fictitious linguistic units, which can at most facilitate linguistic description [20, 43–47]. The fact that our belief in language varieties does not waver is due to linguistic ideologies, which make them – in Lanstyák’s words [15, 164] – almost real, not only a lay idea, but also a scientific belief. (Lanstyák is basically saying this about language, but the characterization of the language ideologies he lists, shows that his statement also applies to language varieties). Examples of such language ideologies are language reificationism, language varietism and language distinctionism: language reificationism is the belief that linguistic varieties are quasi-entities existing outside speakers; language varietism is the belief that language is made up of separable, countable, objectively imagined varieties of language, such as dialects and registers; language distinctionism is the belief that language elements and rules can be clearly assigned to a language variety and that, as a consequence, each language variety can be clearly distinguished from the others [14, 252–264]. These language ideologies are essentially false ideas, yet they are necessary to enable thinking in terms of categories and drawing “characterizations” of language and its subsystems in line with these categories (for more on this, see *The illusorycum-principle*).

The first major critics of *internet language* and related concepts were Peter Schlobinski and Christa Dürscheid. Both questioned the validity of the term *netspeak* that had been coined by David Crystal [4]. According to Schlobinski [21, 3], it is unfortunate that Crystal [4, 76] considers the phenomenon to be an “emerging variety” since the language variability

and language diversity that characterizes internet-based communication is similar to that of the “real world” in that it cannot be brought to a common denominator. In one of his later books he writes about the topic: “The Internet creates a complex language space, defined by parameters such as the medium, the background of the user, the software or the contrast between written and spoken language. Different functional media genres and styles emerge as a function of the constellations of the various parameters – there is no *internet language*, there are only certain language phenomena that occur more or less frequently at a given moment” [22, 230 cited by 6, 72–73 translated by the authors].

Like Schlobinski, Dürscheid [5, 1] also objects to the designation of Crystal’s *netspeak* [4, 92] as a “genuine language variety”, for two major reasons: first, because there examples of what are considered to be netlanguage elements also exist in contexts independent of the Internet and also from pre-Internet times (see *The principle of novelty*), and second, because, even if there are elements that can be described as belonging to internet language, their use is not universal, but dependent on the situation and the individual [5, 5–6]. Dürscheid concludes by calling *netlanguage* a myth (as the title of his paper suggests: *Netzsprache – ein neuer Mythos* ‘Netlanguage – a new myth’): “There is no such thing as an internet language, and there is no netlanguage either. [...] Instead of making general statements about language use on the Internet, we should focus on the analysis of specific types of online text and discourse” [5, 14 translated by the authors].

The lack of uniformity and delimitability is, of course, also criticized by other authors. David Barton and Carmen Lee [2, 5] also argue that, since the characteristics of Crystal’s *netspeak* are not specific to all types of computer-mediated communication, the trap of overgeneralization should be avoided. Differences can also arise, for example, as a result of the diversity of individual language use and of online platforms [26; 27].

Proponents of the sociolinguistic approach in the Hungarian literature also draw attention to the lack of uniformity and the dangers of overgeneralization (e.g., Szabó [25], Porkoláb [18], Prószéky–Domonkosi–Ludányi [19, 49–50]. According to Tamás Péter Szabó [25], the reason internet language can seem “radically different” (see also *The principle of novelty*) is that in examination or inquiry we often prefer certain situations, such as chatting with friends or forum discussions with

people interested in a similar topic, over other types of situations (e.g., formal conversations). Similarly, Szabó also voices his view, that the problem is in the tendency to treat the linguistic features of informal conversations as general features of the otherwise diverse internet language, as follows: however, cherry-picking instances of very distinctive language use distorts the overall picture and leads to overgeneralization.

Ádám Porkoláb [18, 14–27] takes a similar view, arguing that text-based interactive internet genres (e.g., chat, instant messaging, e-mail, forums) do not have a uniform linguistic norm and, in light of this, concepts such as the term *minimalekt* [9, 70–71], which suggests the exclusivity of the effort to reduce writing time, seem too simplistic, schematic, so to speak.

