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DISSERTATION
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LINGUISTICS
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TITLE

Trufax about Discussion Group Netspeak: An Historical Analysis of Semantic Change in the English Slang of Newsgroups and Web Forums

SUPERVISOR

Dr Andrew Van der Spuy

DECLARATION

I, Stephen Turton, state that to the best of my knowledge and belief this dissertation contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. This is my own unaided work.

Signed:  **Date:** 27 October 2014

A NOTE OF THANKS

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Note on the Title

The title of this dissertation is '*Trufax* about Discussion Group Netspeak: An Historical Analysis of Semantic Change in the English Slang of Newsgroups and Web Forums'. *Trufax* is an example of the very slang here under analysis; it means, in this case, 'accurate information', and is a respelling of the pleonastic phrase *true facts*, while also punning on the name of a now-outdated brand of fax server software, TruFax. (A full account of the word's history is given in §7.1.) *Netspeak* is, of course, a compound of *net*, clipped from *Internet*, and *speak*, apparently taking its cue from Orwell's Newspeak (Orwell, 1949); it signifies the language of the Internet. It has been asserted (Williams, 2002: 278) that the term was coined by David Crystal, who uses it in his book *Language and the Internet* (2001), though he himself makes no claim to having invented it. In fact, the term *Netspeak* has existed on the Internet since at least 1983, when it was used (though uncapitalized) in the newsgroup net.arch, where a user jocularly posted, 'How do you say in netspeak? ":-)"' in the manner of a stereotypical second-language speaker asking, 'How do you say in English?' Netspeak is much broader than the scope of my research, as it includes the language of private e-mails, mailing lists, online games, instant messengers, video- and image-sharing websites, chat rooms, blogs, and social networking websites. However, I have chosen to limit my study to Internet discussion groups—namely, newsgroups and web forums—for reasons that will be expounded upon below.

1.2 Preliminary Remarks

What follows in these pages is an examination of the ways in which English writers in Internet discussion groups draw upon techniques of semantic change to create slang words. My hypothesis as I approach my research is that the techniques involved will be similar to those found underpinning semantic change in other, offline varieties of the English language, although the precise constraints of the online platform—its basis in text rather than speech and gesture—will also lead to some differences in how the semantic change is carried out. This gave rise to a number of questions, which I have attempted to answer in my study. Firstly, how (if at all) does semantic change in the English slang of Internet discussion groups differ from semantic change in Standard English? Secondly, how (if at all) does the semantic change in discussion group slang differ from semantic change in the offline varieties of

English slang? Finally, are the techniques through which this semantic change occurs explainable within the established theoretical frameworks of semantic change?

As I have said, discussion groups are only one of the many media through which people interact on the Internet; some of the other media share certain slang terms with discussion groups, and each of them has a myriad of slang terms of its own. However, the whole range of Internet slang cannot be analysed, or even touched on superficially, within the confines of a single dissertation—as Crystal (2001: 67) points out, 'The rate at which [Internet users] have been coining new terms and introducing playful variations into established ones has no parallel in contemporary language use.' Therefore, I chose to focus my examination only on the slang of Internet discussion groups for several reasons. Firstly, newsgroups and web forums have been in existence longer than blogs, video- and image-sharing websites, and social networking websites, and their slang has thus had longer to develop. Secondly, the messages posted to discussion groups are archived, unlike those of online games and chat rooms. Thirdly, their archives are publically available, unlike those of private emails, mailing lists and instant messengers.

Yet putting aside the precise focus of the research, a larger question remains: Why research Internet slang at all? The answer should be obvious. As of 2013, the Internet had approximately 2.7 billion individual users (International Telecommunications Union, 2013), and the figure shows no signs of declining. Current statistics of the language makeup of the Internet are not so readily available, but it was estimated in 2011 that a quarter of the Internet's users were English speakers, putting English ahead of every other language (though Mandarin is in the process of surpassing it) (Internet World Stats, 2011). The Internet is one of the largest media of English communication in contemporary times, and, as Crystal (2001: 5) observes, 'The linguistic consequences of evolving a medium in which the whole world participates—at least in principle, once their countries' infrastructure and internal economy allow them to gain access—are… bound to be far-reaching.' As the medium evolves, so too does its language, and commentators have become increasingly aware of the role of Internet slang and jargon in everyday English. In the past decade, five of the American Dialect Society's ten Words of the Year have been Internet-related: *tweet* ('to post a message on the social networking website Twitter'), *hashtag* ('to place the symbol # before a word'), *because* used before a noun or adjective, *app* ('an application on a smartphone', many of which rely on Internet connections), and *occupy* (the name of a political movement organized

and propagated over social networking websites). The Global Language Monitor's Top Word of 2013 was *404* ('an error code displayed when one has tried to access a webpage that cannot be found'), while the Oxford Dictionaries' was *selfie* ('a photograph one takes of oneself'). It is clear that a great deal of interest has been generated around Netspeak. However, the linguistic study of it is still relatively recent.

Metcalf (2000: 237) declares, 'The greatest accomplishment of the twentieth century in American English was the amassing of data. The great accomplishment of the twenty-first century will be analysing that data, developing techniques that in turn can be applied to the even vaster amounts of data becoming available on the Internet. We have much to do.' We do indeed, though the task extends beyond merely American English on the Internet—if one can even speak of regional varieties of English in the context of the online global village. It is for this reason that I chose Netspeak as my area of inquiry, to expand upon what work has already been done and, I hope, to suggest new avenues of research that may be explored by linguists to come. As Timofeeva (2001: 199) argues, 'Many scholars of general, diachronic and synchronic linguistics have for decades thought deeply about the relationship between language and reality. In the Internet era, when all human life is reflected on the Web… the linguistic issue *language in cyberspace* is becoming particularly meaningful, distinctive and controversial… especially for those linguist-researchers who investigate the contemporary state of languages'. Despite the relative youth of the medium, there has already been sufficient linguistic development online for a diachronic analysis to be feasible—and not only feasible, but desirable.

1.3 Overview

Chapter 2 will provide some relevant background knowledge concerning the three key areas mentioned in the title, on which rests the foundation of the entire dissertation—semantic change, slang, and Internet discussion groups—and Chapter 3 will review what literature has already been published about the intersection of the three. A description of the methodology used in collecting the slang data from Internet discussion groups will be given in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 will elucidate the theoretical framework with which the semantic change exhibited by the data was analysed, as well as explaining how the data was categorized in the subsequent four chapters. Chapter 6 is given over to a discussion of slang derived from offline varieties of English (the standard language, jargon, and other slangs), while Chapter 7 considers words derived from trademarks. The few instances of slang drawn from

onomatopoeia are presented in Chapter 8, while Chapter 9 offers a considerably larger body of words borrowed from the online community of video game players and tabletop game players. Finally, Chapter 10 will offer some comments on the conclusions that may be drawn from the preceding chapters.

1.4 Regarding the Presentation of Data

As much as is possible, all of the data reproduced in this study are presented as they originally occurred, typographical errors and genuine spelling mistakes intact, although inverted commas used within quotations have been regularized to double quotation marks throughout. Line breaks in the original messages have been indicated here by a pilcrow (¶). When I have deemed it necessary, I have inserted short glosses into the data for the sake of clarity and omitted segments elsewhere for the sake of brevity. Omissions have been indicated by ellipses in square brackets (*[…]*), to distinguish them from instances where the writers used ellipses themselves; square brackets that occurred in the original text have been replaced with braces (*{}*) to differentiate them from my own emendations. Longer passages in which multiple writers participated have been indented from the surrounded text; in one or two of these cases, an explanatory note has been appended to the end of the passage and indicated by a dagger (†).

2 BACKGROUND

Now that I have explained why I have chosen this area and believe it to offer the opportunity for important research, I shall briefly assume the role of a semanticist and endeavour to explain the senses of three of the terms to which I have been making frequent reference: *semantic change*, *slang*, and *Internet discussion groups*.

2.1 Semantic Change

To start with the simplest of these, by *semantic change* I mean the alteration of the sense of an utterance from one thing to another. It is a fecund field for research, for, as Ullmann (1962/1979: 193) writes, 'Of all linguistic elements caught up in [the] drift [of language], meaning is probably the least resistant to change.' Implicit in any kind of alteration—where there is a shift from A to B—is a progression of time, and so obviously my study will offer a diachronic analysis. Of course, there is no point in time at which the sense of an utterance switches from being strictly A to being strictly B; there is inevitably an intermediate period of polysemy, what Bloomfield (1933/1973: 430) calls 'expansion', during which an utterance may mean either A or B, or both simultaneously. Later, the earlier sense may fall out of use and only the later sense remain—Bloomfield's 'partial obsolescence'; although, in many other cases, the polysemy persists (Campbell, 2004: 266). It should also be noted that change in meaning occurs at the levels of sentences and signs as well as words, though my study will focus only on lexical semantic change.

I am particularly interested in the techniques of semantic change that produce Internet slang words from Standard English words, brand names, onomatopoeia, and the existing slangs and jargons of computer and tabletop games. I have of necessity also considered the morphological and orthographical changes that words so frequently undergo when semantic change takes place to derive slang terms. This consideration, however, is subordinate to my examination of the semantic change itself.

2.2 Slang

The second issue I shall address is what I mean by *slang*; here I must remove the hat of the semanticist and briefly borrow that of the sociolinguist. It is difficult to provide a satisfactory explanation of what slang is in only a few hundred words when extensive articles and entire books have been devoted to the subject. Marder (1994: 97) colourfully calls slang 'a form of

language which shifts imperceptibly between a smile and a smirk', and which 'thumbs its nose at linguists who dare to force it into a corner or try in any way to pin it down'. Although his remarks are light-hearted, they point to the fact that there is no real consensus among linguists about what slang is—however, they agree that people know it when they hear it. 'There is no acid test for slang,' Lighter (2001: 220) writes; 'but neither is there much doubt about its intersubjective reality.'

The *Oxford English Dictionary* somewhat outmodedly defines slang as 'Language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense'; but as the slang of Internet discussion groups began developing in the days when the majority of the groups' users were programmers and academics and students accessing the Internet from their university campuses, the suggestion that users of slang are speaking language 'below the level of standard educated speech' should be dismissed. Slang may differ from the standard form of a language, but this does not make it inherently inferior or the ideas expressed by it necessarily less sophisticated than those declaimed from a lectern.

Hummon (1994: 77), following Flexner (1960: vi), regards slang as 'language that is "not accepted as good, formal usage" by the majority of the public', but this fails to differentiate slang from colloquial language. Hummon goes on to claim that slang is 'largely part of oral, rather than written, expression', and Lighter (2001: 223) agrees that it is 'most at home in face-to-face settings'; but Internet slang relies almost entirely on the written word. Lighter also notes that some authors have emphasized the aesthetic appeal of slang, calling it 'the poetry of everyday life' and 'the poetry of group dynamics' (p. 224); De Klerk (1995: 268) suggests that inherent in slang is 'some delight in language as an expressive, almost poetic medium', and points to its widespread use of alliteration, metaphor, onomatopoeia, and other devices associated with verse. In his article 'Slang in America', Whitman (1885: 431) famously declared that slang is 'an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism and express itself illimitably, which in highest walks produces poets and poems, and doubtless in pre-historic times gave the start to, and perfected, the whole immense tangle of the old mythologies'. Adams (2009) goes so far as to entitle his book on the subject *Slang: The People's Poetry*. In it, he argues that slang is a means of expressing both individuality and group identity, 'the complementary needs to fit in and to stand out' (p. 6). This is certainly true in the case of Internet slang, but the definition must be narrowed.

Moore (2012: 176) identifies the defining features of slang as 'its informal or colloquial tone, its inventiveness, its playfulness, its ephemerality, its association with specific, often marginalized sub-groups… its rebellious opposition to formal or dignified discourse', and, most importantly, its 'promotion of sociability'; Eble (1996: 10) is in accordance, calling slang 'the vocabulary that embodies the social functions of language'. But it is important to consider among whom slang promotes this sociability. Slang encourages solidarity within a group, but it also works to alienate people outside of that group—it has, Mattiello (2008: 32) notes, 'the two opposite purposes of keeping insiders together and outsiders out'; or, as Coleman (2012: x) pithily puts it, 'If you don't understand my slang, you're not in my gang.'

The claim that slang is ephemeral is a long-established one: Whitman (1885: 431–432) wrote that slang is the 'wholesome fermentation or eructation of those processes eternally active in language, by which froth and specks are thrown up, mostly to pass away; though occasionally to settle and permanently crystallize', at which point they cease to be slang and enter the standard language. However, slang can remain slang for many decades: *Mary Jane*, for example, has endured as a slang term for cannabis since the 1920s (*OED*), and many of the words I shall put forward as examples of Internet slang are currently entering their third decade of existence, and have experienced no decline in their usage.

Mattiello (2008: 35) goes on to assert that 'slang develops from the attempt to find fresh, vigorous, colourful, pungent or humorous expressions', and while it is true that part of slang's *raison d'être* is creative expression, that is not its only purpose—despite the claim put forward by some scholars that slang words exist largely to provide lively synonyms for existing standard words (see Eble, 1996: 12; Lighter, 2001: 220; Adams, 2009: 114; Coleman, 2012: 96). This is a pervasive notion that has been propounded since the writings of Otto Jespersen (1922/2012: 299), who declared that 'a slang word is something that is wilfully substituted for the first word that will present itself', for slang is used 'when a speaker wants to avoid the natural or normal word because he thinks it too flat or uninteresting and wants to achieve a different effect by breaking loose from the ordinary expression'. However, this 'different effect' is surely dependent on the fact that a slang word *does* carry some semantic distinction from the 'normal word'. As Mattiello (2008: 27) writes, 'Slang items are far from being merely synonymous or connoted variants of standard English

equivalent forms … they are loaded with aspects of meaning which are normally absent in standard correspondents'.

Jespersen's view also does not take into account the many occasions on which slang words are invented to fill gaps in the lexicon. For example, to return to the slang surrounding the use of cannabis, there is no synonym in Standard English for *joint*, 'a cigarette of marijuana', and to refer to such a thing using formal language would require a circumlocution. Similarly, though some of the slang words that have come out of Internet discussion groups are essentially synonyms for existing words, like *trufax* for *facts*, many of the slang words have been coined to signify things for which there is no offline equivalent, and thus no Standard English synonym. As Crystal (2001: 81–82) observes, 'a large number of words and phrases have emerged which are needed to talk about Internet-restricted situations, operations, activities and personnel, making this one of the most creative lexical domains in contemporary English, involving all major lexical processes'. Without the slang verb *necro* (see §9.1), for example, what word would one use to describe the act of posting to a thread that has long been inactive?

One might argue that words that are coined to describe actions and entities specific to a particular subset of society should be considered jargon rather than slang. Mattiello (2008: 36) defines *jargon* as 'the specialized vocabulary and phraseology of a set of people sharing a trade or profession'. For argument's sake, let us consider interacting in Internet discussion groups to be a sort of unpaid, part-time profession. One might then suppose that words with senses specific to the Internet are merely the verbal tools of the trade, and *n00b* is to online users what *recruit* is to military personnel. However, Mattiello (2008: 36) goes on to write that 'Slang differs from jargon in its lack of [overt] prestige and pretentiousness… [it] is much more familiar and spontaneous'. Adams (2009: 16–17) suggests that jargon is 'language of purpose', while slang is 'language of being': the former is used by a group whose members share an aim, either a vocation or an avocation, while the latter is used by a group whose members share an interest. This distinction is attractive, but doesn't hold up under scrutiny. Slang words like *joint* and *Mary Jane* are used by people with a shared purpose—to get high—while jargon words like *pirouette* and *glissade* are used by people with a shared interest—watching ballet. I should say, rather, that the distinction between slang and jargon may be illustrated by a simple scenario: if every member of a particular trade were replaced with a computer, the language used by the machines would be jargon, not

slang. Humans in a shared profession create slang when they stop talking formally and objectively about their work and begin talking informally and subjectively about the social context that exists around the work. Jargon is the language of mechanics, but slang is the language of mutuality.

Both types of language may exist within one community. For instance, in the military, the difference between jargon and slang is the difference between calling someone a *recruit* and calling him or her a *rookie*; the former carries no significant emotional evaluation, while the latter may be affectionate, dismissive or scornful, depending on the context and delivery. Internet discussion groups have their own jargon—terms like *post* and *administrator*—but these words are not the same as slang, and they are treated differently. Upon registering as a new user on a web forum, one might be presented with a list of rules that tell one what *topics* are allowed and how many images may be included in a *signature*, but it is doubtful that the rules would make any mention of *n00bs* or *necroing*. They are words that one is unlikely to find printed in the official guidebook, and they must be picked up, as it were, on the streets.

Moore (2012: 178) observes that 'slang is an attribute of a kind of social relationship rather than a kind of person or social type', and this is certainly true of slang in Internet discussion groups. Perhaps more than any other medium of social interaction, the Internet allows people of different generations, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, social classes, and locations to converse with one another with ease, as long as they have an Internet connection and at least one language in common. Lighter (2001: 222) claims that slang blossoms in 'same-sex groups composed of peers of comparable age and social status', and while these traits may determine who belongs to a particular community of slang users and who does not in the offline world, they are often indefinite online unless a user chooses to reveal them.

For example, the use of the offline slang word *ratchet* to mean 'trashy, from the ghetto' may immediately suggest that the speaker is a young African-American from an impoverished urban background, but the use of the online slang word *lurk* to mean 'reading other people's posts without making any of one's own' suggests nothing of the writer's race, nationality, age, or any other facet of their personal context (aside from the practical restrictions already mentioned). It could just as easily come from the keyboard of a middle-aged professor of anthropology in England as a teenage tabletop gamer in Australia. In this respect, one might argue that the slang of the Internet does not belong to a subculture so much as a secondary

culture, one that is adopted by a myriad of people whenever they enter cyberspace and put aside again once they have logged out, existing alongside, but separate from, the primary cultures of their offline lives.

Bearing all of this in mind, I should like to define slang as a form of a language that is:

1. Considered by the majority of speakers to differ from the standard form of the language;
2. Used by a group of people who have in common some attribute, goal, interest, or mode of behaviour, though the members of the group need not be static and their interaction may last only as long as their shared trait is salient;
3. Not bound by formal constraints within the group itself (as jargon is);
4. Subjective (as jargon isn't).

2.3 Internet Discussion Groups

Now that I have explained what I mean by *semantic change* and the *slang* that undergoes it, I shall at last don the hat of the historian and try to clarify what I mean by the *Internet discussion groups* in which the slang is used. I employ the term to refer to any online messaging system that allows a user to post a topic and have other users post responses to it (and responses to each other's responses). Such messaging systems typically fall into two categories: newsgroups and web forums. Though they are superficially similar, their underlying structures are markedly different.

The newsgroups belonged to Usenet, a networking system that predated the World Wide Web by a decade. It was not the first platform to link together far-flung servers for the sake of communication, though; that distinction goes to the ARPANET (Saunders, 2011: 45–47). Beginning in 1969, the ARPANET provided a handful of American universities and businesses with the opportunity to have their various computers interface with one another and exchange data. The network was exclusive and expensive—as Stephen Daniel, one of the initial programmers of Usenet, put it, 'It was commonly accepted at the time that to join the ARPANET took political connections and $100,000.' (Saunders, 2011: 47.) In a direct response to this situation, Usenet, or the 'poor man's ARPANET', was launched in 1980 (Pfaffenberger, 1996: 365–368). Usenet opened its doors to anybody with a modem who wished to participate, and emerged as a sort of technological democracy against the oligarchy that had gone before it. Indeed, Saunders (2011: 48) writes that Usenet 'tended to cultivate a

fairly counter-culture, anti-authoritarian esprit among its users'—a fitting cradle, in other words, for slang, the language of the plebeian rather than the patrician. Eventually, the ARPANET mailing lists were incorporated into Usenet, and what had before been private became available to the public (Hauben and Hauben, 1997: 169).

Usenet organized discussions into categories (the newsgroups themselves) that were hosted by a network of servers spanning the globe. Users connected to their local server to post topics (also known as *articles*), and these topics were then transmitted from one server to the next, allowing users connected to other servers to receive the topics and submit replies to their own servers, from where the replies were transmitted to other servers, and so on (Fisher, 2003: 11), rather like a sophisticated version of broken telephone. A topic and its series of replies were collectively referred to as a *thread*. There was no telling how long it would take a post to a newsgroup to travel from one server to another, so that discussions might easily become protracted and even arrive at a server with certain messages missing from the thread.

Since the advent of the World Wide Web, the popularity of Usenet has steadily declined and its servers have gradually been shut down. The community that once flourished on the system has disappeared to the point where it seems prudent to speak about it in the past tense. The present belongs to the web forum, which, as its name suggests, exists on the World Wide Web. It is hosted by a single server, which every user connects to directly in order to submit topics (also known as *original posts* or *OPs*), to which other users may post replies. Because everything is submitted to and received from the same server, a topic posted by one user shows up instantaneously on the forum, and will be waiting for other users to read and respond to the next time they are online. The fact that messages posted to forums are transmitted in real-time while those posted to newsgroups could take much longer to be received has led to a few differences between the slangs of the two systems. For example, the pace of conversation tends to be much swifter on forums, and so users look with scorn on those who *necro*, or 'post to a thread that has become inactive'. In newsgroups, where having a post show up in a thread that had been dormant for some time was often unavoidable, the practice was not looked down upon, and the term *necro* to describe it did not exist. Such differences between the slangs of forums and newsgroups, though relatively rare, constitute another area I intend to examine in my dissertation.

Necro is one of a small clutch of slang words existing on web forums but not used in newsgroups. There are also a few cases where a word is found in both the newsgroups and the forums, but its meaning differs between the two systems. For example, in newsgroups, the term *ninja* meant 'to make a post whose subject deviates from that of the thread it is posted to, steering the discussion away from whatever the topic poster intended'; but on web forums, where time is of the essence, *ninja* means 'to make a post to a thread just before somebody else does in a manner that renders the second post redundant (because the posts say the same thing) or irrelevant (because the first post somehow negates the second post)'. However, instances of semantic change between the two systems are few and far between, and it appears that most changes of meaning affecting slang words occur entirely within the newsgroups, and by the time the words have arrived on the web forums, their senses have settled and remain relatively fixed.

Because much of the slang that has gained currency on web forums was originally coined in newsgroups, it is on Usenet that most of my focus is placed and from it that most of my data have been collected. The fact that the slang lexis has been transferred from the older system to the newer with very little change is not as astonishing as it may at first sound: the surface structures of the two systems are analogous to the point where the newsgroup may be considered the prototype of the web forum. One could say that if forums are comparable to the Roman public plazas from which their name derives, then newsgroups are the stone circles of the ancient Italic tribes. However, as is well known in linguistics, the sophistication of a people's discourse does not depend upon the complexity of their technology, and despite the limitations placed on discussion by the early newsgroup software, its users nevertheless developed a rich and lively slang.

Some Usenet users would no doubt argue that the past pre-eminence of the newsgroup was, in fact, the golden age of online discussion, and that the rise of the web forum came only after the Fall of Rome. Indeed, they have a name for the time period since Usenet's degradation: the Eternal September. The name is a reference to the deluge of new users or *newbies* (see §6.4.3) who used to join Usenet every September, when incoming university students in the northern hemisphere gained access to the network for the first time on their campuses, and had to be informally taught the rules of posting. Then the Internet service provider America Online made Usenet access available to all of its subscribers in 1993, so that new users began flooding into the system effectively without end and did not bother to learn the local etiquette

(Nowviskie, 2012, p. 244). The barbarians had invaded Rome, and when smaller, less cumbersome web forums started emerging in the following years, Usenet ended with a whimper. However, the sites remain for the historian to excavate, and the preliminary findings are promising.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been many studies on semantic change, studies on slang, and studies on the Internet, but very little has been published on the intersection of any two of these areas, let alone the intersection of all three. Much of the literature written about slang was considered in my attempt to find a suitable definition for it in Chapter 2, and the pertinent theories that have been advanced about semantic change will be examined when I present this study's theoretical framework in Chapter 5; thus, the focus of this chapter will be on the relevant research that has been conducted into the language of the Internet. Although, as has been noted, Usenet was launched in 1980, it appears that linguistic scholarship around English as it is used online began only in the 1990s. Since then, the approaches taken by linguistic researchers have tended towards the sociolinguistic and lexicographic, and I would argue that many of the resulting studies have proven inadequate in various ways.

Perhaps the earliest recording of an Internet slang term in a dictionary-style entry comes from the journal *American Speech*, which since the mid-twentieth century has published an article in each of its quarterly issues entitled 'Among the New Words'. The article records words that have ostensibly been coined or come into currency that year. In the journal's winter 1993 issue (p. 413), 'Among the New Words' included the Internet slang word *flame*, alongside the definition 'Communicate (with someone) angrily or intemperately on e-mail' and a quotation containing the term from 1992, taken from the *Houston Chronicle*. I have provided these details about the entry because they illustrate a number of problems with the journal's approach to the language of the Internet that have persisted in many of its later entries for online terms. Firstly, the definition provided for *flame* is too narrow: *flaming* is not limited to e-mail, and occurs with equal heatedness in chat rooms, online games and discussion groups. Secondly, the entry gives no indication of the history of the word—there is no consideration of what processes of lexical change it may have undergone before it took its current form and meaning, let alone how these processes, carried out as they are through text, may differ from those that are operative in speech. Thirdly, the fact that the entry takes its earliest attestation of the word from the *Houston Chronicle* points to the journal's habit in the 1990s of relying on print media for examples of Internet terms, rather than on the Internet itself. One of the major flaws in this approach is that Internet words, after they have been coined, often take some time to reach the printed page, and so relying solely on this for one's attestations tends to make the vintage of a word appear to be significantly more recent than is actually the case.

Flame, for example, first appeared in the sense of 'angry tirade' on Usenet in 1981, predating the example from the *Houston Chronicle* by eleven years.

The approach of 'Among the New Words' is largely the same as that adopted by dictionaries of Netspeak, such as *NetLingo: The Internet Dictionary* (Jansen, 2006), *Computer Jargon: Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Martin, 2006), and *Dictionary of Computer and Internet Terms* (Downing, 2013). The historical development of online words (and how this may differ from the development seen in offline language) is not considered, the words are generally afforded only a sentence-long definition, and no attempt is made at distinguishing between words from Internet jargon and those from Internet slang, or even at acknowledging that such a distinction exists. This latter problem is also evident in *Cyberspeak: An Online Dictionary* (Ihnatko, 1996), which is in any case out of date. Furthermore, even though none of these texts differentiates between jargon and slang, the focus of each researcher rests very decidedly on jargon—terms like *404* and *shareware*. This is perhaps because jargon words seem more manageable to the researcher: they can be found in technical manuals, they do not vary greatly in their senses, and those senses are typically made quite clear by context. Slang is often a much more slippery thing to lay one's hands on.

Some researchers, however, do manage to catch hold of it. Keats (2011) in *Virtual Worlds: Language on the Edge of Technology* includes a discussion of two slang words popular online, *w00t* and *pwn*, and provides an insightful analysis of the history of each word, but they are the only slang words from Internet discussion groups included in the book, and the rest of its chapters are concerned with other web platforms and subcultures. Crystal's *Language and the Internet* (2001) similarly discusses several slang terms—*troll*, *spam*, *lurk*, and *flame*—and he does draw attention to the fact that online textual communication has different constraints from speech, but he is more concerned with the words' social dynamics than their history, and examines them through the lens of the Gricean maxims rather than semantic change. He takes the same approach, though in a truncated form, in *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide* (2011); and, as with the previously discussed lexicographic studies, these two volumes are more interested in jargon than slang.

Marder (1994) records and analyses slang words surrounding computers and the Internet, and Timofeeva (2001) examines a range of linguistic innovations found on websites, but both articles are concerned with Russian rather than English. Hohenhaus in 'Elements of

Traditional and "Reverse" Purism in Relation to Computer-mediated Communication' (2005) makes mention of *flaming*, *lurking* and *trolls*, but his knowledge of the terms is drawn almost entirely from Crystal (2001), and his interest in them is limited strictly to the role they play in computer-based pragmatics. Squires in 'Enregistering Internet Language' (2010) does not investigate Netspeak itself, but rather the meta-discourses that exist around it, positive and negative, in the media and academia.

Portnow's 'Gaming Languages and Language Games' (2011) provides a cursory examination of the Internet alphabet known as Leet or *1337* and its associated slang, and Blashki and Nichol (2005) recount how they conducted a study of the use of Leet on a web forum by a group of Australian university students studying game design. However, neither text is concerned with the alphabet's relationship to semantic change in slang words (such as deriving *n00b* from *newbie*), and I do not intend to consider Leet beyond its role in this area.

Almost all of the studies mentioned above offer a synchronic analysis of language on the Internet. This is not unexpected: the medium has only existed for a handful of decades, and one might believe that its language has not had sufficient time yet for changes to have taken place that would make a diachronic analysis worthwhile. This may be the case with the standard form of a language, and even with jargon; but slang springs up overnight, its spores spread quickly, and mutations may occur almost instantaneously. Since 1980, the world has gone from being *totally tubular* to *amazeballs*, from *mallrats* to *muffin-tops*, and from *wannabes* to *werking*. Taking into consideration how much English slang in general has changed in that time, and bearing in mind Crystal's (2001: 67) assertion that the rate at which online language changes 'has no parallel in contemporary language use', it is not difficult to see why the slang of Internet discussion groups is a field ripe for study—and not only the slang itself but the techniques used to create it, both those that intersect with the techniques found in offline slang creation and those that diverge from them.

In the course of investigating words from the Internet discussion group lexis that have been derived from Standard English, jargons, and other varieties of slang both offline and online, I have made recourse to a menagerie of dictionaries and glossaries. Foremost among these is the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*), which—although offering few entries on Internet slang—has been an invaluable source of the origins of standard words, as well as a handful of words belonging to offline slang varieties. *The New*

Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English (Dalzell, 2006) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (Ayto and Simpson, 2010) provide definition for items from several regional varieties of English slang, while Reid's (2006) glossary does the same for hip hop slang. The studies of both Eble (1996) and Dundes and Schonhorn (1963) shine a light on American college slang in the latter half of the twentieth century. *Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary* (1995) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (edited by Prucher, 2007) catalogue the respective jargons of science and science fiction. Routledge's *Danish Dictionary* (Garde, 2013) was useful in translating a passage from the language (§6.2.6), while the online edition of the *Collins Dictionary* provides a list of translations of 'to paste' into various European languages.

Lastly, I have consulted the *Urban Dictionary*, a web lexicon of all manner of slang, including that of newsgroups and web forums. Entries are submitted to the website by users and published without moderation, and as such are based almost entirely on hearsay and the users' personal views on the subject rather than impartial academic research. The lexicon is also replete with idiolectic language and even lexical hoaxes designed to put one over on the hapless reader, so that one might wonder why a linguistic researcher would bother consulting it at all. However, I have treated it not as an authoritative guide but as a fascinating record of folk etymologies, indicating, at least partially, what the origins of various slang words are supposed to have been by the people who actually use those words as members of the online community. As we shall see in §5.3 and in many of the analyses that follow, in the world of slang, what people *believe* the past of a word to be—even if it bears no resemblance to the truth—may go on to have considerable influence over the word's future.

4 METHODOLOGY

I have gathered my data from the archives of various Internet discussion groups. Though the servers that once supported the Usenet system are now largely defunct, the archives of many, if not all, of its newsgroups have since been made publically available by the web-hosting service Google Groups. The posts in the archives carry timestamps of the dates on which they were posted—sometimes even to the hour—and Google Groups offers a search engine that allows users to search for the occurrence of a given word or phrase within a specified range of dates, such as 23 February 1982 to 5 June 1984, which is a great boon when it comes to tracking down the earliest attestation of a particular slang word in the newsgroups.

Google Groups also returns search results from a number of web forums, such as the EVE-Online Forums, which were launched in 2006, but the archives of web forums are not always as readily available as those of the newsgroups. Many of the forums that started in the 1990s have since been shut down, and the servers that hosted them have not made their records publically available, if they have kept them at all. However, a slew of video games that were released from the 1990s to the early 2000s gained enough popularity for forums to be set up where players of the games could congregate to discuss them, and as these games have remained popular, so their forums have survived. Incgamers.com has had a forum devoted to *Diablo* since 2004, and Sony.com maintains a forum for *EverQuest* dating back to the same year. ZAM.com has hosted forums for a number of games including *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*, and *Final Fantasy XI* since 2000. Likewise, forums maintained by various *fandoms* (see §6.1.5) have thriven alongside the works of fiction to which they are dedicated: the Chamber of Secrets Forums, dedicated to *Harry Potter*, have been open since 2000, while the Fanfiction Forum has held discussions about a range of books, television series, and films since 2002. Even without the records of earlier forums, there are still a great deal of data available for collection; and, as with newsgroups, all posts on web forums are timestamped, and most forums are equipped with search engines that allow users to sort results by the date of posting.

I have treated the web forums I have investigated as corpora in their own right, the better to discern the nuances of the semantic change to which their data are subject—as Beeching (2013: 106) observes, ‘Using corpora allows the researcher to see usage in context, and to uncover regularities and patterns of usage’. Usenet, though it was a system spread across

many servers, nevertheless functioned as a single, cohesive bulletin board; as such, I have treated it as a single corpus. While there are offline corpora of newsgroup posts available, they are insufficient for the scope of my research: the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's *20Newsgroups Corpus*, for example, only contains data from twenty of the hundreds of newsgroups once hosted on Usenet, while the University of Alberta's *Reduced Redundancy Usenet Corpus* contains data from every Usenet newsgroup, but only from 2005 to 2011. Neither of these corpora would be of much use in tracking semantic change across every newsgroup from 1980 onwards, to say nothing of analysing the data of web forums. As Crystal (2001: 73) reflects, 'The ideal guide to Netspeak would be one grounded in systematic empirical observation, providing a representative corpus of material which would reflect the frequency with which Internet situations use and vary particular structures. But it takes a long time to carry out such descriptive linguistic surveys. No e-corpus of this kind yet exists, and so it is inevitable that guides, whether in article or book form, will contain a great deal that is subjective, expressing personal or institutional taste.'

Thirteen years and several thousand terabytes of data later, the chances of such an e-corpus coming into existence seem increasingly small. In light of this, I believe the only tenable approach to analysing the vast quantity of online data available is to examine them in their natural habitat—that is, online. This is perhaps not ideal, but then the circumstances surrounding historical investigation seldom are. For one thing, rather like our records of Anglo-Saxon or any other ancient language, the archives of the earliest, now mostly shut-down web forums suffer from Labov's (1994: 11) 'bad data' problem insofar as their preservation is regrettably sporadic. Still, meaningful conclusions about semantic change over the history of English can and have been drawn, and I hope this dissertation proves that the same is true of the slang of Internet discussion groups.

I have attempted to track the slang words from their beginnings to the meanings they currently convey, taking note not only of the semantic shifts that took place in order to push many of the words from their standard origins to their present slangy status, but also of any changes that they have since undergone. These could be the alteration or loss of old senses, or the accretion of new ones. To quote Ullmann (1962/1979: 195), 'There is nothing final about semantic change: a word may acquire a new sense, or scores of new senses, without losing its original meaning. Some of these changes are accidental and short-lived [whereas] others will pass from speech into language and harden into permanent changes'. Obviously, no living

linguistic variety is static, and there is little doubt that the words chronicled in this dissertation will go on to shift semantically in ways that are unforeseeable from our present vantage point. In much the same way, an evolutionary biologist can trace the development of the domestic dog from a wild lupine ancestor, but can only hazard a guess as to what the creature will look like a few millennia into the future. Of course, words change more quickly than wolves, and the development of slang words from standard forms is not so much a process of domestication as one of feralization—for slang is language unregulated and unrestrained.

5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 Cognitive Semantics

Most linguists working in the field of lexical semantics seem to favour synchronic analyses over diachronic ones, and so there is not a prodigious body of theory written on the subject of semantic change. What work that has been done in this area has of late fallen under the domain of cognitive semantics, a movement that began in the 1980s and which has more of a psycholinguistic bent than an historical one (Geeraerts, 2010: 182–272). Still, scholars in the field have invested considerable energy into determining whether any general rules may be posited for semantic change, particularly concerning the directionality of the change. Perhaps the most popular theory to come out of this research is the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change advanced and argued for by Elizabeth Close Traugott, later with the assistance of Richard B. Dasher (Geeraerts, 2010: 235; Campbell, 2004: 269). Traugott (1989: 34–35) identifies three tendencies in the directionality of semantic change that I have found borne out in my own research, and which it should be helpful to keep in mind:

1. ‘Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation.’
2. ‘Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation.’
3. ‘Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition.’

In other words, the directionality of semantic change tends to be from the concrete to the abstract, and relatively objective meanings are inclined to undergo subjectification, becoming coloured by the value judgements of the speech community (Geeraerts, 2010: 235; Campbell, 2004: 265). The former process is not new to semantic theory: in 1933, Bloomfield (429–430) observed that ‘refined and abstract meanings largely grow out of more concrete meanings’, and cited Italian *capire* ‘to understand’ as a descendant of Latin *capere* ‘to seize, grasp’. Regarding the process of subjectification, Shindo (2009: 93) notes that although subjectivity starts out as a pragmatic factor that ‘arises from conversational implicatures in the communicative activities between speaker/writer and hearer/reader’, it needn’t remain pragmatic: ‘the speaker’s or writer’s emotional attitudes are sometimes contained in a word’s semantic content and are conventionalized as an established sense’; that is, in some cases, the

subjectivity of a word ceases to be wholly dependent upon the situation in which it is uttered and becomes instilled in the meaning of the word itself, present even when the word is divorced from context.

Although Traugott's primary interest in subjectification is how it intersects with grammaticalization (Traugott, 2010: 30), López-Couso (2010: 140) observes that 'subjectification is not restricted to developments in the grammatical domain, but can also be evinced in the lexical domain', and cites amelioration and pejoration as processes exemplifying this. Traugott (2010: 32) herself acknowledges that 'subjectified polysemies may index evaluation of others [and] of attitude toward the truth of a proposition'. It is subjectification in the lexical domain—the waning of the neutrality of a word and the waxing of its positive or negative connotations with regard to how it is applied by the writer to other people or their utterances—that I believe to be the most pertinent to a discussion of slang, which, after all, 'tends to judge rather than to define' (Eble, 1996: 50). As such, all references made to subjectification hereafter will fall within this area.

All three of Traugott's expectations seem to be true of the slang of Internet discussion groups: since the groups' *raison d'être* is communication—and in particular the exchange of opinion rather than fact—one would expect a great deal of their slang to be abstracted and subjectified from impartial, external situations to personal, metalinguistic situations, revolving around discourse and the forms that it takes, the ways in which it is transmitted, by whom it is written, and by whom it is read. Moreover, the corpus-based approach I have taken to the data lends itself quite well to investigating the expectations; as Dash (2005: 315) writes, '[T]he perspectives to a language acquired from diachronic corpora allow the analyst to investigate whether the pattern of increasing subjectification in semantic change is discernable in cognitive linguistics.' Although my analysis is historical rather than cognitive, the perspectives gained from the investigation will, I hope, prove no less valuable.

5.2 Traditional Classifications

Despite the usefulness of the Traugott's tendencies, one of the drawbacks of her theory—and of all the theories espoused by cognitive semanticists—is that they tend to say a great deal about metaphor and metonymy but let other types of semantic change fall by the wayside. Though it may be argued that phenomena like narrowing and amelioration, which occur in traditional classifications of semantic change, can be fitted in under the categories of

metaphor and metonymy, this does not help to explain how the phenomena operate, and it seems to be more an attempt to neaten things up than to draw meaningful conclusions about them; as Campbell (2004: 266) notes, ‘some of the generalizations that have been based on [the traditional classifications] amount to little more than a repetition in different form of the classifications [themselves]’.

The classification used in this study has its basis in the processes of semantic change set forth by Bloomfield (1933/1973: 426–427): narrowing, widening (or broadening), metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, litotes, degeneration (or pejoration), and elevation (or amelioration). To this, Ullmann added folk etymology and ellipsis three decades later (Geeraerts, 2010: 63–64). Traugott and Dasher (2004: 4) point out that in laying out the classification, Bloomfield himself remarked that it could only categorize semantic change, not explain it; they may label specific instances of change, but they do not provide insight into the causality or directionality of semantic change overall. Nevertheless, I would argue the traditional classification allows us to perceive certain trends of semantic change within Internet discussion group slang (and other lexes) which the Invited Inferencing Theory does not account for. For example, we shall see that subjectification is widespread in the slang words’ development, which is in line with Traugott’s tendencies; but without referral to the processes of amelioration and pejoration, we could not further observe that the subjectification heavily favours negativity over positivity, which enhances our understanding of the slang’s overall character.

In light of this, I have identified the types of semantic change I have come across in my research according to the long-standing labels. Although the labels have generally been applied to changes that have taken place in the standard forms of languages, they may also be used to describe slang. In her landmark study of American college slang, *Slang & Sociability* (1996), Connie Eble found widespread evidence that the processes of broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor—which are known to be active in Standard English both historically and contemporarily—are also at work in the language of college students, in which words from the standard language and other linguistic varieties undergo these processes to derive slang terms. It goes without saying that at least some of these processes have been found in the slang of Internet discussion groups as well, as will become apparent in later chapters.

5.3 Categorization of the Analyses

Eble (1994: 10) remarks, 'Anyone who writes about slang struggles with organization.' We know that one of the defining features of slang is its rebellion against formality, and so naturally it resists attempts to impose any kind of formalization upon it. The linguist must advance upon the data with all the care and caution of an explorer stalking a wild animal, trying to determine which direction offers the safest approach. Eble (1994) herself categorizes her collection of American college slang according to the types of semantic change the slang words undergo—broadening, narrowing, pejoration, and so on—while Mattiello (2008) organizes her samples of general slang according to morphological change—infixation, back formation, blending, and so on—as does Fischer (1998) in her treatment of neologisms both slangy and standard.

I have chosen neither approach for my own data, and have instead classified the Internet discussion group slang according to the sources from which it was derived—Standard English, trademarks, onomatopoeia, and the slangs and jargons of computer and tabletop games. This classification has been chosen because, over the course of their development, slang words in Internet discussion groups often undergo multiple types of semantic and morphological change, and so categorizing slang according to these changes would require a word's history to be carved up and presented piecemeal chapter by chapter. Trying to grasp the sense of a word after that had been done to it would be like trying to understand a living animal by examining cuts of meat in a butcher's shop. Nevertheless, the layout of the data should, I hope, make it clear that Internet discussion group slang follows patterns of semantic (and lexical) change that are largely the same as those found in offline English.

For instance, it is noticeable that only a handful of words presented here are over two syllables long. Such minimalism is not specific to Internet slang: Eble (1996: 118) observes from her data of college slang that many of the most popular words are only one syllable, which she suggests is one of the 'characteristics associated with less formal vocabulary'. In a similar vein, Adams (2009: 10) claims that clipping is a technique of making a word more casual and increasing its effectiveness as slang. He points out that the word *casual* itself has been clipped to *cazh*, and that '[t]he smaller word is more potent, like liquor distilled or sauce reduced'. Internet discussion group slang is certainly saucy, rebelling as all slang does against the formal dictates of language. Part of this rebellion is the eschewal of inflated, multisyllabic language and a predisposition towards shorter, sharper expressions. However, this is not to

say that compounds are disfavoured, or that clipping is rampant; indeed, in 1991, John Algeo analysed all of the neologisms recorded in every issue of 'Among the New Words' published between 1941 and 1991, and found that the most common derivations were combined forms (compounded, suffixed and prefixed) and shifts (both semantic and grammatical), followed by shortened forms (clippings and acronyms), blends and root creations. Algeo concluded that 'the more likely to produce new morphemes a process is, the less frequently it is used' (p. 14). This is borne out by the slang words collected here, most of which are simply the result of shifting the senses and grammatical categories of existing words, names, and pictograms, as seen in §6.1 and §6.4, as well as Chapters 7, 8, and 10. Compounds (§6.2) are not quite as common in discussion groups as they are in Algeo's data, but they nonetheless surpass acronyms (§6.5) and blends (§6.3). Root creation is the rarest source of all, and confined to the onomatopoeic forms examined in Chapter 9.

However, the slang still resists this organization to a certain extent, and some words do not belong entirely to a single category. *Nerf*, for example, entered Internet discussion groups through the slang of video game players, but as it is ultimately derived from a trademark, the analysis of the word has been placed within the chapter dealing with the latter. In another instance, although *camp* is a Standard English word, the slangy sense it possesses in Internet discussion groups was acquired from video game players, and so its analysis is classed with other examples of slang derived gaming language. Of course, the exact etymologies of slang words are often disputed by the users of the words themselves, as will be evidenced by several of the analyses provided here—those concerning *flame*, *troll*, *gank*, and *woot*. The folk etymologies that Internet discussion group users come up with for words may even influence the words' senses and shapes. This phenomenon is not unique to the online world. Adams (2009: 11) notes that 'slang terms are more than usually susceptible to mixed etymologies'; they are a natural result of 'slang's "democratic" tendencies: the People's use has considerable authority and can change the course of lexical history'. Regarding her corpus of college slang, Eble (1996: 46) observes that, in some cases, a term has likely been derived from 'multiple sources [that] reinforce each other and contribute to the form and meaning of the term'. This is evinced most strongly among my own analyses in the cases of *troll* and *epic*.

6 Slang Derived from Offline English

Offline English is the most popular source from which slang words are derived by users in Internet discussion groups. The English in question may be the jargon of science or computers, general slang, or Standard English, the last of which appears to be the largest contributor. Interestingly, this is in direct opposition to the derivational tendency found in offline varieties of slang: Eble (1996: 76, 80) reports, 'In a reverse of the pattern of creating a standard lexicon, in which the less powerful borrow linguistically from the more powerful, slang has always borrowed heavily from the dialects of subcultures.' She points out that African-American speech had a greater impact on general American slang than did any 'standard' variety in the twentieth century, and also draws attention to the borrowing of many Yiddish words into certain American English dialects, from which the words were in turn adopted into the general slang.

However, as I observed in the introduction to this dissertation, it is not really possible to speak of regional varieties of English in the context of the online global village, and the same holds true for slang. While the average American is no doubt well enough acquainted with African-American speech to use it as a source of slang words that he or she can be confident will be recognized and understood by his or her American listeners, the speech community of the Internet boasts members from all around the world, many of whom do not speak English as a first language. A poster in a discussion group cannot thus expect his or her readership to be familiar with the subcultural and regional varieties of his or her own socio-geographical sphere, and so slang words drawn from these varieties are likely to miss the mark. While it is, of course, one of the purposes of slang to exclude, if it is so exclusive as to be incomprehensible to almost all but the speaker, it has failed in its other purpose—that of fostering mutuality within a group.

In light of this, it comes as no surprise that so many items of discussion group slang have been derived from Standard English, which writers and readers around the world are better acquainted with than any nonstandard variety. These items amply demonstrate Traugott's (1989: 34–35) tendencies in the directionality of semantic change, as when relatively objective, formal words for entities in the material world are adopted into online slang, they almost invariably shift towards the subjective and the abstract.

6.1 Simple Semantic Change

One of the simplest forms of slang creation in Internet discussion groups is changing the sense of an existing word without changing its form. The new sense is usually not far removed from the old one, and so slang items created in this way tend to be quite transparent; perhaps this is why they are the words that feature most frequently in the published literature on Internet slang (Crystal, 2001; Hohenhaus, 2005; Algeo and Algeo, 1993, 1994). As we shall see below, for instance, the verb *troll* in discussion group slang is orthographically and morphologically identical to the standard word from which it is derived, and although its meaning has shifted from luring fish to provoking people, the notion of baiting is evident in both the older and newer senses. *Troll* and the words that follow it also represent some of the oldest discussion group slang there is—as one might expect. When they were coined, Usenet was young and its community was still nascent. It takes time for members of a new group to grow familiar with one another and to establish a shared identity with a distinct sociolect. When that happens, group members may develop their own patterns of lexical play, brewing up fresh forms and structures that may 'settle and permanently crystallize', to borrow Whitman's phrase (1885: 432), as part of their communal slang. Until that happens, perhaps, speakers must be content with pouring new wine into old skins, and assign novel meanings to worn words.

6.1.1 *Troll*

One of the best known slang words from Internet discussion groups is *troll*, 'to provoke anger or embarrassment in others by deliberately posting incendiary or misleading messages'. It probably takes its cue from one of the standard senses of *troll*, 'to trail a baited line', which is first attested in the seventeenth century and which may have been influenced by *trawl*; the word was adopted by certain homosexual men in the mid-twentieth century as a euphemism for seeking out a partner for a sexual encounter (*OED*), a usage that has surfaced on Usenet. In 1986, a user in the homosexuality-centred newsgroup net.motss metaphorically adapted the word when he observed that another user was 'trolling for commentary'—that is, soliciting replies, though not necessarily irate ones—on the subject of effeminate men. The sexual connotation of *troll* was broadened on Usenet beyond strictly male homosexual courtship: in 1992, a female poster in alt.romance protested that she was 'not trolling for action [with men] on the net'.

The word had gained the meaning of ‘to post a misleading message’ by that same year, though it seems to have developed directly from the standard fishing sense, not the slangy sexual one—the reverse of what one would expect to observe in offline slang, recalling its propensity to borrow from subcultural varieties. The *OED* cites the earliest attestation of this sense as occurring on 8 October 1992, when a user in alt.folklore.urban commented, ‘Maybe after I post it, we could go trolling some more and see what happens.’ However, there is another attestation from six days prior in the same newsgroup, and on this occasion the poster clearly has the fishing origins of the term in mind: he wrote, ‘It just amazes me that when someone goes newbie trolling how many people he catches.’ In this newsgroup, there was a practice among older users of purposefully posting misquoted or misattributed legends in order to trick inexperienced users into assuming they were genuine mistakes and correcting them. The practice was first explained in 1992 (excerpted below), after a novice poster fell for the trick and then asked what all the fuss was about.

> **David Wilson:** Excuse me. Can someone tell me what’s going on here?
>
> **Scott Cromar:** Well, seeing as how you ended up on my hook, I suppose it’s my responsibility to explain the situation to you […] You may have noticed nonsequiturs and garbled quotes at the end of several postings. People put [them there] as a sort of insider’s joke. Every now and again, someone who is unfamiliar with the game will bite and post a well-meaning correction […] Some people call this game ‘trolling for Newbies,’ especially at the beginning of each new school year.’[†]
>
> ([†]A flood of new users joined Usenet every September as incoming university freshmen in the United States gained access to Usenet for the first time—see Chapter 2.)