According to Gábor Prószéky, Ágnes Domonkosi and Zsófia Ludányi [19, 49], the internet language can only be understood as a more or less separable entity, as it is far from being uniform in terms of linguistic patterns. The authors, referred to Lauren Squires [24], explain the reason why it has become a separate entity in the public consciousness as follows: “the enregistering of *internet language* stems from a linguistic ideology of standardism and a deterministic view of technology, through which certain features are interpreted as unconventional and internet-specific in internet interactions” [19, 49, translated by the authors]. This means that *internet language* is usually seen as a construct that can be explained both by its deviation from the standard linguistic norm and by the impact of technology. It is hard to agree with the first point because linguistic features that are assumed to be internet-specific are not particularly common even in conversations in instant messaging applications [24]; at the same time, the second one is problematic because examples of such features can be found in pre-technological times (for arguments and counterarguments, see also *The principle of novelty* and *The principle of quantity*).

The complexity of the problem is shown by the fact that even the authors of terms such as *netspeak* share the critics' views. For example, Ágnes Veszelszki, the creator of the term *digilekt*, reacts to the criticism of *netspeak* in the international literature as follows: in her view, it is precisely this heterogeneity and the embracing of different patterns that is the specificity of digital communication [30, 35–36]. Géza Balázs, the inventor of the term *e-nyelv* ‘e-language’ [1, 30–33], makes a similar point, pointing out that the Internet should be seen

as a complex linguistic space. In his opinion, the language of the Internet is not uniform, it is not sociologically or even socioculturally delimitable; the Internet has everything that reality has, or languages in general have [1, 129].

The principle of novelty (the cause of the problem)

Although Tamás Péter Szabó's article [25] titled *Hatásvadász nyelvészet* [Claptrap linguistics] was basically written as a critique of Ágnes Veszelszki's *digilekt* concept [28], it can also be interpreted as a critique of any concept of internet linguistics that tries to present *internet language* – or more precisely its prototypical features – as novel, unique, or even a curiosity. Among other things, Szabó questions the novelty of character reduction techniques, which according to other researches are not only used on the Internet, but also in youth language or even in marketing language [11, 42; 12]. He argues that abbreviations (e.g., *hogy* > *h* ‘to’) could be found earlier in school notes and private notes, mergers (fusions) [13, 97–98] (e.g., *azt hiszem* > *asszem* ‘I think’) in fine literature (in passages imitating live speech) and the juxtaposition of numbers and letters (e.g., *good night* > *good n8*) in 18th–19th century texts.

Based on an idea similar to Szabó's, Stephan Elspaß's study [7] *Alter Wein und neue Schläuche?* [Old wine and new wineskins; cf. “Neither do men put new wine into old bottles” (Matthew 9:17)], which refutes the novelty of the linguistic features of the new media by presenting a number of examples from private German letters from the 19th century (e.g. *ist* > *is* ‘is’, *habe* > *hab* ‘have (something)’, *nicht* > *nich* ‘no’, *war es* > *wars* ‘was’, *sehen* > *sehn* ‘see’, *jetzt* > *jetz* ‘now’, *etwas* > *was* ‘something’, *einmal* > *mal* ‘once’). He concludes that “it is only the media that is new, and the fact that we have become more accepting, not the use of language itself” [7, 27, translated by the authors].

Many netlinguists (including one of the authors of this paper) have fallen into the trap of seeing and presenting netlanguage as something completely new (and somewhat sensational) [17]. Let's look at two examples: “Digilekt is a new variety of language *with specific properties not typical of communication mediated by other media*” [28, 6–7, translated and highlighted by the authors]; “The most characteristic feature of the use of language on the Internet is the *absolute striving* for linguistic economy and increasing the speed of writing” [9, 67, translated and highlighted by the authors]. Neither

of these findings was motivated by a desire to make an impact, but simply because even a researcher can be dazzled by so much informal stimulus.

The principle of quantity (the creator of consensus)

Consensus between the various positions can be reached by recognizing that most of the phenomena perceived as internet language are not new (even if some of them are), what is new is the extent to which we are confronted with them on certain surfaces, which creates a sense of novelty. So it is not so much a qualitative change as a quantitative one. Figuratively speaking: it's not so much the flowers in the bouquet that are unique, but their combination: it is the *large number of abbreviations*, the *large number of acronyms*, the *large number of words without accent marks*, the *large number of missing punctuation marks* etc. (not everywhere, of course, but any rapid exchange of messages and comments provides a perfect substrate for such phenomena).