The fact that all of these messages were posted to alt.folklore.urban may suggest an etymological connection between online *trolling* and the *troll* of Scandinavian folklore, but as the newsgroup was specifically for discussing urban legends, this seems unlikely. Furthermore, if the slang word were an allusion to the creature, one would expect it to occur as a noun before it became a verb, when in fact the reverse is true.

The earliest attested reference to *trolling* as an activity to elicit an aggressive response rather than merely an embarrassed one comes from 1993, when a user in alt.society.generation-x

defended the practise: ‘True, trolling does turn people off sometimes […] but more often the resulting flame makes it worthwhile’. The word’s development is in line with Traugott’s (1989: 34–35) tendencies—the word’s externally-based sense, ‘to trail a baited line’, has shifted to a sense describing a textual situation, ‘deliberately inciting negative commentary’. The slangy sense has also undergone subjectification, as precisely what counts as incitement—and whether or not a given case of incitement was deliberate—may be subject to debate.

Troll has also shifted to a noun meaning ‘an instance of trolling’. The earliest attestation of this sense is from 1993, when a user in alt.folklore.urban corrected someone’s spelling of ‘baited breath’ to ‘bated breath’, and another user replied, ‘Actually it’s a subtle word play often used as a troll for spelling flamers.’ The noun had acquired the sense ‘someone who trolls’ by 1994, when a user observed of another, ‘This person is either a moron or a troll. Or maybe both. And plenty here took the bait.’ The fact that the agentive noun takes the form *troll* rather than **troller* may give the Nordic folklorist some satisfaction, as it suggests that, even though the word was not originally inspired by the malevolent *troll*, it was influenced by it later on; recall Adams’s (2009: 11) observation that when it comes to slang, ‘the People’s use has considerable authority and can change the course of lexical history’. Indeed, with the rise of Internet memes in recent years, several images have been spawned that depict otherwise ordinary people who have had green-skinned, horned heads superimposed onto their bodies, often accompanied by the tautological caption ‘Obvious troll is obvious’. Of course, the metaphorical extension of *troll* from a mythical monster to a disagreeable, unattractive individual is not new: the *OED* records its being used in this sense from the end of the seventeenth century onwards, and it is not unreasonable to assume that this negative usage has influenced the development of *troll* from a neutral fishing term to an online pejorative.

6.1.2 *Flame*

If an act of *trolling* succeeds, it is likely to elicit a *flame* or ‘online tirade against someone or something’. It is also used as a verb meaning ‘to direct a flame (at someone)’. One of the earliest attestations of *flame* on Usenet is, in fact, from a discussion of the origin of the slang word itself that took place in fa.human-nets in 1981. This metalinguisic awareness suggests that *flame* had already gained a certain degree of currency by then, though one poster noted that he ‘hadn’t noticed too much use of the word “flame” on the net except for a brief period

just prior to [the discussion of its etymology]'. The consensus that the posters came to was that *flame* was derived from *flaming* in the slangy sense of 'flamboyantly homosexual', which dates back to the 1940s (*OED*); one poster even suggested that the use of *flame* in Internet discussion groups had recently declined as a result of users' homophobic attitudes. However, there is no obvious semantic connection between the offline slang word and the online one, and it seems more probable that the latter is a metaphoric adaptation of the Standard English noun meaning 'a tongue of fire'. Vexation is frequently associated with combustion in English: consider *inflammatory* and *incendiary* ('provoking anger'), *flare up* and *fire up* ('to burst out in anger'), *firebrand* ('agitator'), and the American slang word *burn* ('an insult').

The etymological discussion on Usenet doesn't indicate whether *flame* was regarded by the commentators as a noun or a verb, or both. We cannot be certain whether the slang term was initially a noun that shifted to a verb or the other way around, as the earliest attested post in which *flame* is explicitly used as a noun is also the earliest post in which it is explicitly used as a verb: in 1981, a user in fa.human-nets made a post entitled 'English Murdering & flame about human telecommunicating', in which he held forth on the shortcomings of communicating via computers before concluding, 'Enuff flaming....' The agentive noun *flamer*, 'one who flames', is first recorded later that same year, when a poster in fa.arms-d quoted a provocative excerpt from a newspaper article and pointed out how reminiscent it was of the 'typical flaming' he'd encountered on Usenet, so that the article's author 'sounds like a flamer even in a newspaper'.

Like *troll*, *flame* has shifted from an externally-based meaning in Standard English to a textually-based meaning in slang, and its objectivity has been weakened by the attachment of a negative value judgement to it. This negativity is evident in two popular compounds derived from *flame*: *flame war* and *flame bait* (also written *flamewar* and *flamebait*). *Flame war*, 'a heated argument between or among discussion group users', is first attested from 1984, when a user in net.women posted a topic on abortion and requested that it 'be viewed more as an [sic] self-exploratory experiment rather than a flame war since this has proved in the past (so I've heard) to be completely unproductive.' This newsgroup appears to have been a frequent arena for flaming, as it also contains the earliest attestation of *flame bait*, 'a message intended to incite flaming in response' (in other words, the sort of thing a troll would post). On 16 May 1985, a user replied to the topic of whether men should be subject to

a curfew to reduce violent crimes, and appended to one of her own comments the warning ‘flame bait!’.

6.1.3 *Lurk*

To *lurk* means ‘to read posts without making any of one’s own’. As such, contrary to the general tendency towards pejoration in Internet discussion slang, the word has undergone amelioration from its Standard English antecedent, ‘to remain furtively or unobserved about one spot’ (*OED*), which has a rather sinister connotation. Its metaphorical application online is thus a reversal of the usual directionality of semantic change from the objective to the subjective, as the standard word’s negative implication has been stripped away to create a slang word with no judgement for good or ill. A user may apply it to his or her own behaviour without being perceived as self-deprecating, or to other users without seeming impolite. For instance, in 1997, when one poster in soc.genealogy.german pointed out that *lurking* connotes evil intent in its offline use, another poster assured him that online ‘there is certainly no shame attached to lurking’.

In spite of bucking the connotative trend, *lurk* has followed the typical shift towards abstraction, moving from describing a physical behaviour to a textual practice (or lack thereof). The *OED* cites a reference to the word in an article published by the *New York Times* in 1983, but the word’s earliest surviving attestation on Usenet is only from 1984, when a user in net.movies.sw posted, ‘I’ve been “lurking” on the SF-LOVERS net for about two weeks, and I finally decided to stick my oar in…’ The topic’s title, ‘A “lurker” speaks…’, also offers the earliest attested use of *lurker*. While the agentive suffix is commonly attached to derive nouns from verbs in Internet discussion group slang, *lurk* also more unusually takes on the negating prefixes *un-* and *de-* to produce *unlurk* and *delurk*, both of which mean ‘to stop merely reading messages and post’. *Unlurk* appears first: in 1990, a poster in alt.romance wrote, ‘When I get some more [romantic film recommendations], I’ll be sure to unlurk again.’ The first occurrence of *delurk* was a year later, when a user in rec.arts.books posted, ‘I’ll delurk for an instant to recommend what I think is the greatest book/movie dichotomy I’ve come across: DIVA.’

It should be noted that although *lurk* on its own is not pejorative, it becomes so in the phrase *lurk more*, an insult ordering one to spend more time reading other users’ posts and less time making one’s own, as they are not worth reading themselves. The phrase’s earliest attestation

is from an exchange (excerpted below) posted in 1996 to alt.peeves, a newsgroup for complaining about personal annoyances.

> **John Sweet:** PEEVE: Fucking clueless fucking Berkeley fucking drivers. Fuck. I ride a bicycle from Kensington to Berkeley Marina and back every day, and every day at least one of these rocket scientists tries to paste me.
>
> **Julian Macassey:** Ooops! You ride a Bike in the Peeples Republik Of Berkeley while wearing one of those silly little plastic hats? Then you post to alt.peeves? Think you need to grab a clue and lurk more […] Those Volvo drivers probably post to alt.peeves on a regular basis.

The full, offensive implication of *lurk more* is not apparent from the meanings of its individual parts, which suggests that in spite of being a phrase it must be treated as a single lexeme, much like an idiom. The phrase is often misspelled as *lurk moar*—purposeful misspelling is commonly used in Internet discussion groups to signal that the writer is mocking the addressee, the textual equivalent of patronizing someone by speaking to him or her in a style usually reserved for infants; this phenomenon is discussed at length in §6.4. *Urban Dictionary* (2007, May 19) suggests that the misspelled phrase originated on 4Chan, a popular imageboard website known for its propagation of memes. However, as Zimmer and Carson (2011: 455) observe, 4Chan 'makes a point of having no archives', and so whether it was the cradle of *lurk moar* is impossible to verify. The phrase had been coined at least by 23 September 2004, when one user in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums got into an argument with another and exclaimed, 'You really need to lurk moar and post less.'

6.1.4 *Hijack*

Hijack means 'to divert the discussion in a thread onto a subject other than that proposed by the topic's poster'. The earliest attestation of this sense is from 1993, when a user in news.group added his voice to a discussion about whether certain topics should be posted to sci.econ or sci.research.econ: 'Personally, I would welcome a question on _any_ of these points in s.e.r. […] What I do _not_ want is to have one of these threads hijacked into an Austro-Italian flamewar. What bothers me about s.e. is not the content of thread-opening posts, it is the undisciplined bickering that follows.'

The slangy sense is a metaphorical adaptation of the standard meaning, ‘to seize a vehicle from its owner by force’, and arguably also exhibits hyperbole, as suddenly changing the topic of conversation, however discourteous, hardly bears comparison to the violence of vehicular theft. In addition to shifting the word from being a descriptor of a concrete act to a metalinguistic observation, the change from standard to slang has made *hijack* more subjective: what one user may regard as a natural turn in the course of the conversation, another may judge as a deliberate derailment.

6.1.5 *Fandom*

It has already been observed that unlike most social groups in which slang flourishes, people who interact online are neither separated nor united by their age, geography, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or class—insofar as they can access the technology needed to connect to the Internet, which has become increasingly affordable and available. However, whenever a single community grows sufficiently large, it will invariably fracture into subgroups. High schools stereotypically have cliques of jocks, nerds, skaters, and drama geeks. American universities have fraternities and sororities. Many urban communities have street gangs. All of these divisions are generally quite rigid: a member of one group cannot cross over to another without running the risk of contempt from his or her former peers and mistrust or outright rejection from those he or she wishes to join.

However, the subgroups of the Internet are not so markedly divided as those of offline communities, and a user may hold membership in several different newsgroups and web forums at a time without being spurned by any of them. Furthermore, the subgroups are not determined by physical territory (as street gangs are), ability (as high school cliques are), or communal prestige (as Greek letter organizations are). Rather, because the purpose of Internet discussion groups is conversation, subgroups tend to be formed around subject matter for which members have a shared enthusiasm, and thus a mutual desire to discuss it. This subject matter often takes the form of a video or tabletop game, a book series, a television programme, or a film genre. The sub-communities that develop around these things are called *fandoms*.

The *OED* dates *fandom* back to the turn of the twentieth century and gives its sense as ‘The world of enthusiasts for some amusement or for some artist’; but the word is used only as a mass noun, as in ‘The same editor calculates that at least half his British writers have been

recruited from "fandom"'. In this respect, the online sense of *fandom* is more reminiscent of *kingdom*, as it denotes a particular domain that exists among a plurality of other, similar domains—although the denizens of *fandoms* may pay homage to more than one authority at a time.

The first attested use of *fandom* on Usenet was in 1981, when 'SF Fandom' was a topic of conversation listed at the beginning of an online newsletter. The lack of context does not make it clear whether the poster intended it to be a mass noun (referring to the abstract notion of being a fan of science fiction) or a countable noun (referring to the community of science fiction fans). The first clear use of the term as a countable noun—distinguishing a particular group of fans from another—is from 1984, when a user in net.startrek posted, 'As long as opinions are being solicited, I think that attempting to combine Dr. Who and Star Trek is a horrible idea. (I hate Dr. Who. I hope it's safe to say that here; the fandoms seem to overlap a great deal.)'

While the word *fandom* bears some similarity to jargon as it describes a group of people brought together by an avocational interest in some kind of published work, it is nevertheless slang: it is not about the work *per se* but the social context that exists around it, and as such is tinted with familiarity—much like the word *fan* was when it was flippantly clipped from *fanatic* (*OED*). The casualness of *fandom* is more evident in the derived adjective *fandomy*, 'concerning a fandom or its interests'. The suffix *-y*, Adams (2009: 166–167) notes, is not 'inherently slangy', but it may be 'used to slangy effect … especially suffixing at unlikely frequencies or suffixing in unlikely contexts'. A word ending in *-dom* is certainly an unlikely context for the addition of *-y*; *-dom* is an old-fashioned suffix that one does not expect to find in company with anything other than an inflectional ending, as in *kingdoms* or the archaic-sounding *wisdoms*. Adding a derivational suffix like *-y* seems flippant, and so serves the purposes of slang well.

The earliest attestation of *fandomy* is from 1995, when a user in alt.tv.tiny-toon.fandom posted about his progress regarding some works of art he had been inspired to create by the television programme *Animaniacs*; the artwork was supposed to feature one of the characters, Dot, in erotic poses to gratify members of the *Animaniacs* fandom. The user reported, 'Anyway, the one that's gotten the furthest (still in the preliminary stage though) is Ski Lodge Dot. Nothing truly .fandomy, just Dot getting ready to hit the slopes. I've *tried* to do a

beach scene 3 times, resulting in total failure.' The period before *fandomy* indicates that the user has that particular newsgroup, alt.tv.tiny-toon**.fandom**, in mind.

6.1.6 *Fanboy* and *Fangirl*

The people who populate fandoms are frequently identified as *fanboys* and *fangirls*. Neither compound was coined in discussion groups: the *OED* records that the former has existed since at least 1919, the latter since at least 1934, and notes that both may be used depreciatively. It is true that on the Internet they are not merely gendered synonyms for the standard word *fan*: they each denote 'an enthusiast who is devoted to a piece of work to the point of obsession'; however, depending on how they are used, the words might also show evidence of pejoration and carry the connotation of 'a (generally young) obsessive who does not engage with the work beyond a superficial level, demanding instant gratification rather than intellectual depth'—to the irritation of their (older) fellow fans. This attitude is illustrated by a post made to rec.arts.comics in 1992, when a user defined a *fanboy* as 'Someone (usually a teenager) who follows a particular artist/writer (or set of artists/writers) with an intensity that makes Fundamentalist Christianity look like Unitarianism'; *fangirls* are just as zealous.

However, as in actual religion, zeal may be considered to be a merit rather than a fault, and *fanboy* and *fangirl* may carry a positive connotation. This is borne out by their usage in rec.arts.comics in 1990, when a user posted to a thread debating whether Hobbes from *Calvin and Hobbes* was more than a stuffed toy, 'Use those fanboy and fangirl talents of yours! Trace continuity back to the Hobbes Origin Story, and all will be revealed.' In this case, the *fanboys* and *fangirls* are presented as people whose voracious passion for the comic has made them learned in this special field.

The enthusiasm of *fanboys* and *fangirls* was carried over when the two nouns shifted to verbs in discussion group slang. *Fanboying* is first attested from 1994: a thread in alt.games.mk that was proposing potential new characters for the forthcoming video game *Mortal Kombat 3* had a contribution made to it by a user who wrote, 'As long as we're fanboying character ideas I thought I'd give one of mine.' This use of the word as a transitive verb meaning 'to create (unofficial content for a beloved work)' is not, however, common; such behaviour would now more likely fall under the term *fanon* (see §6.3.2). The more popular, intransitive meaning of *fanboy* is 'to behave in a manner characteristic of a *fanboy*, i.e., to enthuse over

someone or something'. The earliest attestation of this sense is from 1988, when a user in alt.fan.furry wrote about meeting a popular cartoonist at a convention and added, 'I thought I did a pretty good job of not fanboying out'. The first occurrence of the present participle *fangirling*, bearing the same effusive meaning, comes from the same newsgroup in 1996, when a user posted some suggestions in a thread about which actors would provide the best voices for anthropomorphic animals and finished her praise for Alan Rickman with, 'That's enough trivia and minor fangirling I think.'

Although the verbs do not suggest that the enthusiasm of *fanboys* and *fangirls* is a fault as such, the adjectival forms *fanboyish* and *fangirlish* tend to highlight the negative aspects of the subjects' behaviour. Inevitably, the derivation of an adjective from a concrete noun entails a degree of abstraction: there is a shift from a tangible entity to an intangible *idea* of that entity, stripped down to the characteristics that the speaker or writer believes are most salient about it—which, in the case of *fanboyish* and *fangirlish*, include a propensity for irrational emotional attachment to a work of fiction and a desire for content that is gratuitous rather than intellectual.

Fanboyish is attested from 1994, when a poll was conducted in rec.arts.comics.xbooks and several users responded (excerpted below).

> **[Poll question]:** Who are the three X-Men characters you would like to see get their _own_ monthly title?
>
> **David R. Henry:** Lockheed. Beast. Rogue. Thereby clearing them safely out of the confines of the evil influences of team appearances, and at least letting them have a chance developing their personalities on their own.
>
> **Christopher Andrew Campbell:** Lockheed. DRH said it first, but I agree. This would make a great book, and how in God's name could you turn it into something fanboyish? I just don't see how it could be done.

Here *great* is contrastively juxtaposed with *fanboyish*: a *great* book would allow for character development, whereas a *fanboyish* book would offer only meretricious material. *Fangirlish* occurred with a less disparaging but still dim connotation in 2000 in alt.fan.dragonball, when a poster got playfully defensive about her infatuation with a character from *Dragonball-Z* named Mirai: 'I prefer calling him my Mirai. Don't bother me, I'll be as fangirlish as I want!'

The poster acknowledged that feeling romantic ownership for a fictional character could be perceived as the sort of disturbingly obsessive behaviour that a *fangirl* would exhibit, but was nevertheless defiant that nobody should heckle her because of it.

6.2 Compounds

Mattiello (2008: 72–91) demonstrates that compounding Standard English words is a rich source of offline slang, and gives rise to nouns, adjectives, and verbs, the three major content-word categories. Internet discussion group slang likewise draws heavily on the standard language to create compounds in all of these categories, particularly nouns and verbs; adjectives are comparatively sparse, and adverbs appear to be absent entirely. This section will discuss nine of them—*headcanon*, *fanwank*, *banhammer*, *permaban*, *postwhore*, *copypasta*, *eyeroll*, *facepalm*, and *headdesk*—as well as an element that is productive in forming compounds with existing slang words, *fest*.

6.2.1 *Headcanon*

It has already been noted that *fanboys* and *fangirls* often exhibit an almost religious zeal for their favourite works. This impression is extended by the assumption of the word *canon* into the language of *fandoms*. The standard sense of the word, 'body of holy texts accepted as authentic by a church', has been metaphorically adapted to mean 'information about a work of fiction that has been created or approved by the official author or authors'. The adaptation involves a shift from denoting a physical entity, a collection of texts that may be picked up and leafed through, to denoting a set of intangible facts and rules regarded as true within the confines of an imaginary setting, ideas that may be conveyed through physical media but may also exist only in a person's mind. The metaphorical meaning is first attested on Usenet in 1984, when a user in net.startrek registered the objections he had to the liberties taken with the portrayal of the *Star Trek* universe by Greg Bear in his novel *Corona*. The user concluded, 'Greg opens [the novel] with a little disclaimer in which he takes responsibility for his own interpretation of the "canon". Too small a disclaimer for the magnitude of his own heresies.' The fact that the user identifies Bear's departures from the *canon* as 'heresies' reinforces his association of *fandoms* with religion.

Because *canon* indicates a formally accepted body of work—and because it does so quite neutrally, in spite of the seeming irreverence of its origins—it is a formal word, and as such I regard it as jargon. For the opposite reason, *headcanon*, also written *head canon*, is slang. It

signifies ‘a personal, unauthorized idea about a work of fiction that makes sense within, but is not part of, the accepted canon’—in other words, it is a word for something deeply subjective, the relationship of a person to a piece of work rather than the work itself. Despite the flourishing *fandoms* that once existed in the newsgroups, *headcanon* was coined only after the decline of the Usenet community. The earliest attestation I have found for it is from 2007, when a user posted to the *Naruto* section of The Fanfiction Forum, ‘Name a character and I’ll tell you three (or more) facts about them from my own personal headcanon.’ The sort of information that qualifies as *headcanon* may be demonstrated by an example taken from the One Ring Forums, which are dedicated to the works of JRR Tolkien. In 2013, a user wrote regarding the orcs (a race of large, especially wicked goblins in the Middle-earth legendarium) that he had ‘a hard time with the idea that an entire race is evil’. Another user replied, ‘I had this headcanon that the orcs, as soldiers from Sauron’s side, might’ve been trained as such just like how hunters would train their hunting dogs.’ Although the second user’s idea lies outside of *canon*, it nevertheless tries to make sense of a state of affairs that does belong to *canon*.

6.2.2 *Fanwank*

Fanwank, also spelled *fan wank*, offers a rare instance of clear polysemy in Internet discussion group slang. It may signify (I) ‘a convoluted attempt by a fan to explain away a minor discrepancy in a work of fiction’ (see also §6.2.1 and §6.3.2 regarding *headcanon* and *fanon* respectively). It may also signify (II) ‘an instance of the author of a work pandering to his or her *fanboys* and *fangirls* (but not to the casual consumer) by adding material to the work specifically to please them’. In addition to these dual denotations, *fanwank* may carry a connotation that is either approving or disparaging, depending on how it is used—much like the second element of the compound, *wank*, which is (originally British) slang for ‘masturbation’ (Dalzell, 2006: 2064). ‘Tabooed words,’ Feinberg (1985: 211) observes, are ‘*one* of the resources of the inventive slangist’, and it is easy to see why: the vulgarity of *wank* increases the vividness of *fanwank*, and its use in the compound is certainly inventive—*fanwank* is figuratively likened to the act of masturbation as something that is gratifying but not particularly productive. In both of its senses, *fanwank* does not really advance the storyline of a series, but it does offer the fans satisfaction in the form of either wish fulfilment or plot-hole resolution. The metaphorical adaptation of *wank* entails a shift from a physical act to the abstract realm of fiction; it also involves a certain amount of subjectification. While *wank* may be connotatively coloured by the attitude of the speaker, it is still denotatively

explicit: the members of the speech community are agreed upon what constitutes *wanking*, even if their attitudes towards it differ. Conversely, whether the actions of an author or the arguments of a fan constitute *fanwank* is up to the writer's discretion.

Wank has its origins in British English, and so it comes as no surprise that *fanwank* appears to have originated in the *Doctor Who* fandom. In its earliest attestation, in 1995 in rec.arts.drwho, the poster evidently has sense I in mind. He was reacting to a fan who had posted a complex theory seeking to explain continuity errors in the timeline of the Doctor by dismissing his apparent death in the finale of the *War Games* serial. The reactionary poster wrote, 'The whole retroactive continuity thing stinks. Yes, it does seem to "explain" certain continuity problems […] but on the other hand, anyone who's actually seen part 10 of the War Games should know what a fanwank it actually is. Don't accept it, just suspend your disbelief'. In this instance, *fanwank* is something to be spurned.

However, *fan wank* is the subject of rejoicing when it is first attested with sense II eleven days later in the same newsgroup. A user expressed her eagerness regarding the publication of the fiftieth *New Adventures* novel chronicling the exploits of the Doctor, *Happy Endings*, which promised to be a retrospective of all the novels that had gone before. She wrote, '"Happy Endings" is going to [be] an out-and-out fan wank (tm). This is one NA that is *not* being written for a general audience, but rather is being written explicitly for those of us who've doggedly followed the series […] and who will continue to follow the NAs through the next 50 books and beyond.'

Both definitions continue to exist side by side, as is evidenced by a conversation (excerpted below) held in alt.tv.smallville in 2003: a user named Glenn Simpson posted a theory about the physiology of Superman and identified it as 'Just some fanwank on my part', and another user took issue with his use of the word.

> **Jedi Tyro:** fanwank refers to the gratuitous addition of material for no other reason than to appease fans.
>
> **Glenn Simpson:** I stand corrected - I thought it referred to any useless speculation by fans about details that don't really need to be speculated about.
>
> **Jedi Tyro:** No biggie […] Fanwanking has been used by others the same way and will likely end up having duel meanings, if it doesn't already.

Of course, it already had dual meanings. Despite Jedi Tyro's putative correction, the ways in which language is used cannot be so easily regulated—especially if the language in question is slang. It is impossible to promote one sense of a word as being more 'proper' than another when the variety the word belongs to is innately *im*proper; and trying to do so would be just as unproductive as *fanwank* is itself.

6.2.3 *Banhammer*

The instalment of 'Among the New Words' in the Winter 2011 issue of *American Speech* (Zimmer and Carson: 457) defines *banhammer* or *ban hammer* as 'Power wielded by an online administrator to ban or block a misbehaving user from a forum or website, figuratively imagined as a hammer'. It is a thorough definition of the term, although it lacks an etymology. It is possible that the origins of *banhammer* may be traced to the chat system hosted by Battle.net, a website that allowed (and still allows) users to set up multiplayer matches in certain video games with one another. In 1997, a post on Usenet explained the various options available to Battle.net users who had created private channels in the chat system. The channel creator's options included the ability to block any unruly users from the channel for one minute, or to ban them permanently; both of these options could be accessed from the control menu by clicking on an icon of a hammer.