In the light of the above, we can agree with Szabó when, as part of his answer to the question "Is there nothing new under the sun?", he writes that the foundations of the linguistic innovations used in IT slang can be traced back centuries. However, even he himself acknowledges that a new information medium (the Internet) caused these to be noted. So let us be under no illusion: it is almost certain that in a quick exchange of messages and comments, or even a relatively formal exchange of e-mails, we will encounter more prototypical tokens than we would on paper, or verbally. Therefore, the fact that there is an example of number homophony – as Veszelszki [30, 88] calls the substitution of numbers for letters – in a letter sent by Pál Sipos to his friend Ferenc Kazinczy should be considered a wonder rather than a real argument for questioning the legitimacy of *netlanguage*.

The community-principle

The result of quantitative changes is the emergence of an internet norm, a norm that is much more permissive than the standard. By permissiveness we mean that not even an adherent of the ideology of linguistic standardism will haul another person up for sending a message without accent marks and punctuation. It will be known that the reason for this is that the other person is in a hurry (e.g., getting on a city bus) and this is a natural way to speed up character input. The accepted view in sociolinguistics is that each language

variety has its own set of norms, so it is evident that wherever a community perceives a new norm, a new language variety (with its formal, neutral and informal registers) can also be found. Three large-sample surveys confirm the same: the proportion of respondents voting in favor of the legitimacy of *internet language* was 64% (N=1442) in 2000 [3, 82–84 and 190 – first survey], 76% (N=2945) in 2001 [3, 82–84, 190 – second survey] and 81% (N=1557) in 2016 [9, 62].

The principle of analogy

If we compare internet language with the language varieties whose norm is the most deviant from the standard, such as youth language as a gerontlect or Palóc as a geographical dialect of Hungarian (now, we will give a comparison using the latter), we will see that (a) the formality of the speech situation and (b) the age of the speakers are the factors that determine the occurrence of prototypical features and that prototypical features are (c) not exclusive features of a particular language variety. We highlight these three aspects because a common argument against *netlanguage* is that (a) the texts of formal digital genres such as e-mail or (b) the linguistic behavior of older users are less likely to contain prototypical features, and that prototypical features in *netlanguage* are (c) false (sham) features collected from other language varieties.

(a) The more informal the speech situation, the more prototypical features defining the given language variety can be observed; and vice versa: the more formal the speech situation, the fewer of these features can be observed. In short, the formality of the speech situation determines the likelihood of prototypical features. Just as in a pub conversation in Gömör we are more likely to encounter Palóc prototypical features, such as the dropping of the *l* and the elongation of the preceding vowel (e.g. *volt* – *vót* 'was', *bolt* – *bót* 'shop'), a quick exchange between friends is more likely to contain internet-language prototypical features such as word shortenings (e.g. *depresszió* – *depi* 'depression'), words without accent marks (e.g. *szívből* – *szivbol* 'from the heart') or typos (e.g. *otthon* – *otrhon* 'at home').

(b) The older a dialect speaker is, the more dialect-specific prototypical features are observed in his/her speech. This is because the decline and transformation of the traditional peasant way of life has accelerated the displacement of dialectal words from the language of young people [10, 207]. Even

if in the opposite direction, a similar trend can be observed in the digital space: the younger the user, the more prototypical internet-language features appear in their texts.

(c) Of course, a prototypical feature does not become a characteristic trait of a dialect because it does not occur in other language areas, but because its use is considered to be more common in a given area than elsewhere (see the discussion on the principle of quantity in connection with *internet language* above).

Since we do not call into question the language-variety status of dialects simply because (a) the number of their prototypical features decreases with increasing formality, (b) their use varies significantly with age, or (c) because their prototypical features may appear in other language varieties, we will similarly refrain from questioning the lect status of the internet language. Just as – contingent on the above aspects – the vowel *í* is used often in the Rye Island dialect (e.g. *szép* – *szíp* 'nice', *beszéd* – *beszíd* 'speech'), also contingent on the same aspects, emojis characterize the internet language in a similar manner.