As no records of the conversations carried out in these chat channels exist, it is impossible to ascertain whether the word *banhammer* was coined in them. At any rate, it seems plausible that they served as the inspiration for the word in the slang of Internet discussion groups, where *hammer* was metonymically shifted from denoting an icon to denoting the function represented by the icon: a metaphorical hammer abstracted from a pictorial hammer, which was in turn an abstraction from the physical tool. The figurative nature of *banhammer*, perhaps coupled with the assonance of the first two vowels when the word is said aloud, makes the word seem less aggressive than merely writing *ban*, and it frequently occurs in whimsical contexts. Two examples may be taken from a thread posted to the form of the video game developer Bungie in 2010: a new user asked if anyone could provide him with a scanned copy of a magazine article about the forthcoming game *Halo: Reach*. Another user directed him to a topic declaring that requesting scans would result in the requester being banned, and a third user responded, '"You got my sword" ¶ "and my bow" ¶ "and my BANHAMMER!!!!!!11!!!!",' jocularly paraphrasing dialogue from the 2001 film *The*

Fellowship of the Ring. A fourth user paraphrased a few well-known lines associated with superheroes and wrote, ‘is it a bird?no ¶ is it a plane?no ¶ is it superman?NO ¶ ITZ TEH BANHAMMER!!!!’ The excessive use of uppercase characters and exclamation marks in both posts points to their farcical nature, as they treat the *banhammer* as if it were a physical entity—a weapon or a superhero—that could be brought to bear against rule-breakers. The second post also deliberately misspells *it’s* and *the*, a popular technique for expressing an ironic or playful attitude in Internet discussion groups (see §6.4). *Banhammer* and the connotation it brings with it are necessary for the humour in both posts to be successful; replace it with the formal word *ban*, which is without any metaphorical allusions, and the jokes would fall flat.

The slang word lets users speak of the threat of being banned flippantly, as if it holds no fear for them; it also allows administrators to soften the blow of banning someone and thus avoid alienating themselves overmuch from the other users, who might not look amiably on someone who exercises his or her authority too severely. Slang is, after all, an implement for opposing that which is standard and authoritative, and thus, paradoxical as it seems, it may be drawn on by individuals who have authority within a group to reassure the rest of the group members that their true allegiance still lies with the People, in spite of the elitist powers they wield.

The form *ban hammer* occurs before *banhammer*, and is attested from 1999 in alt.tv.daria, when a misbehaving user was banned by the administrator, who wrote, ‘my first use of the Official #Lawndale Gold-Plated Kick/Ban Hammer here in alt.tv.daria, and hopefully the last use as well.’ The earliest attestation of *banhammer* is from two years later, when a user in comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.action wrote, ‘The only webboard on gaming that I’ve found to be any good is the one at Something Awful. Since it is moderated and registration is $10, people tend to not act like morons for fear of the banhammer.’

The noun has also shifted to a verb meaning ‘to ban (someone) from a discussion group’. Interestingly, the earliest attestation of the verb on Usenet precedes that of the noun. It seems highly unlikely that the verb would have been derived directly from the chat system hammer icon and then converted to a noun; a more probable explanation is that it just so happens an instance of the verb has survived where earlier records of the noun have been lost. At any rate, in 1998 a topic was posted to alt.comp.jgaa under the title ‘Ban Hammering?’, in which

the poster asked if there was any way to ban users from a server. The form *banhammering* occurs only several years later: in 2002, a user in alt.startrek.vs.starwars wrote, 'What's the galactic standard for signal propagation rates? I know hyperwave tech was banhammered.' In this instance, the past participle has been broadened to mean 'banned' in general, and refers to an agreed-upon exclusion of a type of fictional technology from an imaginary world being jointly created by posters in the thread.

6.2.4 *Permaban*

Permabanning is what happens when the *banhammer* falls. It is a word whose derivation straddles the line between prefixation and compounding: *perma-* has been attached to *ban* in the manner of a prefix, but it is a clipping of a free morpheme, *permanent*, which nudges it closer to being an element in a compound. This combining form is found in Standard English, as in *permafrost* 'perennial frost'; however, it does not seem to be particularly productive in the standard language. When it is creatively applied to other words, the results are decidedly slangy, as in *permagrin* 'a perpetual smile' or *permaloan* 'a borrowed item that the borrower never returns'. Perhaps these words automatically feel informal because they denote precisely the same things as the longer forms *permanent grin* and *permanent loan*, and so the incentive for each new form appears to be only that the speaker couldn't be bothered to articulate the whole phrase—recall Adams's (2009: 10) assertion that clipping makes a word more casual, thereby increasing its effectiveness as slang.

Permaban, 'to deny a user access to a discussion group or chat room forevermore', is certainly more casual than *permanently ban*; like *banhammer*, it expresses a subjectified, cavalier attitude towards the act that the objective jargon word *ban* cannot convey. The earliest attestation of *permaban* on Usenet is from 1996, when one user in alt.irc.dalnet threatened to get several chat channels filled with illegal content shut down, and another user responded, 'attn: IRCops ¶ permaban this guy!' The waggishness of the post is also evident in the use of *IRCops*, a blend of *IRC* 'Internet Relay Chat' and *cops*, instead of the jargon word *administrators*. *Permaban* had shifted to a noun meaning 'denial of access from a discussion group or chat room forevermore' by 1997, when a user in alt.music.nin observed that '#nin to this day has a permaban on *!*@*aol.com because so many AOL users are troublemakers'; in other words, users with email addresses belonging to the domain name aol.com were automatically barred from posting in the newsgroup. (See §6.4.6 for more information on the stigma attached to AOL users in Internet discussion groups.)

6.2.5 *Postwhore*

A *postwhore*, *post-whore*, or *post whore* is ‘one who posts very frequently’. This is not quite the same as a *spammer*, as *spam* is content that is always worthless but needn’t be excessive (see §7.2), while a *postwhore’s* posts, though many, may or may not have some redeeming qualities. Like *fanwank* (§6.2.2), *postwhore* trades on vulgarity for the sake of vividness. Obviously, a *postwhore* isn’t really a *whore*; the second element of the compound is used metaphorically to suggest someone whose messages are as numerous as a loose woman’s trysts. The word has shifted from describing an external situation, a person who carries out certain physical acts, to a textual one, a user who posts in a certain manner. The latter is frowned upon but not nearly so controversial as the former, and so *postwhore* is not as pejorative a term as *whore*—a rare occurrence of (partial) amelioration in discussion group slang.

Postwhore may even be self-applied, as indeed it was in its earliest attestation on Usenet. In 1997, a user wrote in rec.music.tori-amos, ‘Sometimes I feel like a post whore (posting to anything and everything for no good reason whatsoever), sometimes I only respond to things that I feel a need to add to’. The form *postwhore* first occurred in 2002, when a poster in alt.roundtable joked about the many messages he and his friends had been exchanging, ‘And the raw reaction to seeing the mass of posts from Jimmy, Agelmar, and myself will be one or more of the following: 1) You guys have no lives. ¶ 2) Postwhores! ¶ 3) I WILL BREAK THY FINGERS, SWINE!’ In the same year and same newsgroup, the compound had also become a verb meaning ‘to post very frequently’: a user named Purple achieved the dubious honour of being the most prolific poster of the month, and an argument broke out (excerpted below).

> **Purple:** Now I’m God.
> **Handy Solo:** Nah. Now you’re filtered with the rest of the post-whores.
> **Purple:** I wasn’t post-whoring, I was mocking you and Nick[†].
> ([†]The previous top poster.)

6.2.6 *Copypasta*

Copypasta means ‘text that has been copied from elsewhere and pasted’ or ‘an instance of copying and pasting text’, and is a compound of *copy+paste* metonymically altered from

describing a sequence of computer functions to the product of those functions, or the act of carrying them out. At first, it appears that the second element has been whimsically respelled to be homonymous with the *pasta* of Italian cuisine. Such fanciful alterations are common in offline slang: Ayto and Simpson (2010: 16, 173) catalogue, for instance, *bazooms* and *bazookas* from *bosoms* and *Mary Ann*, *Mary Jane*, and *Mary Warner* from *marijuana*. The malapropism-like amendments make allusions to other words and names based on form rather than content, resulting in amusingly incongruous comparisons. In addition to being more concise than a standard phrase like *copied and pasted text*, the casualness of *copypasta* allows the writer to apply the word to others' actions playfully or dismissively, as the situation demands. It may also serve as a knowing wink when the writer applies it to his or her own posts: one copies and pastes text when one is feeling too indolent to come up with original content, and labelling it with the familiar *copypasta* reinforces that laidback attitude.

Copy and *paste* were first collocated on Usenet in 1985, when a poster in net.micro.mac praised an item of software for having 'a really neat copy paste function so reentering a long command is a one menu-item choice'. The following year and in the same newsgroup, the two words occurred as a compound designating 'an instance of copying and pasting text': a user posted that he had tweaked the code of a program so that by double-clicking he got a 'quick copypaste' to 'output documents' more efficiently. The earliest attestation of the form *copypasta*, carrying the same sense, comes from 1999 in dk.politik, a Danish newsgroup: one user accused another named Warming of making spurious claims, and a third user replied 'Så for pokker, nu har du ca. 20 minutter før Warming skriver "Påvis dine censurrerende påstande med copypasta eller fremstå som en løgner!", efterfulgt af halvtrestusinde meningsløse citater fra Oscar Wilde.' ('So damn, you now have about 20 minutes before Warming writes, "Demonstrate your censorious allegations with copypasta or appear as a liar!", followed by fifty thousand meaningless quotations of Oscar Wilde.') In this instance, we may presume that the writer has borrowed *copypaste* from English and altered it slightly to make it seem more like a Danish word. Although the word for 'to paste on a computer' in Danish is *klistre*, the noun for the physical substance 'paste' is *pasta* (Garde, 2013: 220–221), and the writer appears to have used this to partially folk-etymologize the English word.

The next twenty-five occurrences of *copypasta*, all between 1999 and 2004, support the folk-etymologizing hypothesis—as do the seventeen occurrences of *copy pasta* in the same time period. Each occurrence was posted to a newsgroup whose users wrote in Danish, Swedish,

Spanish, Croatian, Hungarian, Dutch, German, or Italian, in all but one of which *pasta* means physical ‘paste’, but does not carry the computer jargon sense (*Collins Dictionary*). German is the exception—its word for the substance ‘paste’ is *Paste*—but only one instance of the word occurred in a German newsgroup, and perhaps the writer borrowed the word from one of the other foreign languages in which it was used. The earliest recording of *copypasta* in an English newsgroup or web forum is only from 2006 (see below), and so it seems improbable that the altered spelling originated among English writers. The form *copy pasta* is attested a year earlier, when a user in alt.config posted a lengthy list of hyperlinks to online resources explaining how to start a newsgroup, and noted that he had copied and pasted the list from a webpage. Another user simply posted a link to the webpage in question, and added, ‘saves copy pasta et al.’

The first English attestation of *copypasta* from 2006 is also the earliest usage in which its sense has been shifted from an instance of copying and pasting text to the copied text itself also comes from 2006. A user named ReofblMobile on the ZAM Forums posted a topic that offered a selection of his favourite quotations, and other users responded scathingly to his ‘regurgitated texts’, including one named Jawbox, whose signature also happened to contain a quotation. The resulting argument is excerpted below.

> **ReofblMobile:** Actually, Jawbox, there’s a bit of irony in your rabid dislike for this post […] in the process of flaming it, as well as every other post you make, you post this: [reproduction of Jawbox’s signature]
>
> **Jawbox:** You might have had a valid point if I had just copy-and-pasted a few lyrics […] into a new thread. But what you have instead is another failed point […] trying to defend the fact that your thread of pure copypasta has turned into nothing more than a revelation of your geeky arrogance.

Although *copypasta* needn’t be negatively loaded, in this instance, calling ReofblMobile’s quotations *pure copypasta* carries a disdainful connotation that would be lacking from a less slangy phrase like *purely reproduced text*; it parallels already established slang expressions like *pure poppycock*, *pure baloney*, and, more severely, *pure bullshit*.

If the early history of *copypasta* suggests that it was derived in foreign-language newsgroups by folk-etymologizing *copypaste*, then it seems probable that the word was readopted from

these newsgroups into English with its altered form rather than being coined independently as a pun on the English word *pasta*. In spite of this, associations with the foodstuff were inevitable, and the fanciful imagery they suggest may be in part responsible for the word's enduring popularity. Such an image was explicitly invoked in alt.slack in 2006, when a user posted an online newspaper article he had come across and introduced it by writing that he was 'serving up the steamin' plate of copypasta'. In the same year, *copypasta* had also been shifted to a verb meaning 'to copy and paste (text)': a thread on the ZAM Forums asked users to post their favourite quotations, and one replied, 'Quotes that I think are funny are all copypasta'd on my other computer…' In this instance, the quotations have not been copied and pasted to a discussion group, but rather pasted in a file saved on a computer, so that at some later date they may be copied from the file and pasted where other people can read them.

6.2.7 *Fest*

Fest is a bound morpheme productively used to create compounds. It is not unique to Internet discussion groups: Mattiello (2008: 122) identifies it as part of general American slang, occurring in such words as *hen fest* and *talkfest*, and claims that it is used to form slang compounds meaning a 'festival or special occasion' of whatever element it is being compounded with, presumably derived from such well-known German compounds as *Oktoberfest*, in which *Fest* means 'celebration'. However, the meaning of *fest* in discussion groups is more general than that given by Mattiello. It is closer to the sense documented by Eble (1996: 33) in her collection of college slang, in which it means 'an abundance of (the other element in the compound)', as in *pizzafest* and *sleepfest*. This is undoubtedly the source of the element in discussion group slang, yet it seems to have undergone subjectification: its productivity has narrowed from being able to form compounds with any noun or verb to combining only with pejorative words—or combining with relatively neutral words to create pejorative compounds. As such, *fest* may be glossed as 'an undesirable abundance of (the element with which it is combined)'. Although Eble classified *fest* as a suffix, on the Internet it needn't be spelled as one word with the preceding element, so that, for example, *trollfest* and *troll fest* are equally acceptable. That, alongside the fact that *fest* carries an easily perceptible meaning on its own, suggests rather that it is a word, albeit one that never occurs on its own.

The earliest use of *fest* on Usenet appears to be in the compound *flamefest*, 'an exuberant bout of flaming', which is first attested from 1985 in fa.human-nets, where a user wrote about his posting tactics when 'engaged in a flamefest on [a] discussion group'. (See §6.1.2 for *flame*.) Nine years later, *troll fest* occurred in a thread entitled 'It's a wacky meta-troll fest', in which one user *trolled* other users for being *trolls* themselves, thus creating a multiplex instance of *trolling*. (See §6.1.1 for *troll*.) *Spamfest* is attested from the same year, when a user in bit.listserv.museum-l cursed what he saw as the insufferable wiseacres of the newsgroup by writing, 'may their mailboxes be truly clogged by junk e-mail. (SPAMFEST!!!)' (See §7.2 for more on *spam*.) Two years later, a user disparagingly referred to an arcade game as 'one giant scrubby twink fest', meaning 'a profusion of inept players'. (See §7.5 for *twink*.)

Each of the above compounds combines *fest* with an already denigrating word, but it may also be used to give a negative cast to an otherwise ambivalent term. For example, we saw in §6.1.3 that *lurking* is neither a laudable nor a contemptible practice in itself, but *lurkfest* swings towards the latter pole in a post made to alt.video.dvd in 1998: one user dismissed another user's suggestion that people visit her two chat channels by responding, 'Most times I have visited these two groups, they have been a lurkfest.' In other words, the chat channels were a waste of time because nobody actually chatted in them; they were overpopulated with users just looking on wordlessly. In a similar vein, *LOL* ('laugh out loud') is a fairly objective term, yet the compounded form *LOLfest* denotes not 'a bout of laughter' in general, but specifically 'a bout of derisive laughter'. It is attested from 2004, when a poster in rec.sport.pro-wrestling wrote that a certain wrestler's achievements would one day have to be struck from the record books when it was discovered that the 'supplements' he had been taking were actually steroids, which would 'cause a massive LOLfest'. The compound may also signify 'an object worthy of a bout of jeering'; for example, in 2006 a user in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums posted to a thread in which people were quarrelling, 'This thread is just one great big lolfest.' (See §6.5.1 for *LOL*.)

Because *fest* is slangy, it may also be used in ways that standard compounding would not permit—for instance, to form compounds with phrases. A fine example of the flexibility of *fest* comes from a post made to alt.tv.dark_shadows in 2003, in which a user criticized the other posters in the newsgroup for having 'managed to turn it into a lie-fest and a rumor-fest and a "hate your neighbour"-fest and a "stick it to your friend"-fest'. While the *Fest* of

Standard German may promise a party, the *fest* of Internet discussion groups offers only a rained-out parade.

6.2.8 Interjectional Compounds

The three compounds to be discussed in this section are *eyeroll*, *facepalm*, and *headdesk*. What makes these compounds unusual is that, in addition to occurring as nouns and verbs, all of them are used as interjections. Each compound is straightforwardly derived from NOUN+NOUN or NOUN+VERB, and so there is nothing inherent in its form that would point to the fact that it may be used exclamatorily; but then, as Eble (1996: 28) argues, it is the 'very simplicity' of compounds that 'gives rise to complexity in meaning', for they offer 'few or no clues about the grammatical or semantic relationship between the parts'. *Eyeroll* is at least made partially transparent by its endocentricity: it indicates the rolling of one's eyes in their sockets. *Facepalm* and *headdesk*, however, are exocentric in that they do not describe body parts or an item of furniture *per se*, but rather the act of bringing these objects into contact. A verbal element must be inferred.

Complicating the three compounds further is the fact that they function as speech acts. Because body language is not observable in textual communication, the compounds allow users to express in writing what they are (supposedly) doing physically. Of course, a writer does not actually need to strike his or her head against the deck in order for his or her message to have the desired effect—the reader will never know whether the action was carried out or not, and so its performative function rests solely on the written word. In fact, it is highly unlikely that a given use of one of the compounds has any real-world referent, and so while the word may on the face of things denote a physical act, what is salient is the word's connoting of the emotional state underlying the act. In other words, the compounds exhibit Traugott's (1989: 34–35) tendency of shifting from having an externally based meaning to an internally based one, which naturally entails subjectification—intrinsically neutral gestures are pressed into service as vehicles of social judgement.

6.2.8.1 *Eyeroll*

Eyeroll is used to indicate the writer's disdain for someone, just as rolling one's eyes does in person. It was first used as a noun on Usenet in 1994, when a user in alt.sex.fetish.orientals posted a haiku about having sex with an Asian woman and another user replied, 'This haiku you speak of drew an eyeroll and a gag from me, but I ignored it as the drivel it was.' The

word had become an interjection by 1996, when a user criticizing the US Republican party's budget plan in alt.society.generation-x posted, 'At least this strips away any pretense of wanting a balanced budget "for our children's future" *eyeroll*'. Crystal (2001: 90) reports that asterisks may be used on the Internet to 'mark imaginary actions or facial expressions', although in this case it is an interjection that is marked, not a verb; otherwise, the form would be inflected to '*eyerolls*'. *Eyeroll* is first attested as a verb in 2004 in alt.support.loneliness, when a user protested that his comments regarding women's stringent 'dating policies' weren't complaints but facts, and another user named DaKitty responded by posting '{DaKitty:raises an eyebrow and eyerolls}'. The use of brackets and the script-like inclusion of her own name indicate in the same manner as asterisks that DaKitty is describing a (supposedly) physical deed. Her syntax brings the utterance closer to being a sentence than an interjection, but the fact that she wrote 'raises an eyebrow and eyerolls' instead of the more conventional 'raises an eyebrow and rolls her eyes' ensures that the coordinate phrase echoes the interjection—and, like it, implies an imaginary act rather than the physical deed one would expect to be indicated by the standard phrasing.

6.2.8.2 *Facepalm*

Like *eyeroll*, *facepalm* is an expression of disdain, specifically directed at someone who has done or said something that the writer believes to be remarkably stupid. Clapping one's palm to one's face is a more expressive gesture than merely rolling one's eyes, and so the emotional weight of *facepalm* is correspondingly greater. Unlike *eyeroll*, it is attested as a verb before a noun or interjection: in 1996, a user posted a story to the creative writing newsgroup bit.listserv.superguy in which one character's reaction to another's dull-wittedness was 'Christie facepalmed'. *Facepalm* appears to have caught on in the newsgroup, as its earliest occurrence as an interjection comes from another story posted there a month later. A character who was supposed to be playing the appropriately dramatic *William Tell Overture* opted for a Frank Zappa song instead, and her disgruntled companion responded with '(facepalm)', the parentheses used in the same manner as asterisks. The newsgroup also bore witness to the earliest recorded use of *facepalm* as a noun—a compound within a compound, in fact—in a story posted in 1996, wherein a character's foolish suggestion is met with 'a mass-facepalm'; that is, an instance of *facepalming* by many people.

6.2.8.3 *Headdesk*

Headdesk is perhaps modelled after *facepalm*, likewise suggesting an item being forcefully brought into contact with the face. The act of hitting one's head against a desk is more violent than just striking it with one's hand, just as the latter is more vigorous than rolling one's eyes; the growing intensity of the gestures bears out Adams's (2009: 14–15) observations regarding the 'overtly competitive' nature that may be demonstrated by successive slang synonyms. He points to the increasingly destructive words used to signify 'drunk' in American slang: from *hammered* in the 1950s to *smashed* in the 1960s to *annihilated* in the 1970s, and finally to *fubar* (from *fucked up beyond all recognition*) in the 1980s. Thus, in Internet discussion groups, when somebody does something so monumentally stupid or inappropriate that *eyeroll* or *facepalm* simply won't suffice, writers may turn to *headdesk*. Its earliest attestation is as an interjection, when a poster turned the compound on himself after committing a posting blunder in perl.perl6.internals in 2003:

> **Will Coleda:** It looks like [Bren Dax] was talking to the list, but didn't actually send there. =-)
> **Brent Dax:** Gah! I keep doing that! *headdesk*

The compound first occurred as a verb in 2005, when posters in a roleplaying thread pretended to be bathing in a hot spring, excerpted below.

> **Kitten:** -jumps in fully clothed- YAY!
> **Ryn:** *jumps in fully naked*
> **Kitten:** -resists urge to headdesk-

Headdesk appears to be used as a noun much more rarely than *eyeroll* and *facepalm*, despite the fact that it is derived from two nouns. The earliest occurrence I have found is from 2010 in the *EverQuest* Forums of Sony.com, where a poster uses it as a slangy synonym for *headache*: he contended that if gaining experience points were made easier in the video game, 'leveling your toon [character] past 80 would no longer be the /headdesk that it is currently.' The forward slash is employed in the chat systems of online games to indicate the performance of an action, equivalent to parenthesizing a word or phrase in asterisks, brackets, or dashes. Its use here suggests that even though '/headdesk' was being used as a noun, it was

still strongly associated in the poster's mind with the interjectional speech act from which the noun was derived.

6.3 Blends

Blending appears not to be a commonly used process for deriving slang in Internet discussion groups. This is not surprising, considering that it is a minor process in English as a whole: in his analysis of the neologisms recorded in all the issues of 'Among the New Words' from 1941 to 1991, Algeo (1991: 14) found that only 5% of them were blends. The process presents something of a stylistic paradox. On the one hand, blending does not follow regular patterns and the forms it derives are unpredictable (Mattiello, 2008: 138), which means that it is about as informal as a morphological process can be; and, indeed, blends are frequently nonstandard, as in *jorts* (*jean*+*shorts*), *gaydar* (*gay*+*radar*), and *guesstimate* (*guess*+*estimate*). On the other hand, creating a blend requires deliberation. The speaker or writer must consider precisely how two words would best fit together, either phonologically or orthographically. For this reason, blends tend to feel contrived rather than spontaneous, and so they are ill-suited for slang, which typically seeks to present itself as effortless and indolent. Nevertheless, there are occasions on which the self-consciousness of blending may be turned into a sort of knowing playfulness, which does suit slang's purposes. This is the case regarding the blends presented here, *interwebs*, *fanon*, and *fangasm*.

In her treatment of blending, Fischer (1998: 39) argues that '[s]tylistic motivation plays only a minor role' in the creation of blends. However, I would argue that style is the primary motivation for blending in Internet discussion group slang, if not in all slang. Why, for example, say *Interwebs* when *Internet* or *web* would do? The slang word is longer than the two alternatives, and thus the incentive for using it can't be typographical brevity; nor can it be semantic transparency, for which the standard *Internet* or even the informal *web* would be a better choice. Rather, it is the tone conveyed by *Interwebs* that motivates its use, one that cannot be found in the other two words. The same holds true for *fanon* and *fangasm*. The slang words' informality presents the writer as coolly casual, as well as promoting the writer's camaraderie with a group of people who are also familiar with the words—for, as Mattiello (2008: 141) argues is the case with clippings, the use of blends may differentiate outsiders from a covert elite for whom 'an allusion is sufficient to indicate the whole'.

6.3.1 *Interwebs*

Interwebs is a blend of *Internet* and *web*, facetiously pluralized, and signifies 'the Internet' or 'the World Wide Web'—the distinction between the two platforms has been blurred by the emergence of a new generation of discussion group users for whom the World Wide Web has always been a part of the Internet, and who use the terms almost interchangeably. *Interwebs* is attested from 2001, when a user in comp.sys.acorn.programmer replied to another who had asked a naïve question about server coding, 'You should really go and learn the rules of the Interwebs before using UNSENET!' The use of the slang word rather than the standard term emphasizes the social difference between the writer and the addressee, and is an attempt by the former to alienate the latter: while the writer belongs to the Usenet community and knows how to be appropriately slangy around his fellows, it is likely that the newer user is not yet versed in the vocabulary of the newsgroups.

The noun has also shifted to a verb, *interweb*, meaning 'to use the Internet'. Its earliest attestation is in the present participle form in 2004, when a user posted a topic in alt.pets.rodents.rats about her ailing pets and concluded it, 'PS Apologies for the spelling and gramma, 'tis quite early for interwebbing and have had a night full of ratty worry.' In this instance, *interwebbing* is more concise than writing out *using the Internet*, but it is doubtful that that was the writer's primary motivation for using the blend. Rather, she wished to present her apology light-heartedly, and so turned to the informal word *interwebbing*—as well as the amusingly archaic *'tis*—to lift the tone of the post.

6.3.2 *Fanon*

Fanon is a blend of *fan canon*, and means 'an idea about a work of fiction that is not officially sanctioned but is nevertheless accepted by a fandom'. (It is worth noting that *fanon* is also a Standard English word denoting part of the vestment of certain Catholic priests. It is impossible to tell whether the coiner of the slang word *fanon* was aware of this, but the clerical overtone of the word would fit in well with the already established association of *fandoms* with religion, as seen in §6.1.6 and 6.2.1, regarding *fanboy* and *fangirl* and *headcanon* respectively.) *Fanon* is distinct from *headcanon*, which belongs to an individual rather than a community and makes sense within the *canon* even though it isn't part of it; *fanon*, on the other hand, may contradict *canon* outright. However, in the same vein as *headcanon*, *fanon* is abstracted from the standard sense of *canon* by referring not to a tangible body of literature but to an intangible concept. It is a subjective term, used depreciatively by

some posters and enthusiastically by others—and even those who look on *fanon* as a positive thing may disagree about what should count as *fanon* and what shouldn't. The very notion of *fanon* is deviant, and the informality of the blend allows this deviance to be better conveyed than the more formal *fan canon* would allow.

The first occurrence of *fanon* on Usenet—and possibly the actual coining of the word—was in 1998, when a user in alt.startrek.creative.erotica.moderated named Emily Salzfass made a post about *fanfiction* (unauthorized literature written about the characters of a published work by fans): 'I am all over saying that Trek fandom is a great community, that fanfic is an empowering and positive forum, and that we as a group are thoroughly and effectively shaping an inadequate canon to fit our growing needs. {I've also coined "fanon" to mean "fan canon"…it's yours, if you want it…}' The slang word spread from the *Star Trek* discussion group community to others, including those devoted to the *Harry Potter* fandom. An example of the word's application may be lifted from the Chamber of Secrets Forums, where in 2005 one poster railed against another for having an 'agenda' and advocating the popular but unofficial romantic pairing of the characters Harry and Hermione: 'The Ron, Harry and Hermione he's talking about are fanon!H/HR!characters, not canon. Ther's [sic] no use trying to convince this one we'd rather use the real ones in debate […] Whatever. I'll stick to canon […] You have fun with your fanon-fanfic stuff, just don't expect us to buy it'. In contrast with the user in the *Star Trek* newsgroup who praised *fanon* for its creativity, this poster rejects such ideas as undesirable aberrations from established doctrine, and she uses the word *fanon* as the negative antonym of *canon*. It is to be expected that different writers would attach disparate connotations to the word—after all, it is the way of religion that one disciple's truth is another disciple's heresy; and as it is with people of faith, so it is with people of *fandoms*.

6.3.3 *Fangasm*

Fangasm is a blend of *fan* and *orgasm*, and means 'something that causes intense delight in its fans' or the 'intense delight experienced by fans' itself. *Orgasm* is closer to scientific jargon than colloquial language, and so *fangasm* is not as crass as *fanwank* (§6.2.2), although it likewise compares the gratification of *fanboys* and *fangirls* to sexual pleasure. The pseudoscientific appearance of *fangasm* allows it to be mock-serious, as if a fan's passionate response to his or her object of devotion is a recognized medical phenomenon. The approach is not unique to *fangasm*; for example, Thorne (2014: 316) observes that *-oid* has been a

productive suffix in American slang since the 1960s, producing such pseudoscientific words as *zomboid*, *bozoid* and *trendoid*. The earliest occurrence of *fangasm* on Usenet was in 1999, when a user in alt.music.superfurries wrote concerning a track on the Super Furry Animals' album *Guerrilla*, 'Rabid Dog is fangasm! it kicks ass, it is a typical B-Side, yes but a fucking brilliant one!' The syntactic structure of the first sentence is unusual, as it suggests that *fangasm* was being employed as an adjective despite its derivation from two nouns. Indeed, when the word next occurs after a seven-year gap, it is a countable noun: a user in alt.battlestar-galactica proposed that if two particular science fiction screenwriters were allowed to collaborate on a prequel to *Battlestar Galactica*, the *fandom* might 'have a mass fangasm on [their] hands'.

Fangasm has also been used as an interjection indicating the writer's *fanboyish* or *fangirlish* delight in something. In 2005, a user in rec.music.filk expressed his excitement for an upcoming convention by writing, 'Gotta GO. *fangasm*'. The asterisks are used to mark an imaginary action (Crystal (2001: 90), and like the interjectional compounds discussed in §6.2.8, *fangasm* here functions as a speech act, enabling the user to convey in writing what he or she is supposedly doing in reality. Of course, while one can actually *eyeroll*, *facepalm* or *headdesk*, a *fangasm* is an unreal bodily response, and so language is the only way it *can* be conveyed. Finally, the blend had also become a verb meaning 'to have a fangasm' by 2007: a poster in the *World of Warcraft* section of the ZAM Forums wistfully envisioned what the game would be like if demon hunters became available as playable characters, and ended his post, 'Just some fangasming here, what powers do you think DH's will recieve [sic]?' In all of these instances, the blend abstractively turns *orgasm* inwards from a physiological reaction to an emotional one, and roots it in the subjectivity of the writer's personal interests as a fan.

6.4 Deliberate Misspellings

'[M]any of the words used in Leet and gaming language are originally derived from incorrect spelling generally due to speed of typing, and then deliberately and repeatedly used as incorrect,' report Blashki and Nichol (2005: 83). Many such deliberately incorrect forms occur in the slang of Internet discussion groups; they are commonly used to indicate playfulness or irony, which in face-to-face, verbal conversation may be conveyed through intonation and body language. As online posters do not have access to either of these tools, they must rely on less conventional methods of expressing their attitudes.

Some misspellings, like *teh*, *suxxor*, and *roxxor* from *the*, *sucks*, and *rocks* (the *-(x)or* suffix is here a meaningless embellishment), carry no significant semantic distinction from their normally spelled counterparts, and they merely set the tone of the text. Other misspellings, like *pr0n* from *porn* and *secks* from *sex*, are likewise semantically unchanged, but are used to disguise illicit activity and evade software that scans messages for inappropriate content, the rationale being that the misspellings 'can be easily read by any human reader … but would foil most search engines' (Perea, Duñabeitia, and Carreiras, 2008: 237). However, there are misspellings that do carry senses that aren't to be found attached to the standards forms, such as *leet*, *krad*, *n00b*, *pir8*, *warez*, *n00dz*, *hax*, and *haxor* (the *-or* suffix is in this case agentive). All of these words belong—either originally or through a later subsumption—to a subset of vocabulary known as Leet or Leetspeak. *Leet* may alternatively be spelled *1337*, as in addition to having a lexicon it has an orthographic system, which Portnow (2011: 156–157) generously calls 'a form of digital calligraphy', and in which letters are replaced with other letters, numbers, and symbols. There are different styles of Leet spelling (Perea et al., 2008: 237), and how vigorously the orthography is applied varies from user to user and from post to post; sometimes, only the vowel letters are changed, so that *leet*, *krad*, *noob*, *pirate*, *warez*, *noodz*, *hax*, and *haxor* may be rendered *l33t*, *kr4d*, *n00b* (the dominant spelling), *p1r4t3*, *w4r3z*, *n00dz* (also dominant), *h4x*, and *h4x0r*. On other occasions, the consonants are replaced as well, resulting in *1337*, *|<|24|)*, *|\|008*, *|*1|2473*, *\/\/4|232*, *|\|00|)2*, *#4><*, and *#4><0|2*, among other renderings.

One ought, however, to be wary of expressing oneself unreservedly through 'digital calligraphy'. Leet is associated with a particular style of presenting oneself, and a particular type of poster—it is perceived, Portnow (2001: 156) writes, to be 'the purview of twelve-year-olds who believe using it makes them look "cool"'. This rather dim view of Leet is demonstrated by a topic posted to rec.humor in 1990, bearing the title '12 Year Old's Guide'. It presented itself as a dictionary of the words used by preadolescent posters, such as: 'K00L - Interesting, the best, I flunked spelling and think that the key after the "9" is a "O"'. When Leet *is* drawn upon by older posters, it may just be to indicate a sort of self-aware playfulness—but, as Portnow (2011: 156) observes, it may also be mockingly directed at people as a tool of social 'emasculation'. Because of this, Leet spelling is almost always linked to pejoration in one way or another: either a Leet-spelled word will attract pejoration, as we shall see in the case of *n00b* (§6.4.3), or an already pejorative word will attract a Leet spelling, as will be seen with *krad* (§6.4.2).

Of course, it is not always clear whether a poster is using Leet ironically or in earnest, which sometimes complicates conversation. This is illustrated by a disagreement—excerpted below—that occurred in 2001 in alt.games.diablo2, when a user named Duckjob 3.0 made a post in which he used the word *n00b* and another user upbraided him about it.

> **Mike S:** Can you please put your brain in gear (even someone who uses l33t speak such as yourself must have one; re:n00b) before posting?
>
> **Duckjob 3.0:** About the "l33t speak" thing, that was something I used to put a lighter note on the post, because I am an easygoing kind of guy, and I'd like to come off as one
>
> **Thouv:** I actually like your way of talking, and i do not think it is "l33t"-ish at all except for the "n00b" part, but i suppose it was done on purpose and to mock l33tery

In fact, clear cases of Leet being used in earnest in Internet discussion groups are few and far between, making the parody more prevalent than the reality. The situation is comparable to that of the Valleyspeak of the American Valley Girl, a stereotype of a slang-slinging, airheaded teenybopper that was, Dalzell (2010: 175) writes, 'firmly based in reality, then subjected to exaggeration and parody' to become 'a highly visible, oft-mimicked caricature'. Uppity young boys are stigmatized on the Internet as uppity young girls are off of it, and whether or not the slang attributed to them is actually used by them, the association alone is sufficient for it to attract an unfavourable evaluation. As such, Leet-spelled words are very often applied pejoratively. It is not a circumstance unique to slang: Campbell (2004: 65) notes that one standard language may borrow from another in such a way that words that had no negative bias in the donor language are pejorated in the borrowing language; for instance, Spanish *hablar* 'to speak' was adopted into French as *hâbler* 'to brag'. Social attitudes in newsgroups and web forums do not nearly approach the scale of nationalistic tensions and typecasting, but the outcomes are nevertheless similar.

6.4.1 *Leet*

The term *leet* itself is thought to be a clipping of *eleet*, misspelled from *elite*. The slang word means, on the face of things, 'excellent', and may conceivably be applied to anything, a broadening from the standard word's restricted application to an outstanding group of people.

Leet is typically associated with hackers (Keats, 2011: 122), though it is difficult to verify whether it originated with them as they did not advertise all of their discussions in public spaces. *Elite* was, however, a word frequently applied to hackers on Usenet from 1983 onwards: they were said to 'consider themselves somewhat of an elite' and to 'enjoy being an elite group', and were even referred to as 'the elite's elite'. The first attestation of *eleet* comes from 1992, when a user in bit.listserv.words-l posted, 'C00l and EleEt are the words "cool" and "elite" spelled in the currently preferred style of the 17-year-old self-styled hacker.' Indeed, *leet* may be considered to be an online equivalent of *cool*, excepting the fact that *cool* may be used sincerely without the speaker being perceived as juvenile by his or her audience.

Why should *eleet* then have been clipped to *leet*? Mattiello (2008: 141) suggests that clipping is a process commonly employed in the creation of English slang, particularly as a way of differentiating outsiders from 'special private groups' for whom 'an allusion is sufficient to indicate the whole'. Possibly the earliest attestation of the clipped form is from 1995, when a user posted a topic in comp.sys.apple rhapsodizing about a demonstration of a piece of software and entitled it 'NFC MegaDemo. Leet.' He may well have intended the word to signify 'excellent', but there is not sufficient context for us to be sure. The meaning of *leet* is more certain, as is the fact that it is a clipping, in a discussion about a computer that took place in the same year in mcgill.general:

> **Perry Wang:** `/34h, $o|\/|3|30|)Y 73|_L /|/|3 \/\/|-|47 7H3 /-/3ll H4|\/|IL7ON'95 /$? |-|34|'\|) 4|3oU7 I7....[†]
>
> **Scott Thompson:** Hamilton '95 is a the 44bit 'leet OS […] Features not only true multitasking, but also multispamming. Plug-and-pray. Direct feed to LeetNet via DUM protocol. Registered users get a free llama.
>
> ([†]'Yeah, somebody tell me what the hell Hamilton '95 is? Heard about it…')

The posters were pretending to be excited about an imaginary computer model, Hamilton '95, which is a thinly-veiled mockery of Windows '95. There is no *DUM* [i.e. dumb] *protocol*, *multispamming* would hardly be an improvement on *multitasking*, and *plug-and-pray* was once a common pun on *plug-and-play*, a hardware specification first used by Windows '95 that became infamous for its unreliability (Leinfuss, 1996: 67). Through all of this, the posters were lampooning those whom they had earlier called ''leet windoze userz'—demonstrating that, at least in certain crowds, *leet* had already undergone ironic pejoration.

This sentiment is echoed in an argument carried out in alt.irc that same year, when one user tried to assert his chat-room credentials by claiming that he had 'been on channels with the bad crowd', and another user replied, 'How special… you must be really 'l33t.' These applications of *leet* offer the reverse of the ironic amelioration commonly found in offline varieties of slang: while being *bad*, *wicked*, or *sick* may be good among some speakers (Eble, 1996: 66), being *leet* is, for many online users, decidedly bad, as will be shown by further examples quoted in the following sections.

6.4.2 *Krad*

Krad (or *k-rad*) has a similar denotation and connotation to *leet*: superficially, it means 'excellent', but it is often used ironically to insinuate the reverse. *Krad* is not derived from Standard English, although it likely comes from a standardized word: in scientific jargon, *krad* is a clipping of *kilo-rad*, '1000 rads', a unit of radiation (*Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary*). *Krad* carries this sense in its earliest attestation on Usenet, when a poster in sci.environment wrote in 1989 about the health guidelines concerning the dosages of irradiation (measured in krads) to which food could safely be exposed. It appears that the word was adopted into Internet discussion group slang and used as a hyperbolic pun on the American surfer slang *rad* 'fantastic', clipped from *radical* (*OED*); a *krad* person or thing is, in other words, '*rad* multiplied by 1000'. The earliest attestation of the slang word is from 1992, when a user in comp.org.eff.talk recounted some alleged exploits of software pirates and concluded, 'There should be like an "alt.elite", or alt.krad that I can cross-post this type of stuff too. I just get a giddy feeling of amusement at the very existence of warezzz pir8's.' The waggish tone of the post suggests that those who are *krad* aren't that *rad* after all, just as the *leet* aren't really *elite*.

The pejorative connotation of *krad* was stated explicitly in 1994, when a user in alt.rave expounded, '[B]asically, the so-called "lamers" are told by the so-called "elite" that k-rad (K-RaD, /<-RaD, etc) means "really cool", which it does literally ("rad" being short for radical and "k-" probably being a reference to "kilo", ie. 1000). What the "lamers" are not told is that k-rad really refers to anything that's lame and especially wannabe-elite.' Socially, slang may be a sort of shibboleth: use the words correctly, and one will be allowed to enter the inner sanctum; use the words wrongly, and one will be cast into the outer darkness. The negative connotation of *krad* led to its being respelled to *kr4d*, as is demonstrated by a post made to alt.2600 in 1997: a user asked, apparently sincerely, 'Doze ne1 kno howe 2 gain passwords

and user names from AOL?' A second user, irked by the first's spelling, replied, 'I KnOwZ U Kr4d d00d. FuX0rs, j00 JuSt GoTtA..... FUCK IT! GET OFF AOL!!!' ('I knows you krad dude. Fuck, you just gotta…') In this way, the second user initially pretended to be answering the first's question as if he or she were a fellow user of AOL, and copied the first's parlance; however, the exaggerated manner in which he or she did this betrayed the sarcasm behind the apparent compliment 'U Kr4d d00d', and he or she then dropped the act entirely and insulted the user outright.

6.4.3 *N00b*

N00b is a Leet misspelling ultimately derived from *newbie*; the latter belongs more to Internet jargon than to slang, as it carries no significant social judgement. It originated in the 1970s to refer to 'a raw recruit' in the United States military, but then broadened to designate a beginner in any field (*OED*). It bears the sense of 'a beginner at programming in particular' in its earliest attested occurrence on Usenet, in 1988, when a poster in comp.sys.mac asked that a list of helpful guidelines be put together for novice programmers posting questions about coding, so that they might avoid 'st[r]uggling as a newbie' like she once did. The first attested use of the term to indicate 'a user new to the Internet' is from the same year, when a user in news.admin opined regarding the yearly online influx of college freshmen, 'I agree with Allison and weemba: there should be an automated (dare I say enforced?) mechanism for training the newbies.'

Newbie was later respelled to *noobie*, styled after the General American pronunciation of the word as the yod-dropped /nuːbiː/ (see Wells, 1982: 247), and possibly an ironic jibe at the supposedly inept spelling of novice posters. As soon as this social colouring came into effect, the word shifted away from being jargon towards slang. The earliest attestation of *noobie* comes from 1994, when a user in comp.os.ms-windows.programmer.misc sought programming help in a topic entitled 'Sound/Events (Shtoopid Noobie Kweschun)'; the deliberate spelling mistakes were used by the poster to poke fun at his own ignorance. *Noobie* had in turn been clipped to *noob* by 1999, when a user in rec.pets.birds named Dee corrected another user, Mamabird, for referring to the tilde as a *squiggle*, and things escalated into a quarrel that is excerpted below.

> **CricketRAH:** Guess "squiggle" isn't technical enough for the computer nerds!
> **Mamabird:** Who ever thought of a dumb name like "tilde"? Probably ol' Bill Gates

> or somebody like that. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.
>
> **Dee:** its a tilde, pronounced "till duh".....and a cockatoo is different from a cockatiel and if i spelled cockatiel wrong you'ld laugh and call me a newbie and I'ld laugh and call you a noob

Dee's post doesn't clearly indicate whether there was any denotative distinction between *newbie* and *noob*, but it signals that the two forms had different social values attached to them, at least by Dee and presumably by some others. Rankled by the other posters' ridicule of him for using a stuffy item of jargon unfamiliar to them, Dee retaliated by calling them an item of slang he assumed they would find equally unfamiliar. There is little social stigma attached to ignorance of jargon, but ignorance of slang suggests that one is an outsider from a special group. To quote Coleman (2012: x) again, 'If you don't understand my slang, you're not in my gang,' and if one is not in the gang, one is deserving of disdain.

Soon afterwards, *noob*'s spelling was further altered to the Leet form *n00b*. As Blashki and Nichol (2005: 83) point out, deliberate misspellings are common in gaming language, and *n00b* appears to have originated in the gaming community. It is first attested from 1999, when a user in alt.games.everquest asserted that players of the online game *The Realm* 'dont say n00b […] commonly anymore.' Since then, *n00b* has gained a great deal of popularity, and it and *newbie* have diverged in their senses: while *newbie* still ambivalently signifies 'a new user', *n00b* means 'an incorrigibly inept new user'. A distinction was explicitly drawn in 2002 by a poster in alt.games.starsiege.tribes, who suggested that *n00b* is 'harsher' than *newbie* and elaborated, 'A n00b is likely to be a newbie who refuses to learn, or ignores rules, or generally behaves badly, as opposed to newbies who really are trying to learn.' Similarly, a poster in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums explained in 2004 that *n00b* is an 'insult describing a person who is not only lacking in knowledge of something, but also blatantly refuses to learn about it and even berates those who would benefit him with experience'. *N00b* has undergone pejoration, and here we see subjectification at work again: the line between *newbie* and *n00b* is a hazy one, and on which side of it a particular novice falls depends on how charitable the writer is feeling. The derogatory connotation of *n00b* is made clear when one considers the collocations in which it occurs on Usenet: they include *bloody n00b*, *damn n00b*, *f00lish n00b*, *f***ing n00b*, *F^$KING N00B C*NTS* and *n00b scum*.

6.4.4 *Pir8*

The *OED* reports that *pirate* has been used in the sense ‘person or company who reproduces or uses the work of another […] without authority and esp. in contravention of patent or copyright’ since the seventeenth century, but in the late twentieth century, the word’s meaning narrowed online to mean ‘one who illegally distributes copyrighted material over the Internet’. This sense is attested from 1983, when a user in net.crypt offered advice on making software harder to duplicate: ‘The easiest way to install serial numbers is with proms or eproms [memory chips] that most pirates can find and duplicate. While not perfect it does limit your losses to those who are willing to modify their hardware.’ While *pirate* in this sense is not particularly slangy, the word’s convention-defying respelling to *pir8* is. Unlike the majority of Leet, which replaces letters with numbers based on their visual resemblance and employs a one-to-one correspondence, the replacement of *ate* with *8* instead relies on a phonetic similarity and has a three-to-one correspondence. Although the second syllable of *pirate* is not actually pronounced [eɪt], its spelling matches that of the past-tense verb *ate*, and this provides sufficient justification for the replacement of the syllable with the symbol for the homophonous word *eight*.

Like *pr0n* and *secks*, *pir8* could be used to mask illicit activity from word scanners; this is evident in a post made to comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.strategic in 1995, when a user claimed to have downloaded the video game *Warcraft 2* for free and another user replied, ‘Can you give me a pir8 site where i can get warcraft 2 from ??’ However, *pir8*’s Leet spelling inevitably attracted a derogatory connotation, as is attested in a post made to 3dfx.games.glquake in 1998, when a user defended his views on the computer industry by writing, ‘NO, im not some leet pir8, XXXXXsexual or (insert insult here)’. Even before then, the alternative Leet spelling *p1r4t3* had emerged as a term of abuse: its earliest attestation comes from 1995, when one user in comp.sys.amiga.games complained that the graphics in the pre-release for the game *Fears* were of inferior quality, and another user ranted, ‘You dumb fuck. You dumb fucking 3L33T3 P1R4T3 W4R3Z D00D [eleete pirate warez dood…] THAT IS AN OLD VERSION.’ The user’s temporary switch from standard spelling to the Leet orthography emphasizes his low opinion of his addressee’s intelligence by suggesting that he can only understand the spelling-mistake-ridden language of impetuous preadolescents. It is a form of condescension not unlike ridiculing someone by addressing him or her as if he or she were a wayward child, and as such the applicability of *p1r4te* or *pir8* to a person subjectively depends upon the writer’s attitude towards him or her.

6.4.5 *Warez*

Warez are the booty of *pir8s*. The word has been clipped from *softwarez*, a playful misspelling of *softwares*, which is an equally jocular pluralization of the mass noun *software*. (Unusual pluralizations are popular on the Internet, which is itself sometimes referred to as the *interwebs*—see §6.3.1.) The replacement of *s* with *z* is a common feature of Leet, and is comparable to what Wescott (1987: 216) describes as American slang's penchant for *zazzification*, 'to render words slangier than they already are by substituting a Z-sound for other consonants'; he cites the derivations of *scuz* from *scum* and *mazoola* from *mahoola*. In the text-based communication of the Internet, of course, it is the letter *z* rather than the sound /z/ that is substituted, and it doesn't replace just any consonant, but only *s* on those occasions when the letter actually corresponds to [z] when spoken (so that, for instance, *softwarez* is acceptable but **zoftwarez* is not). The earliest attestation of *softwarez* comes from 1987, when a topic was posted to comp.sys.mac with the title 'Re: NTSC video on Mac II via softwarez', in which the poster groused about a supposed software change to improve the video capabilities of the Macintosh that had failed to materialize. The zazzified form *softwarez* does not seem to differ semantically from the standard word, but rather conveys the poster's disparaging attitude towards the 'hype', as he called it, surrounding empty promise of an upgrade.

However, when *softwarez* was clipped to *warez*, its meaning shifted from 'any software' to 'illegally distributed software'. *Warez* is first attested from 1988 in comp.sys.admin, when a user complained about other posters instructing people in how to evade software copy protection: 'I would like to see this newsgroup be used to discuss current Apple // products, problems, and questions; if I want to read about someone's latest "warez" (or similarly misspelled items) I will look in an appropriate place. Incidentally, "talk about copy protection" is different from "give methods for defeating copy protection".'