The illusorycum-principle

Can we speak of an internet language if it is not uniform, but has prototypical features that are alive in the consciousness of the community? Under what heading, then, do we examine these prototypical features if we are to avoid the concept of *internet language* and related collective terms? Is it worth choosing an indirect solution (e.g., roundabout wording) rather than directly naming the phenomenon?

The solution may be István Lanstyák's *illusorycum* concept (< *illusion* + *ideologycum*), which compares languages and their varieties, including dialects and registers, to (1) *illusions* and *ideologies* [15, 7, 17–19, 164–168].

(1) The traditional conception of language sees languages and language varieties as distinct, thing-like entities, since we are used to 'using', 'possessing', 'passing on', 'counting' [15, 17] and even 'researching' or 'studying' them [23, 39]. Language is an illusion in the sense – here, Lanstyák refutes the traditional understanding – that it does not exist as a thing, it is just that speech and writing would have us believe otherwise. An illusion, in the psychological sense, is a false perception based on a real external stimulus (as distinct from a hallucination, which is a false perception without a stimulus). Like illusions, »language« and the

other categories mentioned above are based on real external stimuli (hearing people speak in this or that way, reading writings that are done in this or that way), but the appearance of their existence as a thing is a false perception [15, 18].

(2) Lanstyák calls languages and their varieties *ideologycums* because they are constructed by language ideologies. When we say that language is a multifaceted phenomenon, what we are actually saying is that different researchers (belonging to different trends) create for themselves the *ideology of language* from different kinds of language ideologies [15, 164, idea of the highlighted phrase: 23, 39]. It follows that a language (variety) is exactly what and how (through which language ideologies) the science – and not just the science, but also society, politics, culture etc. – currently regards as a language (variety).

Lanstyák sees the utility of *illusorycums* in the ease with which they can be used to name otherwise difficult-to-describe phenomena [15, 19]. *Illusorycums* are therefore necessary. "For if we were to start eliminating them from linguistics, we fear that chaos would ensue, resulting in a state of affairs where even linguists belonging to the same paradigm would be unable to communicate with each other (which would come as a rather grim consequence to the hard work of generations and generations of linguists of great excellence)" [15, 8, translated by the authors].

Based on the above, we can also regard *internet language* as an *illusorycum* [8, 90–91]. Just as the language and its varieties are not uniform, neither is the internet language. Yet, it is necessary, because without it the object of our study would be difficult or impossible to name. Or then, for the sake of consistency, we would have to discard similar terms (*e-language*, *digital communication*, *digilect* etc.) and with them the many names of the research fields based on them (e.g., *netlinguistics*, *internet linguistics*, *digital communication research*).

Proof of the necessity of *internet language* as an *illusorycum* is also provided by Gábor Prószéky's, Ágnes Domonkosi's and Zsófia Ludányi's book [19] in which the authors presents the pitfalls of enregistering *internet language* as a more or less separable entity and the concerns that arise in connection therewith (see *The principle of uniformity*), while at the same time they are noticeably looking for (not yet stigmatized) words to name and describe the phenomenon. In the cited chapter [19, 49–51] we can find up to ten *illusorycum*-suspect solutions that have a meaning similar to that

of internet language: digital communication, digital language use, digital mode of communication, online communication, communication conducted in an online manner, online language use, online language world, online language, internet language use, mode of communication used on the Internet (the Hungarian terms translated by the authors). This example shows that even if we question the legitimacy of *internet language* (although this is not verbalized in her article) and try to avoid the persecuted term, we will still have to somehow name what we are talking about.

Discussion and conclusions

In general, there are two major criticisms of *internet language*: the first is that the literature on it tends to view it as a single and well-defined entity, a

linguistic variety; the second is that its prototypical features are often presented as radically new, a kind of curiosity. Our conclusion is that, although the internet language is not uniform and its prototypical features have antecedents in the past (the principles of uniformity and novelty are thus defeated), its legitimacy is sufficiently reinforced by four other principles, the principles of quantity, community, analogy and illusorycums (especially this last one). Similarly to all other language varieties, the internet language does not really exist, it is merely an illusorycum – the illusion of its existence is created by language ideologies (e.g., language reificationism, language varietyism, language distincionalism) and certain prototypical features. Yet, it is necessary: for without it, we cannot even name the object of our study.

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