Warez, and in particular its Leet spelling *w4r3z*, is obscure enough to avoid the sort of unwanted attention that actually writing *illegally distributed software* might bring, and in this respect using the word may sometimes have similar motivations to those behind *pir8*. *Warez* never occurs in the singular form **ware*, and retains the *-z* suffix even when it takes on an additional suffix, as in the form *warezed*—it had been shifted to a verb meaning 'to send warez (to someone)' by 1996, when a user in alt.2600.programz (note the spelling) requested

free content from other users by posting ‘warez me too pleeez’. The earliest attestation of *warezed*, which also provides a clearer context of the verb’s use, comes from 1997 in alt.fan.lion-king:

> **[Poll question]:** Do you own either the complete TLK [The Lion King] game for PC or the other Segs/Nintendo versions???
>
> **TxTimon:** I’ve got the PC shareware, had full version warezed to me but never got to play it.

The last two posts demonstrate that *warez* is not always applied pejoratively, as it is used by people who perceive its referent to be a worthwhile practice. However, there are others who look down on those who scour the Internet for *warez*, and so lampoon the practice and the vocabulary associated with it. For example, in 1996 in alt.test, a poster’s signature included the line ‘Visit the IC 3L33T3 W4R3Z FTP S1T3: 127.0.0.1’; in other words, ‘Visit the Inner Circle eleete warez file-transfer-protocol site’, followed by the site’s ostensible IP address. However, as more experienced users on the newsgroup would know, the post is an act of *trolling*: 127.0.0.1 is the address that designates one’s own computer, and so trying to access it as a source of *warez* would merely present the hopeful user with a list of his or her own files. One would have to be quite ignorant of the ways of computers to fall for this trick, but then the attitude of the discussion groups is that the sort of people who would use a Leet-spelled phrase like ‘3L33T3 W4R3Z’ must be ignorant. In fact, in 1996, a poster in rec.games.computer.quake.misc used *warez* to mean posting moronically: a post was made that jokingly claimed that the video game *Duke* ‘rOOLZ !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!’; the post made no mention of downloading the game or anything else illegally, and yet another poster responded, ‘WArEZ AllERT!!!!!!! IntELLEiGEnCE LiVIL dRoPPOING REAPidlY!!!!!!! WaRNING!!!!1!!111!!!!! ¶ (You forgot to mix 1’s in with the exclamation marks. You’ll never be a true master of the Warez if you don't try harder than that :-)’ In this instance, *warez* metonymically became a pejorative embodiment of the entire concept of the infantile, *warez*-hunting Leetspeak-user.

6.4.6 *N00dz*

Like *pr0n*, *n00dz* denotes ‘online pornography’, though it is applied only to images, not videos. It has been narrowed and pejorated from the standard sense of *nudes*, ‘artwork depicting unclothed figures’. *Nudes* first occurs in the slangy sense on Usenet in 1987, when

a user wrote of a slideshow program, 'It is available on GEnie and Neil (Harris) has posted at least 15 nudes which were digitized by someone else […] Would anybody be interested in the slideshow program and a few pictures on Usenet to see what this puppy does?' *Nudes* was later Leet-spelled and zazzifid to *n00dz*, which, like *n00b*, is styled after the yod-dropped American pronunciation. Unlike *pr0n*, the function of *n00dz* is apparently not to cloak illicit material. Instead, it is used to deride users who trawl the Internet in search of pornography, perhaps based on the notion that the stereotypical naïve, twelve-year-old Leet-speller would not be able to bring himself to use the more explicit word *porn*, and so would settle on the more euphemistic *n00dz*. The earliest attestation of *n00dz* is from 1996, in an exchange posted to alt.journalism.moderated excerpted below.

> **Arsenio Oloroso:** Hey, this newsgroup is really a good idea. How do we get the word out?
>
> **Eric Larsen:** Of course, if we all start posting "k-rad k00L SanDrA BuLl0(K n00dz," we'll have loads of new subscribers… ¶ …if you *really* want that sort of activity. ;)

The implication is, of course, that no reasonable person would want that sort of activity; a small readership is better than a large one populated by preadolescent pornography-seekers. A similarly disparaging attitude is evident in a post made to alt.hentai.sailor-moon in 1999, in which a user wrote, 'We ALL know that lamers posting to this ng [newsgroup] for SAIL0R M00N N00DZ are all on AOL. ;)' AOL was typecast as the Internet service provider of choice for school-age posters, as they were not old enough to access Usenet from a university campus or skilled enough to set up their own servers for that purpose. Preteen posters are *lamers*, and only *lamers* would visit a newsgroup to search for smut rather than, as the saying goes, reading it for the articles. Thus, *n00dz* has been further pejorated from its artistic origins so that it not only signifies 'online pornography imagery', but suggests an attitude of contempt both towards the signified and towards those who consume it.

6.4.7 *Hax* and *Haxor*

Hax is a deliberate misspelling of *hacks*; the replacement of *cks* with *x* in Leet is almost as common as the replacement of *s* with *z*, and has already been seen in the words *roxxor* and *suxxor*. We might call this tendency *exification* after Wescott's (1987) *zazzification*. (Incidentally, the placement of the inflectional suffix *-s*, either as a third-person-singular

marker or a plural marker, before the derivational suffix *-or*—even if it is respelled as *z* or combined with *ck* into *x*—violates the hypothesis maintained by Scalise (1986: 103) and others that 'Inflection is always peripheral with respect to derivation'. Slang, as we have seen, has no reason to abide by convention.)

Hax first appears as a noun derived from *hacks* in the sense of 'hacking programs'. It seems to have originated within the online gaming community, where the exified form's sense had narrowed specifically to 'programs used to hack video games in order to give the hacking player an advantage' (see Chapter 9 for a more detailed treatment of the relationship between the slang of the online gaming community and that of Internet discussion groups). It is first attested from 1994 in rec.games.bolo, when gamers from various American universities got into an intercollegiate spat. One poster from Northeastern State complained that he had played a match in the video game *Bolo* against a player from the University of Michigan, only for his opponent to cheat in order to win. A second poster from the University of Pennsylvania wryly observed that when people from his college had been caught 'using hacks' the previous year, he had 'got more shit from UMich than anywhere else', and now the tables were turned. A third poster, David Xavier Clancy, who had been involved in that incident, replied, 'Actually […] i never gave you shit for the hax at upenn, just the fact that YOU used hax, as you freely admitted.'

Later that year in the same newsgroup, Clancy employed *hax* as a verb meaning 'to hack', either shifting it from the already exified noun or exifying it afresh from the third-person present-tense verb *hacks*. Agreeing with other posters griping about cheating in the game, he wrote, 'if you hax, use hax, or distribute hax (the worst of all) then you sux rox.' However, use of the word *hax* was by no means limited to Clancy or rec.games.bolo. It occurred, for instance, in rec.games.computer.ultima.online in 1998, when one user lambasted another for being the sort of 'loser' who is 'too busy haxing Minesweeper to put any thought into [his posts]'.

These posts demonstrate that, like the other Leet-spelled words examined so far, *hax* was used pejoratively, denoting odious software or behaviour. However, when *hax* was shifted to an adjective, it underwent amelioration—one of the few discussion group slang words to do so, an occurrence made even rarer by the fact that, unlike *lurk* (§6.1.3) or *postwhore* (§6.2.5), *hax* the adjective did not merely lose its negative connotation to become neutral; it was

resubjectified as a positive attribute. It signifies, apparently without a hint of irony, 'extremely skilled', suggesting that the person to whom the adjective is attributed is so good at something that it's as if he or she were using hacking programs. The earliest attestation of this sense of *hax* comes from 2003, when a user in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the Zam Forums wrote about completing a dangerous quest that involved breaching a castle, only for a non-player character to follow them in with no difficulty. The poster concluded, 'We were like, WTF we almost DIE getting in here and she just strolls right into the middle of [the castle]? SO HAX! lol'. Of course, the poster did not mean that the character actually made use of a hacking program; that would not be possible given that it was controlled by the computer, not a human player. The usage here is tongue in cheek, as the character's arriving unscathed was not the result of talent but merely the game's programming. The adjective may be used in earnest, however, and it has spread beyond the gaming community to be adopted by users of Internet discussion groups devoted to other interests. For instance, in 2012, a poster on the Fanfiction Forum wrote about reading *The Irregular at Magic High School*, a Japanese light novel whose protagonist is 'hax as fuck and can dominate the opposition what with his "make nukes out of anything" and "heal from almost everything" ability'.

Turning to a less complimentary word, *haxor* is a deliberate misspelling of *hacker*, derived from *hax* and the Leet suffix *-or*, which may act as an agentive suffix, as in *pwnzor* ('one who *pwnz*; that is, dominates', from *owns*), though it may also be frivolous and semantically empty, as in *pr0nzor* ('pornography'). *Haxor* had been coined by 1995, when a template was posted to rec.radio.scanner which users could fill out to let other users know why they were being *flamed*. The options included 'You act like the haxor of the world' alongside 'You suck' and 'I don't like your face'. The company in which *haxor* finds itself here suggests that it had already undergone a degree of ironic pejoration in its divergence from *hacker*, and was directed at people disdainfully.

This attitude is also observable in a post made to alt.2600 in 1997, which offered a list of signs that a person is a 'leet a0l h4x0r'. One of the signs is that the person 'thinks they are a hacker because they can get into warez chat rooms on AOL'. In 1998 in alt.hacking, another user insisted regarding the use of Leetspeak, 'Hacker don't do any of that shit, only lamers do that […] i haven't every see a hacker call himself a HaX0r or some stupid shit like that!' To these users, *haxor* doesn't mean 'hacker' so much as 'hacker wannabe', in much the same way that *leet* doesn't mean 'excellent' so much as 'mistakenly believing oneself to be

excellent'. Like that of *n00b*, the subjectification of *haxor* has led to its acquiring a derogatory connotation not present in its standardly spelled counterpart. *Hacker* is a relatively objective term, applied to people who hack by those who approve of them as well as those who don't; but *haxor* is a loaded term, applied to people who only imagine they can hack. A skilful scoundrel may inspire outrage or respect, but one who tries and fails to be a scoundrel provokes nothing but contempt.

6.5 Acronyms

'The various types of abbreviation found in Netspeak have been one of its most remarked features,' Crystal (2001: 84–86) observes, before going on to list just over a hundred contractions, initialisms, and acronyms. If nothing else, abbreviations are remarkable for their sheer pervasiveness online. They allow Internet users to read and write messages speedily, whether they are describing their thoughts and feelings (like *OMG* for *oh my God*), requesting information (like *a/s/l* for *age/sex/location?*), or simply offering a valediction (like *TTYL* for *talk to you later*). These usages illustrate a larger development in the English language generally, which has seen acronyms and initialisms become highly productive in the period since the end of the Second World War (Coleman, 2012: 37–38). Their particular popularity in Internet discussion groups and other online platforms is understandable when one considers the latter's reliance on textual communication; for acronym creation, Bauer (1983: 238) stresses, is a 'very much orthographically-based' process. Although the meanings of most acronyms do not differ significantly from those of the phrases from which they have been shortened, some of their number have become so embedded in discussion group slang that they have ceased to be treated like acronyms at all, instead being reanalysed as simple morphemes capable of bearing inflection—and with this morphological change has come semantic change. Three cases of this are presented in this chapter: *LOL*, *ROFL*, and *IMHO*.

6.5.1 *LOL*

Possibly the best known of all Internet acronyms is *LOL*, from the verbal phrase *laugh out loud*. It has already received attention from sociolinguists for its use as a discourse marker (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 264; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008: 11–13), but it does not appear that the acronym's semantic and morphological shifts have been given much attention. *LOL* is first attested on Usenet from 1989, in an issue of the online *FidoNET Newsletter* posted to comp.org.fidonet. The issue provided a list of abbreviations that were ostensibly in common use among the newsletter's contributors, including 'LOL - Laughing Out Loud',

although no record of its use in previous *FidoNET* issues exists. The earliest extant use of the acronym in conversation is from 1991, when a user in alt.flame wrote that he had been warned that there would be an attempt to suck him into a bout of *flaming*, and another user ridiculed him by replying, 'LOL. So, although you are naturally bereft of wit, intelligence, and capriciousness, you do have "e-mail acquaintances(*)" who lend you clues'. In this instance, *LOL* is used as an interjection indicating that the writer is laughing at the addressee; much like the interjectional compounds discussed in §6.2.8, the acronym functions as a speech act. The user is not able to express his actual laughter through textual communication, and so employs the acronym to convey in writing what he is doing physically, or at least supposed to be doing. *LOL* need not have a real-world referent, as its connotation of an emotional state (amusement) is more salient than its denotation of a physical act (laughing out loud); like *eyeroll*, *facepalm*, and *headdesk*, it has been abstracted from an externally based meaning to an internally based one.

However, *LOL* then became a verb meaning 'to laugh', and here the actual act of laughter, not just the sentiment beneath it, is clearly salient. It was also at this point that its morphology began to change. In 1993, a user in rec.arts.animation commented, 'i've seen about 15 eps of Animaniacs and LOLed (only a chuckle, mind you) 6 times.' A year later, another user in rec.arts.startrek.current responded to a humorous post by writing that he was 'still LOLing'. The posters were no doubt aware of the acronymic origin of *LOL*, as they both capitalized it—even the earlier poster, who left the pronoun *I* in lowercase. However, the addition of the inflectional suffixes *-ed* and *-ing* indicates that they were treating *LOL* as if it were a single morpheme; we can hardly expect them to have meant the forms to be shortenings of **laugh out louded* and **laugh out louding*.

The word's reanalysis is further evidenced by changes in its orthography: it has since been spelled *lol*, as if it were not an acronym at all but a single morpheme pronounced [lɒl] (*OED*). This is borne out by the inflected forms *lolled* and *lolling*, where the second *l* has no acronymic meaning but ensures that the words conform to English spelling conventions, in which *loled* and *loling* would be pronounced with the diphthong [əʊ] as in *dole* rather than the expected monophthong [ɒ] (in Received Pronunciation) or [ɑ] (in General American) as in *doll*. The earliest occurrence of the slang word *lolled* is from 1995, when, unusually, it was used as a transitive verb meaning 'to cause (someone) to laugh': a user in bit.listserv.cinema-1 wrote to another, 'Kjf, thanks for making me LoL today! Hmm, maybe that should be a

new verb. You lolled me!!' The first attested use of *lolling* is from 1997 in alt.society.liberalism, in which one user attacked another's reading ability and she responded, 'You sure have trivial ways of trying to attack my credibility. If I used those trite net acronyms, I certainly would be rotfilling or lolling right now.' *LOL* has also been shifted to *LOLs*, a plural noun that signifies 'laughs'; it is attested from 1997 in alt.support.depression, when one poster responded to another's amusing comments, 'Thank YOU for the LOLs!' Like *LOLed* and *LOLing*, although *LOLs* retains the acronym's capitalization, it is nevertheless treated as a single morpheme—it presumably is not meant to stand for **laugh out louds*.

6.5.2 *ROFL*

The semantic and morphological development of *LOL* is echoed by *ROFL*, from *roll on floor laughing*, less commonly *ROTFL* (*roll on the floor laughing*) or *ROTFIL* (*roll on the floor in laughter*). Its earliest attestation comes also from 1989, when a user in rec.ham-radio wondered about the many abbreviations in use on Usenet and another user gave an unhelpful answer (excerpted below).

> **Alan Bloom:** I have figured out what BTW and IMHO mean, but RTFM[†] is a new one for me????
>
> **Chuq Von Rospach:** Actually, I think there's a message in news.announce.newusers where you could have RTFM about RTFM, but that's another issue.
>
> chuq (he said, ROFL)
>
> ([†]*RTFM* stands for *read the fucking manual*.)

This is another example of slang's ability to draw a line between insiders and outsiders. Chuq ridiculed Alan for his ignorance of an abbreviation, and expressed his ridicule by using yet another abbreviation that Alan might not have known. As with *LOL*, *ROFL* is a speech act: Chuq need not actually have rolled on the floor laughing to achieve the desired effect.

The earliest recorded explanation of ROFL came the following year, when one poster in comp.sys.ibm.pc made a humorous comment and another replied, 'rofl! (rolling on floor laughing)'. The interjection had also become a verb by 1992: a user in bit.listserv.words-1 explained how recently he had remembered something funny on an aeroplane and 'totally ROFLed', to the bemusement of his fellow passengers; obviously, it is unlikely that the user

had enough space literally to roll on the floor laughing, and he is using the verb hyperbolically to mean simply ‘to laugh’. *ROFLing* is attested from the same year in aus.flame, where a user posted that he was ‘ROFLing in anticipation of [another user’s] reply’. Evidently, the verb is treated as monomorphemic: the inflected forms are not meant to be understood as shorthand for **roll on the floor laughinged* or **roll on the floor laughinging*.

The reanalysis of the morphology of *ROFL* is made plain by its respelling to *roffle*, where the second *f* and *e* do not stand for anything but reflect the conventions of English spelling, in which a simple word ending in *fl* must be followed by *e*, and another *f* must be added to indicate that the verb is pronounced [rɒfl], not [rəʊfl] (compare *riffle* and *rifle*). *Roffle* first occured as an interjection in a post made to alt.politics.elections in 1992, when one user responded to another’s query about whether police helicopters were equipped with infrared technology by posting, ‘Duhhh havnt you seen “BLUE THUNDER”... <ROFFLE>’, where the chevrons, like asterisks, indicate an imaginary action (Crystal 2011: 90). *Roffle* had shifted to a verb by 1995, when a poster in alt.usage.english wrote to his peers regarding his *trolling* of another member, ‘I’m sorry Bob & everyone else, it’s just too much fun roffling around at the idea of an irate Bob fuming at his screen.’ The past tense form occurred three years later in rec.arts.sf.composition, where a user recounted an amusing story and finished, ‘Oh well, you had to be there. Personally, I roffled.’

6.5.3 *IMHO*

IMHO, from *in my honest opinion* or *in my humble opinion*, began life as a prepositional phrase. It is first attested on Usenet from 1984, when it was used by a poster in net.video who parenthetically supplied what the acronym stood for: ‘The Sony and Maxell tapes are, imho {in my honest opinion}, almost indistinguishable in quality, and are the only kind I buy now.’ The acronym was glossed as *in my humble opinion* three years later, when a poster in comp.sys.amiga appended to her message, ‘Don’t forget that my IMHO disclaimer means In My Humble Opinion’. Whether the *humble* phrase was coined separately from the *honest* phrase or is an instance of folk etymology cannot be ascertained, but the issue has no bearing on the later development of *IMHO*.

The acronym had been reanalysed as a noun meaning ‘opinion’ by 1989, when a user in comp.unix.aux included in his signature, ‘All “IMHOs” disclaimed and copyrighted.’ The

placement of *IMHO* in inverted commas suggests the user was aware of the unconventionality of pluralizing a prepositional phrase, and perhaps he intended it to be only a flippant nonce word. Nevertheless, since then, usages of the nominal *IMHO* have abounded. It occurs, for example, less self-consciously in a post made to rec.sport.basketball in 1990: a user responded to a post listing basketball players' nicknames that he didn't much care for them, then added, 'Not a comment on your list, just an IMHO that baseball nicknames are historically better than basketball nicknames.' Presumably, the poster was aware that *IMHO* had been abbreviated from a prepositional phrase, but he nevertheless treated it as monomorphemic noun: he could not have intended his utterance to be understood as **just an in my honest opinion*.

IMHO has also since become a verb meaning 'to state one's opinion'. This categorical shift is, in some ways, more remarkable than the similar shifts undergone by *LOL* and *ROFL*, as those were verbal phrases to begin with. The past participle form *IMHOed* is attested from 1991 in rec.arts.sf-lovers: when discussing what might have caused the strange behaviour of an alien race in the novel *Protector*, a poster referred to the opinion voiced by one of the novel's characters by writing, 'Brenann IMHOed that this was largely cultural.' *IMHOing* first occurred two years later, when a user in rec.arts.disney gave his views on the censorship of culturally insensitive lyrics in Disney's songs and ended, 'Anyway, enough IMHOing…'

It may be worth noting one case in which this item of discussion group slang has crept off of the Internet: it appears as a lowercase word with a spurious *e* added, its sense seemingly unchanged, in the novel *Carpe Jugulum* by Terry Pratchett (1998: 306), himself a former contributor to Usenet (Tredinnick, 2006: 229–230). A character speaking a variety of mock-Scottish English observes that a man in his charge is 'sicken', and his companion replies, 'Born sicky, imhoe!' It will be interesting to observe, as the Internet becomes ever more firmly embedded in popular culture, how many other online slang words will slip from discussion groups and other Internet platforms and into offline discourse.

7 SLANG DERIVED FROM TRADEMARKS

Most slang derived from trademarks relies on allusion for its meaning to come across—there is some salient characteristic that is shared by the trademarked product and whatever is being denoted by the derived slang word. 'Allusion,' Eble (1996: 87–88) writes, 'is not only a way of enhancing meaning by bringing ancillary knowledge to interpretation; it also provides a way of excluding those who do not have the knowledge.' It is for this latter reason, I would argue, that trademark-derived words make up a relatively small portion of Internet discussion group slang—in fact, I have only encountered five of them, all of which are documented below. After all, the commercial availability of any given brand is frequently restricted to a particular country, whereas the online community is populated by users from around the world. I observed at the beginning of Chapter 6 that slang words drawn from a regional variety of English are likely to miss their mark on an international stage, and the same holds true for regional brands, whose names would very likely be meaningless to those living outside the brand's marketplace. As Eble observes, allusive slang is meant to exclude people who are not in the know from being part of a special group—but it should not be so exclusive as to pass over the heads of people who *do* belong.

The five slang words presented in this chapter have all managed to circumvent this difficulty in various ways. *Trufax* succeeds because its meaning relies on a pun rather than allusion, and so it is understandable regardless of whether or not the reader knows of the TruFax brand. The other words here all trade on allusions, but not necessarily allusions to the actual products they are named after: *spam* is inspired by a well-known television sketch, while *twink* is taken from an offline variety of slang, and knowledge of each is much easier to distribute across the Internet than the physical foodstuffs sold under the names Spam and Twinkie. Finally, *smurf* reached discussion group slang through a hacking program, while *nerf* passed through the slang of video games, and knowledge of the Smurf and Nerf franchises is not necessary to understand the words, although it does arguably augment their potency.

7.1 *Trufax*

Trufax, as I observed in the introduction to this dissertation, is a respelling of the pleonastic phrase *true facts* that illustrates the penchant of Internet discussion group slang for exification (see §6.4.7). It is not the only instance in the English language of *facts* being altered to *fax*;

Algeo (1991: 10) observes that *fax* is sometimes used as a ‘commercial respelling’ of *facts*, as in the trademark *Ceefax*. Indeed, *trufax* appears to be a pun on another trademark, *TruFax*, though on this occasion *Fax* is not standing in for *Facts*: the trademark belongs to a brand of fax server software. The software had been known on Usenet since at least 1990, when a user in alt.fax posted, ‘I’ve been beta testing fax server software from COS since mid-August. Their product is called TruFax’. There was also a punk band named Tru Fax and the Insaniacs that some users of Usenet were familiar with from at least 1986. However, as the original membership of Usenet was composed largely of programmers, and punk rockers were few and far between, references to the software occur far more frequently than those to the band, and the slang word’s spelling more closely matches that of the brand name. The earliest attestation of the slang word is from 1995, when a user in bit.listserv.gaynet contrasted the assertions of the American political commentator Rush Limbaugh, which he called *Limpfax*, with his own opinions, termed *TRUFAX*.

The shift of trademarks to common nouns is a well-known occurrence in English, though the process is usually one of broadening: *kleenex*, for example, has come to mean ‘any facial tissue’, not just those sold under the brand name Kleenex (Eble, 1996: 55). What is notable about *trufax* is that its meaning has not broadened—it does not mean ‘any brand of fax server software’—but it is used as a pun instead. Nevertheless, it reflects Traugott’s (1989: 34–35) expectations by shifting in its meaning from a tangible entity, a kind of software, to an abstract notion: as a noun, *trufax* means ‘accurate information’. However, the word has not stopped there. It has come to be used as an interjection indicating agreement, much like *indeed*; the earliest attestation of its being used in this way comes from 2003, when one user in rec.backcountry jocularly pretended to diagnose a sample of something and another user responded.

> **Eugene Miya:** Silica and ferric based. Diagnostic? Could be reptilian.
> **Mach Twain:** Trufax. The bars of Orion. Like Tom Daschel.

The word’s shift from a noun to an interjection is a further abstraction from the ‘internal situation’ to the ‘textual situation’, moving from an evaluation of any item of information to an evaluation of the discourse itself. This new meaning is, of course, entirely subjectified: while facts are objectively true regardless of the writer’s or reader’s attitude, the use of the

interjection *trufax* is based solely on whether or not the writer holds the same opinion as the person to whom he or she is responding.

7.2 *Spam*

Spam has become well known to everyone with an Internet mail client, in which case it signifies 'unsolicited electronic mail' or 'to send unsolicited electronic mail' (*OED*). *Spam* is part of the jargon of e-mail, but it also belongs to the lexis of Internet discussion groups, where it means 'worthless content' or 'to post worthless content'. In discussion groups, *spam* is slangy, as it refers not to automatically generated and mass-distributed e-mails, but to messages submitted by human posters that the writer considers to be of no value, though the posters would probably disagree. The slang word has been considerably subjectified and abstracted in its derivation from the trademark Spam, a type of tinned pork. Launched in 1937, the brand name is supposed to have been a blend of *spiced+ham*; its application later broadened to refer to any kind of tinned meat (*OED*).

Its passage from denoting a foodstuff to signifying useless online messages is an intriguing one, and is expounded by Crystal (2001: 53–54): 'The origin of the term lies in a 1970 *Monty Python* sketch in which a cafe waitress describes the available dishes to two customers, and culinary variation is introduced by an increasing reliance on spam … the whole interchange being accompanied, as one would expect, by the chanting of the same word from a passing group of Vikings.' This explanation does not originate with Crystal; it was, in fact, espoused on Usenet in 1990, along with the earliest attestation of *spam* as a verb: a user in rec.games.mud described the *Monty Python* sketch and finished, 'The verb "to spam" would be to send lots and lots of useless information (in particular, the word "spam") over and over to someone, thus scrolling their screen with lots and lots of lines of "spam spam spam spam spam spam" etc.' Here, the user's account differs from that of Crystal, who goes on to assert that *spam* 'was first applied to cases where a single message would be sent to many recipients, as when a company sends out an ad to everyone on a mailing list', before it came to be applied to harassing a single user with many messages.

The *Monty Python* explanation may at first seem too fanciful to be anything more than a product of folk etymology, but knowledge of the Spam sketch on Usenet certainly goes back to at least 1984, when a user quoted (without attribution) the lyrics of the Vikings' song in his signature: '"Spam, spam, spam, spam; ¶ Spam, spam, spam, spam; ¶ Lovely spam, wonderful

spam…”’ The trick of printing the word *spam* repeatedly across someone’s screen had been tried by 1984, when a post was made in net.misc that presented a collection of witty command-line interface prompts submitted by programmers. One submitter explained that he had programmed his interface so that, when a user typed in a command, the program would return one of a number of messages at random, one of which was ‘Spam, SPam, SPAm, SPAM’. The stunt was also carried out on Usenet; in 1995, for instance, a user in bit.listserv.fnord-l wrote the message ‘Spam spam spam spam spam spam spam spam ¶ Spam spam spam spam spam spam spam spam ¶ SPAMMITY SPAM SPAMMITY SPAM!’ 249 times. (On a side note, the user was posting from an AOL account, so perhaps the bad reputation of the service provider exhibited in §6.4.6 was not unfounded.)

As one might expect of a word derived from a brand name, *spam* was a noun before it became a verb. The earliest attested usage of the word in the slangy sense—though still capitalized like the trademark—is from 1987, when a user posted a message to comp.sys.amiga that went off on a tangent halfway through; he cautioned his readers at the beginning, ‘This article contains a *little* bit of Spam. :-)’ At least one reader detected an allusion, as his only response to the forewarning was, ‘Dirty Vikings!’ This usage demonstrates that *spam* needn’t indicate ‘*a lot of* worthless content’; any amount will do. Likewise, *spamming* someone doesn’t have to be an excessive act, as is attested by a post from 1993 in rec.games.frp.cyber. One user quoted a post made by another user named Perkins and went on to write why he disagreed with it; he also changed the tag at the top of the quotation, which would normally read ‘Perkins wrote:’, to read ‘Perkins spammed:’. Perkins’s post extended over only a few lines, and so his respondent is unlikely to have been objecting to its length; rather, substituting ‘spammed:’ for ‘wrote:’ conveys the respondent’s disdain for Perkins’s opinion by insinuating that it is without any value. The adjective *spammy* was coined from the noun earlier that same year, when a user named Kris ended a post with ‘Kris ¶ (hooray! No spammy sig!!)’. As none of Kris’s earlier posts was signed with anything more than his name, his comment appears to be a jibe at other members who ended their posts with lengthy signatures that coupled their names with quotations, jokes, contact details, and whimsical disclaimers; indeed, the post just above his concluded with a signature that spanned eleven lines. The implication is that one’s name alone is a sufficient valediction; anything beyond that is a pointless postscript.

7.3 *Smurf*

Smurf designates 'an alternative account created by an established user for some ulterior purpose'. How this rather sinister slang word developed from the trademarked name for a race of peaceable blue creatures standing three apples high is not immediately obvious. It is possible that the word passed into the Internet discussion group lexis through the argot of money laundering. As strange as this may seem, criminal argots are a long-established source of slang words, and have produced such familiar items as *frisk* and *heist* (McMillan, 1978:146). For money launderers, a *smurf* is an accomplice operating under an assumed name; Richards (1999: 156) explains, 'Typically, a mid- to high-level launderer will set up a number of smurfs with identification, a place to live, an identity (often as a student), and a bank account … At some point, the smurf will receive a huge infusion of money into his or her account [and] will then direct that some, or perhaps even all, of it be routed on to the next smurf…' The argot word's pejoration from the trademark is perhaps an ironic association of the innocence of Smurfs with the feigned legitimacy of the launderers. Knowledge of the criminal term had entered mainstream US society by 1985, when the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article about a man who had testified before a congressional committee about his doings as a *smurf* (Koziol, 1985). The first time the practice was alluded to on Usenet was in March 1997, when a user posted a report on money laundering that made mention of '"smurfs" who recycle … bank accounts'.

Some months after that, the criminal *smurf's* assumption of a false identity seems to have been the inspiration behind the name of a hacking program, smurf.c. The program allowed its users to impersonate Internet Protocol addresses belonging to other people and use them to send countless packets of data through a network, flooding it (Chirillo, 2001: 550). The program was first referred to on Usenet in October 1997, when a poster in demon.service who was explaining the difficulties of tracking down pernicious Internet users wrote, 'Then somebody came up with a program called smurf […] It broadcasts an ICMP ping at whole networks, so all the hosts on that network reply. Only it broadcasts the ping with a forged IP address (guess whose).' By the following year, *smurf* had entered computer jargon: the act of deploying the hacking program became known as *smurfing*, and an instance of its deployment was called a *smurf*.

From jargon, the word entered the slang of the online gaming community (whose impact on Internet discussion group slang is discussed in detail in Chapter 9). In the context of video

games, *smurf* became a verb meaning ‘to play using an alternative account’. The earliest attestation of this sense is from 1999, when a poster in alt.games.starcraft railed against another player of *Starcraft* who kept calling him a cheater before disconnecting from the game just before he was defeated, thereby avoiding being recorded as having lost the match on Battle.net (see §6.2.3). The poster decided to engage his cowardly opponent using an alternative account to avoid recognition, vowing, ‘from now on I am gonna smurf and beat the shit out of him whenever he plays....’ Later that year, *smurf* had shifted to a noun meaning ‘an alternative account in a video game’: a user in rec.games.computer.ultimate.online complained that after he had got into a fight with some other players, an in-game moderator had unfairly taken their side. A second user suggested that the moderator may secretly have been ‘one of [the players in question] or one of their friend’s smurf char […] They usually log on their smurf, tlak [sic] lots of shit and hope to scare you.’

Smurf was then borrowed back from the gaming community into the general slang of the discussion groups in the compound *smurf account*, ‘an alternative account in a newsgroup or on a web forum’. Despite its altered form and denotation, it retained the same negative connotation it had had among gamers. Evidently, there was still an echo of the malicious hacking program about it, as the earliest attestation of *smurf account* refers specifically to an alternative account that someone was using to pose as another user, just as smurf.c disguised the sender of the attacks using another person’s IP address. The attestation comes from 2003 (excerpted below), when a user claimed that he was posting from his genuine account but that somebody else had been impersonating him. He later posted another message reaffirming the legitimacy of his account, but appears to have inadvertently sent it from a *second* account, exposing himself as a fraud.

> **Mike Hirtes:** It is my solemn Duty to announce that someone has been thieving my identity.
>
> **Mulciber:** Yes, very droll, Dave.
>
> **Dave:** I don’t know what you are talking about I’m sure. I AM the real Mike Hirtes and nothing you can say will change that.
>
> **Phoenix-D:** Might help if you remember to change back to your smurf account, hmm? :P

It must be stressed that *smurf account* does not always signify an account masquerading as an already existing user. Indeed, this would be technically impossible on a web forum, where any given username, once registered, cannot be registered again. A *smurf account* may present a novel identity in a discussion group; the caveat is that it is nevertheless a false one, created by an established user who wishes to behave in such a way that would somehow be inappropriate coming from his or her primary account. This is illustrated by an incident in the Final Fantasy XI section of the ZAM Forums in 2004, when one user started insulting another without apparent provocation, and the latter replied, 'why should i post a serious response to you? it's obvious i probably posted something to piss you off somewhere so you made a smurf account and are now flaming me.' In this case, the motivation for creating a *smurf account* would be the chance to harass an enemy incognito, without the threat of one's actual account getting banned for it.

7.4 *Nerf*

In the lexis of Internet discussion groups, *nerf* means 'to weaken'. It is ultimately derived from Nerf, the name of a brand of sport equipment and toy weapons. The brand has been known on Usenet since at least 1983, when a user in net.rec.disc asked, 'Has anyone tried the new Nerf Boomarang (the three-armed one)?' Nerf is perhaps best known for its guns, which shoot foam darts rather than real bullets; the comparative flimsiness of the weapons became the basis for the trademark's allusive adoption into the slang of the online community of video game players, particularly players of *Ultima Online*. Gamers use *nerf* to describe instances when game developers have lessened the power of one of their characters, weapons, or abilities, turning them from formidable to harmless. (This is, of course, subjective; what the players see as unwelcome *nerfing*, the developers likely see as a necessary levelling of the playing field.) *Nerf* first occurred with this sense as an attributive noun, still capitalized to indicate the reference to the brand name, in February 1998, when a user in rec.games.computer.ultima.online observed that his character had been reduced to a 'durable, accurate Nerf Viking' as a result of 'the latest patch' or update to *Ultima Online*. Soon afterwards, another poster in the same newsgroup claimed that swordsmen were 'worthless until the next patch gets rid of nerf weapons'. *Nerf* was then shifted to a verb meaning 'to weaken (an in-game character, weapon or ability)'. It first occurred as a past participle on July 1998: a user posted that he was considering renewing his *Ultima Online* account, but first he wanted to know the answer to: 'Are the melee weapons more balanced now or are

they still "nerfed"?' The following month, a poste demanded that the game 'Stop NERFING the friggin damages and UP the defensive measures'.

Like *smurf*, *nerf* was borrowed from the gaming community into general discussion group slang; there, its sense broadened to 'to weaken or undermine in any way'. Its earliest attestation is from 1999, when a user in alt.multimedia.director wrote that her clients were having trouble connecting to the Internet and she suspected that a firewall was 'nerfing the process'. Shortly afterwards in alt.internet.access, a poster wrote that programs aimed at increasing the speed of an Internet connection were 'a waste of time, except for the people that have totally nerfed their systems' settings'. However, the application of *nerf* in discussion groups is not restricted to online connectivity problems. For instance, in 2005, a poster on the Chamber of Secrets Forums wrote that when Harry Potter's mother died to save him, 'the strength of the charm nerfed any ability of his to be a horcrux [a vessel of dark magic]'. In a similar vein, a user on the Fanfiction Forum wrote in 2012 that Superman would defeat Batman in a fight if the former 'wasn't being held back by other factors that nerf him down'. In its development from the trademark to this point, *nerf* has been abstracted from signifying a type of material object to an inchoative process, and a pejoratively regarded one at that: the fun of the toy has given way to the failure of something or someone else.

7.5 *Twink*

The last of the words to be discussed in this chapter, *twink*, is an insult meaning 'an obnoxious individual'. Unlike the folk etymology of *flame* (see §6.1.2), the origin of *twink* actually does lie within the lexis of American slang words associated with homosexual men, in which *twink* denotes 'an effete young man'. Its earliest attestation is from 1963, when Dundes and Schonhorn recorded that the word was found in the language of (heterosexual) students at the University of Kansas (p. 171). Since then, the word has been adopted into the slang of gay men themselves (Hennen, 2005: 33). Although *twink* appears to be a clipping from *twinkie*, the *OED* notes that the latter word is only attested from the 1980s, and suggests that it is in fact a suffixed form of *twink*, which is 'of uncertain origin'. Nevertheless, whatever the true origins of the words are, both *twink* and *twinkie* are popularly associated with Twinkie, an American brand of snack cakes founded in 1930—and, as Adams (2009: 11) observes, 'the People's use has considerable authority' when it comes to slang, and can 'change the course of lexical history'. Whatever the latter's origins, the Twinkie brand has allusively influenced the slang word; to quote a post made to alt.suicide.holiday in 2003, a

man who is a *twinkie*, like a Twinkie cake, is ‘tasty and cream filled, but having absolutly no nutritional value’; in other words, as the post goes on, ‘young, shallow and cute’.

The word’s use online goes back considerably further than that, though. It first occurred in the newsgroup net.motss in 1985, when a poster quoted from an article published in the gay-oriented magazine *Christopher Street*: ‘{Gay} bars are often regarded by Rs [masculine gay men] as the bastions of self-segregated Qs [feminine gay men] - branded as twinkie bars, leather bars, etc. - and so may be viewed with distaste….’ The shorter (though not necessarily shortened) form *twink* is first recorded in the same sense in 1990, when a poster in soc.singles wrote, ‘Of course there is such a thing as homosexual culture […] (one may of course deplore such manefestations [sic] as leather bars, cruising, and twinks)’.

Although the denotation of *twink* in these posts is fairly innocuous, there is a markedly derisive connotation to the word—it is, as one user put it in 1996, ‘the male homosexual equivalent of “bimbo”’—and it is this connotation that was picked up and intensified when *twink* entered Internet discussion group slang. Newsgroups and web forums are, of course, replete with the usual homosexual slurs encountered in informal discourse in the offline world (*fag*, *faggot*, *queer*, *homo*, and so on); but, as was discussed in §2.2, the difference between the two realms is that the traits that so frequently decide who belongs to a particular community of slang users offline, such as sexual orientation, are often indeterminate online, where people are thrown into a socio-cultural melting pot. Many Internet users who have no interaction with openly homosexual people in physical reality may find themselves rubbing shoulders with gay men and women in virtual reality, easing the way for cross-pollination between different linguistic varieties.

Twink is presumably a product of this process, passing from heterosexual American college slang into the language of gay men, who then brought it to Usenet, where it was readopted by the larger heterosexual community. Perhaps users took a particularly shine to *twink* because it was doubly stigmatized, denoting not only a homosexual, but the sort of homosexual who is derided by other homosexuals. In any event, the first recorded use of *twink* as an outright pejorative directed against people regardless of their sexuality comes from 1988, when a user in comp.org.fidonet posted a story in which the protagonist, who belonged to a mailing list, said of his inflammatory peers, ‘You mean I should just ignore these twinks?!’ The following

year offers the first instance of *twink* being abusively directed by a writer against her addressee, when two users were bickering in alt.flame (excerpted below).

> **SXM101:** I find certain people "irritating" too, Mz. Holt. But I don't tell them not to post anymore. Is this sinking in yet?
>
> **Diane Holt:** Oh, yes, definitely. Sunk right in. Airhead.
>
> Read the "But I don't tell them…" sentence, twink. Read it several times.

The dim view taken of *twinks* is evinced by a list of jargon and slang posted in alt.folklore.computers in 1990, in which *twink* was defined as a synonym for a *read-only user*; that is, someone 'who uses computers almost exclusively for reading USENET, bulletin boards and email, as opposed to writing code or purveying useful information'. Although this definition as it stands is not borne out by the data, in which those accused of being *twinks* have taken part in discussions, the sentiment is nevertheless the same—a writer who accuses someone of being a *twink* no doubt wishes he or she *hadn't* taken part in the conversation, as the information purveyed in his or her posts is not, from the accuser's perspective, useful.

As the years have passed, *twink* has become particularly associated with the slang of video game players, in which it signifies 'a novice player, or a player who behaves amateurishly', quite similar to *n00b* (see §6.4.3). The earliest attestation of this sense is from 1995, when the following exchange occurred in alt.games.netrek.paradise.

> **Steve Sheldon:** [I] Usually just go around bombing resources, planets, shooting twinks.
>
> **David Putzolu:** Sure, pick on recruits only and it is easy to get lots of kills. What's to brag about?

With *twink's* passage into the lexis of Internet discussion groups, its pejorative connotation has intensified to the point of eclipsing its original denotation, leaving the word semantically bleached—as is the case, I would argue, with most insults. Allan (2009: 857–858) observes, for instance, that when *dog* is applied abusively (as in the phrase *you dog!*), 'the content meaning "canine" has been lost or at least demoted, and what is salient is the evaluative, insulting meaning of the construction'. Likewise, when someone is called an *asshole*, a *dick*, or a *twat*, it is unlikely that the speaker really believes the referent has any resemblance to a

part of the human anatomy. Rather, the derivation of the insults from their original denotations involves a sort of extreme metaphorical adaptation, where no trace of the original meaning remains save its perceived negative qualities, which are distilled and concentrated. It goes without saying that it is a process of radical subjectification: an insult is only applicable to someone insofar as the speaker or writer believes it to be applicable.

8 ONOMATOPOEIC SLANG

Sornig (1981: 26) writes that 'one of the oldest and commonest ways to insinuate meaning is the language-external device of simulating a similarity between sounds in reality and linguistic sound production, i.e. the imitation of referential, auditive sensation by articulatory realizations'—in other words, onomatopoeia. Of course, in Internet discussion groups, the realizations are orthographic rather than vocally articulated, but onomatopoeia is still a productive source of online slang, just as it is in offline slang—Mattiello (2008: 41) observes that it acts as an invigorating force on slang, producing, for instance, such spirited synonyms for *vomit* as *barf*, *bolk*, *puke*, and *ralph*. As one might expect from a community whose primary purpose is communication, most of the onomatopoeic words that have been adopted into the discussion group lexis appear to be transcriptions of non-linguistic vocal articulations, such as *gah* as an expression of frustration, *meh* as an expression of apathy, and *haha* as a transcription of laughter. These words have remained strictly interjectional, exhibiting no change in meaning. However, a handful of onomatopoeic words have undergone categorical shifts, and thus also the semantic changes entailed by the shifts. Three such words are examined in this chapter: *woot*, *fap*, and *squee*.

8.1 *Woot*

Woot is a transcription of an exclamation of delight. At first glance, it may appear to be a purposeful misspelling of *wooh*, derived from an originally accidental typographical error due to the proximity of the *H* and *T* keys on a QWERTY keyboard. (See §6.4 for an extended treatment of deliberate misspellings in Internet discussion groups.) *Wooh* certainly predates *woot* on Usenet: its earliest attestation is from 1989, when one user in news.admin wrote to another, 'Come over to the dark side of the net and feel the POWER! […] WOOH HAA!' Indeed, the meaning of the two interjections appears to be identical.

However, Keats (2011: 121) claims that *woot* is in truth derived from the hook of a hip hop song released in 1993, 'Whoot, There It Is' by 95 South—one of only two instances in this study of African-American culture being drawn on as a source of discussion group slang, despite its far-reaching impact on general American slang in the twentieth century (see the introduction to Chapter 6 and §9.3). The archives of Usenet support Keats's claim: the first reference to the song in the newsgroups is from June 1993, when a user in alt.rap wrote of the Miami style of hip hop, 'I honestly can't stand it -- Daisy Duks, Whoot there it is, Doo-Doo

Brown.' Three months later, *whoot* was misspelled as *woot* (apparently inadvertently) when a poster used the song's hook as an exclamation of glee in comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.flight-sim: he wrote about his excitement about the impending release of the video game *Age of Empires* and finished, 'Woot there it is!' The phrase was used again with the same sense and spelling in January 1994, when a user in alt.fan.rush-limbaugh gloated that Ronald Reagan had been surpassed by Bill Clinton in the United States approval polls. By October of that year, *woot* had been extracted from the rest of the phrase and occurred alone: a user posted a topic in rec.games.deckmaster.marketplace entitled 'Woot! I got 'da Land!'

In spite of this electronic paper trail, the etymology of *woot* is very much in dispute among the people who use the word. Keats (2011: 120) notes that it has been posited to be a blend of *wow, loot!* from the language of tabletop gamers, a misspelling of *root* ('a system administrator's account') in the jargon of hacking, or an acronym of *we owned the other team* in the slang of video game players. And there are yet more proposed origins: for instance, a poster in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums remarked in 2004, 'btw, i think "Woot" comes from "Wonderful Loot" ahaha.. at least, i think thats what I was told.' Keats (2011: 123–124) stresses the fact that even though these folk etymologies are spurious, they nevertheless allow *woot* to 'resonate' with different online communities—hackers, tabletop and video game players, and so on—in ways that mainstream words like *hurrah*, *yippee* and *yay* cannot. Using a slang word like *woot* is a way of expressing a particular group identity, and so it is small wonder that members of the group in question would like the origins of the word to reflect that identity as well. It is worth noting that *woot* is frequently also spelled *w00t* in accordance with Leet orthography, although it seems to have escaped the pejoration so often attached to Leet-spelled words (see §6.4). *W00t* dates back to 1996, when a user in soc.singles expressed his enthusiastic agreement with another user's views on romance by posting, 'w00t w00t w00t w00t!! (hacker speak there :)'.

More recently, *woot* has been shifted to a verb meaning 'to write or say *woot*; to crow with delight'. The verb's earliest attestation is from 2001, as a present participle in the *EverQuest* section of the ZAM Forums, where a user posted, 'Also Im still WOOTing when I won the [dice] roll on the Tunic'. The past participle occurred a year later on the same forum, when a user reported how he had defeated an antagonist in the game and then 'looted the head and crate and Wooted to everyone that would listen.' Since 2002, the gerund *wooting* has also been used as a noun meaning 'the act of crowing with delight', as demonstrated by a thread in

alt.ozdebate in which some users were expressing their enthusiasm about being the most prolific posters in the newsgroup, and another user replied, ‘I wish you guys would stop all that w00ting. ¶ It’s indecent.’

8.2 *Fap*

Fap is a representation of the sound of male masturbation in discussion group slang. (It is also a verb in Internet jargon meaning ‘to throttle a user’s bandwidth’, but it is likely the latter is derived from an acronym of *Fair Access Policy*—the technical name for the implementation of a bandwidth cap—and the two words are unrelated.) The onomatopoeic word seems to have been borrowed from the lexicon of *hentai*, a genre of pornographic comics, in which *fap* is a sound effect alongside more conventional items like *zap*, *pow*, and *bang*. It is unclear when the word was first used in the genre, but in 2001 users in the newsgroup alt.games.final-fantasy.hentai suggested that *fap* was popularized by the *hentai* webcomic *Thin H Line*. Although online folk etymologies must usually be taken with a grain of salt, there may be some truth to the users’ proposal. The archive of *Thin H Line* reveals that *fap* had been in use in the comic since April 1999 (ClayComix, 1999), while the earliest occurrence of the word on Usenet was in August 2000: a user in alt.fan.jennifer-love-hewitt reacted to some uploaded content featuring the actress by posting, ‘sweet…mother..of..god… ¶ fap fap fap’.

By January 2001, *fap* had shifted to a verb meaning ‘to masturbate’. It first occurred as a present participle in alt.tasteless, where a user posted a local news article entitled ‘Flasher the Clown’s act banned for being too risque’ and added, ‘Oooooo, I’ve got you now. Start fap, fap, fapping…’ The past participle is attested from four months later, when a poster in alt.music.mdfmk wrote of someone who had died in a car accident, ‘I fapped to her autopsy pictures. Well, not really, but you sick fucks probably would.’ An adjective was derived from the verb the same year: *fappable* or *fapable*, signifying ‘sexually appealing or desirable’. Its earliest attestation is from alt.tasteless, where there was a thread dedicated to necrophilia: one user posted a link to a website featuring pictures of executions, and another user replied, ‘Very fappable.’

Mercifully, when use of the adjective spread beyond the confines of alt.tasteless, its meaning broadened to ‘appealing or desirable’ in general, not strictly in an erotic context. This is demonstrated by a post made to rec.music.phish in 2004: a user wrote of his new Fender

Bassman amplifier, ‘i know [the earlier model] is more fappable, but for $300, what can you say…’ A more recent example of its broadened meaning comes from the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums, where in 2009 a poster wrote that he had acquired a skill-enhancing belt from a monster he’d defeated, and another poster asked, ‘Mind sharing where [the monster] spawns? That belt is fapable.’ Naturally, with the derivation of the adjective from the verb came a greater degree of subjectivity, as the sense shifted from a straightforward physical act to a value judgement about a person or thing made by the writer—exactly what counts as desirable, whether sexually or otherwise, clearly lies in the eye of the beholder.

8.3 *Squee*

Squee represents an inarticulate exclamation of excitement. It is apparently meant to resemble the excited squealing of a pig; as one might expect, the comparison was not always a flattering one, particularly in the word’s early usages. *Squee* first occurred on Usenet in 1989, when one user in alt.flame wrote a sarcastic post criticizing another, and a third user replied by quoting the post and replacing most of its content with ‘“squee squee squee”’, suggesting that it was nothing more than agitated, mindless squeaking. Since then, the word has become particularly associated with *fanboys* and *fangirls* (§6.1.6), and specifically represents an exclamation of *delighted* excitement. The word seems to have gained this association by 1995, when a user in rec.arts.sf.fandom posted an advertisement for a fanzine named *SQUEE!*—although no explanation of the title is given, it is presumably a reference to the contributors’ enthusiasm for science fiction. The allusion to a pig’s squealing was first explicitly invoked in April 1996, when a user in rec.arts.anime.misc grumbled that the *anime* series *Gunbuster* deserved to be more widely lauded, but it didn’t ‘make the fanboy grade’ because it wasn’t as gratuitous as other series like *Ranma ½*. He concluded that *Gunbuster* was like casting ‘[p]earls before swine’, and a fan of *Ranma* drily replied, ‘“Squee. Squeee! SQUEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!” […] although Gunbuster is still great, we would wish you to refain from calling Ranma 1/2 “boring.”’

Perhaps the earliest use of *squee* where it is unambiguously an exclamation of delight is from July 1996, when a poster in alt.gothic.fashion offered to meet up with other members of the newsgroup and style their hair like the Bride of Frankenstein’s before they went out clubbing together, and another poster replied, ‘squee! three chairs [cheers] for horrorshow hair!’ *Squee* soon followed in the footsteps of *woot* and *fap* and shifted to a verb signifying ‘to make

inarticulate noises of excitement'. The verb's first occurrence in 1998 also comes from alt.gothic.fashion: a user wrote of seeing a child-sized pair of Dr Martens shoes, 'I didn't look at the prices of the baby Docs, because I was probably too busy squeeing over them.' A year later, another user in the newsgroup wrote that she had found some pink plastic handcuffs 'at the supermarket for $1.50 and squeed'. *Squee* was later used to derive the adjective *squeeable* in 2004; it means 'worthy of being squeed over', if only in the estimation of the writer. Its earliest attestation is from alt.fan.hanson, where a poster wrote that she enjoyed watching *Law & Order* because it was 'entertaining and squeeable'. As with that of *fappable*, the derivation of *squeeable* entailed subjectification: while one person may objectively observe that another is squealing with delight over something, whether that something is worthy of the *squeeing* may be subject to debate.

9 Slang Derived from the Online Gaming Community

Perhaps no variety of English other than the standard form has had so enormous an impact on the online lexis as the language of computer and tabletop game players. The games themselves may be played in actual or virtual reality, but the communities that have grown up around them have their roots planted on the Internet—in chat rooms, voice-over-Internet services, and instant messengers, as well as discussion groups—and there they have yielded a bounty of slang and jargon words that have been picked up and absorbed into the language of newsgroups and web forums at large. The fact that Internet discussion group slang has borrowed from gaming jargon as well as gaming slang is not unusual: Eble (1996: 19) observes that '[s]ometimes words that start out as jargon for a particular group become slang for a wider group', and gives the example of *gig*, a word for 'job' in the jargon of musicians that has spread to general English slang.

It is often not apparent whether a particular item from the gaming lexicon should be classed as jargon or slang. Adams (2011: 261–262) avers that '[w]hether what gamers say in the course of gaming is jargon or slang depends on whether the word or phrase in question serves primarily social purposes or is focused on the "work" of playing the game', but he admits that the distinction is not always clear-cut. In §2.2, I suggested that slang is distinguishable from jargon in that it is not bound by formal constraints within its group of speakers or writers; for instance, an office worker may speak slangily to his or her colleagues around the water cooler, but drop the slang from his or her speech in favour of jargon when speaking in a business meeting. Offline communities frequently distinguish between formal and informal contexts such as these, which makes differentiating their jargon and slang relatively straightforward. But online games have only one context: the match at hand, participated in by gamers who are playing for fun but nevertheless also mean business. They blend sociability with strategy, slinging slang and barking jargon at each other in the same breath, and the two linguistic varieties may become so entwined as to be difficult, if not impossible, to unknot. This is borne out by the terms that will be dealt with in this chapter. Some of them are decidedly derived from slang, like *griefer*, which initially denoted a player whose behaviour is insufferable. Other words are just as clearly from jargon, like *necro*, which described an in-game character class. However, there are yet other words that straddle the line between the social and professional, like *gank*, which signifies a certain style of playing but does so with a degree of social stigma that nudges it from jargon towards slang. Lastly,

some words may be either jargon or slang within the same lexis, depending on how they are applied: *fail*, for instance, started out as a noun describing (among other things) a low score on a dice throw, but gamers later attributed to it the slangy, generalized meaning ‘failure’.

Whether they are jargon or slang, gaming words filter into the conversations of discussion groups in much the same way as sporting terms have been appropriated into the general idiom of English, whether or not speakers and writers are aware of it. For instance, a person need never have played a game of baseball or so much as watched one to utter a sentence like *She threw me a curveball* or *They’re in the big league*; if pressed to explain what he or she means, the person might not even be aware that these expressions originated on the baseball field. He or she may be equally unaware of the connection between *stymie* and the golfing green, or *lightweight* and the boxing ring; and doubtless a similar look of bafflement might be elicited if a non-gaming discussion group user were asked about the origins of *ninja* or *fail*, though he or she may have used the words many times.

The spread of terms from online gaming communities out to Internet discussion groups in general bears some resemblance to the borrowing model of dialectology, in which linguistic (in this case, lexical) innovations spread outwards from a focal area into the surrounding transition zone (Trudgill, 2003: 136). The chief difference is that varieties on the Internet are not geographically bound like those of the offline world; a user may pass from one online group to another in an instant, and participate in several groups simultaneously, while a speaker in the physical world is largely restricted to interacting with the same speech community day after day. The natural consequence of this is that the spread of innovations on the Internet seems to be not nearly as gradual as it is in other realms of communication; and, unimpeded by geographical obstacles, the innovations tend to be far-reaching rather than localized, which goes some way to account for the remarkable homogeneity of slang across disparate newsgroups and web forums.

There are, I would argue, three levels involved in the dissemination of gaming language, two of which are of significance to this study. The first level is the *intra-ludic*, which constitutes the use of gaming language by players while actually playing the games, through chat channels and voice-over-Internet services. In-game conversations are necessarily abrupt and ephemeral, and public records of them are not available, so we shall not concern ourselves with them here.

The second level is the *meta-ludic*, which constitutes the use of gaming language by players to discuss the games while not actually playing them—while 'off the field', in other words. These discussions may be carried out through any number of media, but we shall restrict ourselves to the newsgroups and web forums dedicated to gaming. Instances of semantic change occur on this level, when a slang or jargon word is shifted from signifying something within the gaming experience to signifying something within the discussion group experience.

The third level is the *extra-ludic*, which constitutes the use of the semantically changed words by people in discussion groups which are not dedicated to gaming, and in which the original senses of the words may be unknown. Presumably, users who belong to gaming groups carry the words to the larger discussion group community, where they are picked up by users who do not play the games. Although semantic change tends to spread from the meta-ludic level to the extra-ludic, there are occasions on which words from general discussion group slang have been adopted into the language of gamers and had their meanings shifted to gaming-specific entities and phenomena. For instance, in §7.5, we saw that the meaning of *twink* has changed from the extra-ludic 'an obnoxious individual' to the meta-ludic 'a novice player'. Of course, whether words like *twink* then pass from gaming discussion groups to conversation within the games themselves (the intra-ludic level) is beyond the scope of this study, and we shall content ourselves with instances of semantic change from the meta-ludic level to the extra-ludic. I have found seven such instances, all of which are presented in this chapter: *necro*, *ninja*, *gank*, *camp*, *fail*, *epic*, and *griefer*.

9.1 *Necro*

Necro is a verb meaning 'to post to a long-inactive thread', with a decidedly negative connotation. *Necro* first occurred as a noun clipped from *necromancer* in discussion groups devoted to online games featuring necromancers as characters, such as *EverQuest*, *Morrowind*, and *Final Fantasy XI*. The Standard English meaning of *necromancer* is 'someone who divines the future by communicating with the dead', but in these games, the meaning has shifted to 'sorcerer who raises the dead'. The earliest attestation I have found of the clipped form *necro* comes from 2000 in the *EverQuest* section of the ZAM Forums: a user arguing about the class of an antagonist in the game wrote, 'This guy is a wizard not a necro.' The word's association with the raising of something dead was adapted

metaphorically and pejoratively on online forums as a jocular denigration of posters who ‘resurrect’ topics that have long since ‘died’, and whose original posters might not even be active on the forums any more. The verb itself could have arisen in two ways: it has either undergone a categorical shift from the clipped noun *necro*, or it is itself a clipping of the verb *necromance*, which is a back formation from *necromancer*. The latter seems more likely: although categorical shifts are common in slang, so are noun-to-verb back formations (Mattiello, 2008: 129), and the past participle *necromanced* is attested slightly earlier than the clipped form *necro’d*. It occurred in the *Morrowind* section of the Nexus Forums in March 2004, in reference to someone posting to a thread that had been inactive for five months (excerpted below).

> **Hyperk1:** by the way, admins, hasn’t this thread been hijacked?
> **Peregrine:** Not only hijacked but necromanced.

The clipped form *necro’d* occurred in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums two months later, when a user posted to a thread that had been revived after two months of inactivity, ‘Wow, majorly necro’d thread’. The word’s shortening to its initial two syllables is not wholly unexpected: recall Mattiello’s (2008: 141) claim that clipping is used to differentiate outsiders from ‘special private groups’ for whom ‘an allusion is sufficient to indicate the whole’. Although public forums do not lend themselves to ‘private groups’, clipping may still be sufficiently esoteric to distinguish experienced forum users from beginners—who are, after all, the users most likely to commit an act of *necromancing*. The word has since spread to discussion groups with no connection to games featuring necromancers, in much the same way that words like *curveball* are used by people who have no knowledge of baseball. For example, in 2006, a user on the *EVE-Online* Forums posted, ‘Gah, didn’t realise that was necro’d,’ in a topic that had been resurrected after three years.

The development of the word fits in with Traugott’s tendencies (1989: 34–35). It has shifted from a meaning based in the external described situation, ‘someone who communicates with the dead’, to a meaning based in the metalinguistic situation, an accusation that another writer has inappropriately resumed an old topic of conversation. Furthermore, *necroing* is subjective: while one user may think that it is acceptable to post to a thread that has been dormant for a month, or two, or twelve, another may not, and so precisely what counts as *necroing* depends on the writer’s viewpoint.

9.2 *Ninja*

Ninja is a verb meaning ‘to make a post in a thread just before somebody else does, in a manner that renders the second post redundant (because the two posts contain the same information) or irrelevant (because the first post somehow negates the second post)’—in other words, posting with the swiftness of a ninja. The association of *ninja* with alacrity goes back on Usenet to at least 1993, when one user in alt.fan.warlord offered to edit another user’s cumbersome signature ‘with NINJA speed’; over the next decade, the phrase was applied to cats, programming code, Pentium microprocessors, and table football.

As with *necro*, *ninja* may have been particularly popularized in the gaming community by its presence as a character class in games like the *Final Fantasy* series, although its use was not limited to groups devoted to games featuring ninja. Also like *necro*, *ninja* underwent pejoration—except the change seems to have occurred on the intra-ludic level rather than in the discussion groups. It came to refer to an in-game practice that was looked down upon: to *ninja loot*, a compound verb signifying ‘to pick up an item dropped by a defeated antagonist before the player who actually defeated the antagonist has a chance to’. The compound’s earliest occurrence on Usenet was in 1999, when a user in alt.games.everquest complained about the fact that ‘if a GM [game master] is killed in an event, “ninja looting” can happen since ANYONE can loot the corpse, not the person/party responsible for most damage. A 50th wizard looted my corpse and got ALL the [armour], then said he didn’t find anything.’ Soon, *ninja loot* had been clipped to just *ninja*; it occurred as a past participle in the same newsgroup in 2000, when two posters discussed the stigma attached to the practice (excerpted below).

> **John Henders:** A wizard on my old server […] has had the same kinds of problems since someone posted a screenshot of him ninja looting the Dracoliche
>
> **Alasdair Allan:** I dunno […] Bermen ninjaed a Cryosilk Robe ages back (one of only 7 or 8 on the server) and he has never had a problem getting groups afterwards.

Later, based on the larcenous quality of *ninjaing*, the word was adapted by posters who were gamers as a synonym for *hijack*, ‘to divert the discussion in a thread onto a subject other than that proposed by the topic’s poster’ (see §6.1.4). It could also be used as a noun meaning ‘an instance of hijacking’. Like that of *hijack*, the metaphorization of *ninja* shifted it from a

descriptor of a concrete (albeit virtual) act to a metalinguistic observation. Its new sense was subjective, but then so was the former one: a poster who was accused of *ninjaing* a thread might argue that he or she had expanded the conversation, not diverted it, while a gamer accused of *ninjaing* items from a fallen foe might believe that he or she had rightfully earned them. The earliest attested use of *ninja* in the metalinguistic sense is from 2002, when a topic poster in alt.games.everquest protested that his thread had been diverted, and another user replied, 'It's called thread hijacking/thread ninjaing. ¶ Welcome to usenet sir.'

With the decline of Usenet and the emergence of web forums, the meaning of *ninja* began to change further. It has in recent years still occasionally been used as a synonym for *hijack*, but instances of this appear to be rare and may cause confusion, as is evident in a discussion from the *World of Warcraft* section of the ZAM Forums in 2006 (excerpted below): one user diverted the topic of conversation in another user's thread, and was admonished for doing so.

> **Allegory:** Wow 4th post. Now that's a ninja if I ever saw one.
> **Gomek:** Ninja? I don't get it…
> **Allegory:** Ninja'd the thread. You stole the thread from me by pulling it away from teh original topic.
> **Gomek:** I call that a "hijack", but I guess my lingo is different. =P

More prevalent in the current slang is *ninja* used in the sense provided at the beginning of this section: 'to make a post in a thread just before somebody else does'. The real-time posting offered by web forums allowed *ninja* to acquire this sense, which would not have been applicable in the delayed posting system of the newsgroups. This sense's earliest attestation is from 2004, when a user in the *EverQuest* section of the ZAM Forums posted a lengthy answer to a question and consequently found that someone else had submitted a reply while he had still been writing his. He then edited his post (excerpted below).

> **Bergil:** It's actually possible to Charm an Incredibly Tough mob?
> **defster:** Yep. It's not easy though. [One more sentence omitted.]
> **Stapr:** Yes, most IT mobs can be charmed. [Nine more sentences omitted.]
> EDIT: Ninja'd

As its current meaning has no associations with a type of behaviour in video games, *ninja* is not restricted to gaming forums. For example, in 2005, someone on the One Ring Forums jokingly asked where users thought the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* had gone to college. One user suggested that 'Gandalf graduated [sic] from Hogwarts with a Masters in Explosives Engineering', and another replied, 'Ninja'd! I was going to say Hogwarts just to be cheeky.'

The meaning of *ninja* has shifted from an originally external situation to a metalinguistic one—an observation that there has been a misstep in the conversational flow. It still suggests a theft, if only a metaphorical one: a poster who *ninjas* has 'stolen' the words right out of another poster's mouth. It also offers an unusual instance of amelioration in discussion group slang, inasmuch as it has lost the negative connotations of its earlier senses to become a neutral word. While stealing another player's loot and *hijacking* a topic are deliberate acts that deserve castigation, posting something in a thread just before somebody else does is unforeseeable, like when two people who are having a conversation start talking at the same time. As such, the poster is without blame, and it seems the word *ninja* is applied without shame. Thus, even more unusually, it has defied Traugott's (1989: 34–35) third tendency of semantic change by moving from subjectivity towards objectivity.

9.3 *Gank*

Before it entered the discussion group lexis, *gank* was gaming slang for 'to kill (a single player) using a group of players'. Urban Dictionary (2005, February 12) claims that it is a clipping of the compound *gang kill*, and indeed, that form is attested on Usenet from 1998, when a user in rec.games.computer.ultima.online wrote, 'You know what always bothered me about PK's [player-killers], it was the way in which they gang kill people.' It has also been spelled *gangkill*, which is first recorded in the same newsgroup and in the same year, when a user complained of the members of a certain in-game guild, 'They gangkill the players from [another guild].'

However, *gangkill* appears to be a product of folk etymology, as the shorter form *gank* predates it considerably in gaming slang. It is attested from 1992 in rec.games.moria, where a user reported that his character had died and he didn't know what had killed it. Another user suggested, 'It […] seems like you had a run-in with a magic user. A magic user can cast spells to blind, THEN can summon all sorts of real neat monsters to gank you.' The context

here indicates that the word does not describe a defeat by several antagonistic players, as the writer mentions only one, a magic user (who is aided by non-player monsters). It is not clear exactly what the writer intends to signify by *gank*, but it certainly isn't synonymous with *gang kill*.

In fact, before it was adopted by the gaming community, *gank* existed in the slang of hip hop—one of only two instances in this study of a word being derived from African-American culture, in spite of the culture's extensive influence on general American slang in the twentieth century (see the introduction to Chapter 6 and §8.1). Reid (2006: 378) identifies *gank* as hip hop slang and glosses it as 'to steal from or otherwise cause harm to', while Stern (2008: 69, 70) reports that students at an urban high school in Chicago defined it as 'to cheat or deceive'. Unfortunately, none of them offers a date for the origins of the word, but it appears to have been familiar to at least some posters on Usenet by 1990: there, the very earliest attestation of *gank* comes not from a gaming newsgroup but from rec.sports.basketball, where a user wrote of the chances of the Purdue basketball team making it to the finals, 'They may have been upset early in past years, but I think they've been "ganked" by the committee (getting sent to play LSU IN Baton Rouge when they were a 2 seed and LSU was a #14 !!!)' *Ganked* is a versatile word, and the writer could conceivably have meant that Purdue was being literally 'cheated', or figuratively 'stolen from' or even 'caused harm', by being matched up with a team not of its calibre in the lead-up to the finals.

Any one of these meanings, or all of them, could have been in the minds of gamers when they adopted the word into their own slang. For example, in 1996 a user in rec.arts.sf.starwars.games predicted of an upcoming *Star Wars* video game, 'If it works like I think it will, there will eventually be a group of people calling themselves badasses who fly Gunboats [and] hang at the jump-in point and gank the incoming.' *Gank* here obviously involves causing harm, but it also suggests cheating: after all, the point of the game is to destroy enemy players, but waiting around with superior artillery at the place where they first emerge in the game is hardly fair play.

Of course, ganging up on a single player is another form of cheating, and it appears that the similarity of *gank* to *gang* led to its being folk-etymologized as *gang kill* by gamers who were presumably unfamiliar with American hip hop slang—after all, the online gaming community was populated with users from numerous other countries. This spurious history apparently

influenced the narrowing of the word's sense from any sort of underhanded behaviour to a many-against-one attack. This is not astonishing: we have already seen other examples of how folk etymology 'can change the course of lexical history' (Adams, 2009: 11). The altered sense of *gank* is apparent from 1999, the year after *gang kill* is first recorded: a user in alt.games.ultima-online observed that players who killed other players were 'more often than not […] ganked on sight by groups of [other players]'.

From there, *gank* was metaphorically adapted in discussion group slang to mean 'to overwhelm (a poster or thread) with a group of posters'. The earliest attestation of this I have found is from 2005, when a user in the *World of Warcraft* section of the ZAM Forums complained that his posts kept getting voted down by other users, and someone responded, 'Earlier in the morning some WoW ppl went over to the FFXI [*Final Fantasy XI*] side and ganked a thread comparing the two [games], maybe they migrated over here to attack these forums.' *Gank* in this sense has spread beyond gaming forums; for example, in 2011, users on the One Ring Forums were reminiscing about a thread from 2008 in which the topic poster had protested that *The Lord of the Rings* was for men but the forums were filled with 'a bunch of women'. The poster had been summarily overwhelmed by replies from other posters criticizing his sexist attitude. Looking back on the incident, a user wrote, 'Heh, they ganked that noob. Total pwnage XD'

Gank has also given rise to the interjectional compound *postgank*, a jocular message posted on gaming forums (but seemingly not yet others) by which users express their distaste for another post by pretending to 'kill' it. When one user posts a *postgank* message, it acts as an incentive for other users to do the same, thus making it a many-against-one activity. The earliest attestation of this is from 2005 in the *World of Warcraft* section of the ZAM Forums, where a user posted a playful topic criticizing his fellow users and they waggishly ganged up on him and each other (excerpted below). The forward slashes, like parenthesizing a phrase in asterisks, indicate an imaginary action.

> **Loarake:** Don't those freaks-who-post-on-forums-while-at-work have something better to do than gank people 700 posts under them?
> **Tasia:** /postgank ¶ stfu n00b!!!11!11iiilovewow…
> **GreatBadger:** /postgank both of you…
> **Tyrandor:** /postgank badger

Lenonis: /postgank

The compound has abstracted *ganking* from a tangible act in video games to a metalinguistic comment in discussion groups. One cannot really *gank* an online message; as with *eyeroll*, *facepalm*, and *headdesk* (see §6.2.8), what is most salient about *postgank* is its connotation of the emotion underlying the speech act, the writer's animosity (genuine or feigned) towards the preceding utterance. Like many slang words, the purpose of *postgank* is not to describe but to judge.

9.4 *Camp*

The Standard English sense of the intransitive verb *camp*, 'to lodge for a time in a tent or other portable shelter', has been metaphorized in gaming slang to mean 'to spend time waiting in a certain place in the game to gain some kind of advantage'. This sense first occurred on Usenet in 1994 in alt.games.doom, where a poster discussing tactics to use against enemy players in *Doom* wrote, 'The most frequently used tactic is self-sacrifice […] You may also use this if your opponent is camping for you. Just kill yourself until you appear somewhere behind him.' In other words, if one's opponent has found a strategic location where he lies in wait for one to arrive, one can kill one's own character and hope that when it is automatically resurrected, it will be in a less vulnerable position. The advantageous nature of *camping* is made clearer by its use in alt.games.quake in 1996, when a user observed that it would be 'harder to discourage somebody from camping in quake than doom - as now not only can you camp behind a corner, but under water, and shoot the grenade launcher, or stand on a ramp and using the "look around" feature look down and wait for the "victim"'. *Camp* is also used as a transitive verb, as is demonstrated by a conversation from alt.games.everquest (excerpted below) in which a user wanted to know whether a certain pair of monsters was easy to find and kill, or if there were many other players waiting around at the place where the monsters resurrected to kill them as soon as they appeared.

Allan Kolenovsky: Can anyone out there tell me what levels the Maid and Butler in Mistmoore, are? Are they usually heavily camped […]?

Fomar: I've never camped them but my Ranger guild mate camped them solo at 50.

Eventually, the word's sense was broadened on gaming forums to refer to any situation in which one waits around for some kind of advantage, not just in a game. In 2004, a user on EverQuest Forums posted a mock job interview and another user replied, 'My daughter is back from university and is currently camping a job, so this made me laugh hard.' The implication is that the user's daughter was spending her time waiting for employment to turn up. However, *camp* is more commonly used on gaming forums to mean 'to wait around in a thread for other users to post in it, or to follow a specific user and wait for him or her to post', metaphorically adapted from its in-game sense. This meaning is also attested from 2004, when a poster in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums wrote regarding the reputation-rating system of the forums, 'There are many kinds of karma trolls, some camp one particular person, others just camp a certain thread, some just rate down anyone that just doesnt agree with them or has a differing view.' Since then, the verb has spread to forums devoted to other pursuits—as is demonstrated by a post from 2011 in the roleplaying section of the Giant in the Playground Forum. One user decided to initiate a roleplaying story (to which multiple users contribute passages, each pretending to be a character in the story). The user posted a topic that read, 'Hey cleitc! I'm camping the thread 'till you get here,' to indicate that he was waiting for another user, cleitc, to continue the story.

9.5 *Fail*

Fail, signifying 'anything unsuccessful, a failure', is perhaps one of the best known words from Internet slang, although its origins remain obscure. The Fall 2010 instalment of 'Among the New Words' (Carson: 356) hazards that it may be derived from the phrase 'You fail it', which appeared in the Japanese arcade game *Blazing Star* in 1998. It would not be the first time a dubiously-worded phrase has been adopted into the parlance of the Internet culture—see Lankshear and Knobel (2006: 221–223) for an account of the online popularity of 'All your base are belong to us', a phrase from the 1989 Japanese arcade game *Zero Wing*. However, it is not clear why 'You fail it' would have inspired the slangy *fail*; the choice of grammatical aspect may be odd, but the phrase nevertheless uses *fail* as a verb—just as it is employed in Standard English—whereas in the discussion group lexis, *fail* is a noun.

It is possible that the slang word was instead derived from the *fail* of programming jargon, where it is a noun signifying 'an instance of a program failing to run'. This sense is attested on Usenet from 1983, when a user in net.bugs.4bsd posted some changes he had made to the code of an e-mail program and added, 'After this fix, my test ran 10 times without a fail.'

Alternatively, the slang word may have been derived from the jargon of tabletop gaming, in which a *fail* is 'a throw of a die that is unsuccessful in preventing damage from being done to the thrower's character'. This sense is attested from 1985, when a user in net.games.frp explained of the effects of a spell in *Dungeons & Dragons*, 'The saving throw is standard but added to the roll is the victims level […] and subtracted from it is the [spell] casters level […] Remember that a 1 is always a fail and a 20 always a save regardless of level differences.' Although it has already been noted that programmers had a sizeable presence on Usenet, the gaming etymology seems more likely when one considers the regularity with which *fail* is collocated with *epic*, another item of discussion group slang that appears to have been influenced by tabletop gaming (see §9.6).

Online roleplaying games—some of which retained dice-rolling systems—are the descendants of *Dungeons & Dragons* and its ilk (Jakobsson, 2006: 211). One would expect some of the early video game players to have been tabletop game players, and to have brought their jargon with them to be absorbed into the nascent online community. Thus, the earliest recorded use of *fail* semantically broadened from 'an unsuccessful dice throw' to 'anything unsuccessful' comes from rec.games.computer.ultima.series, where in 1999 a user asked what had happened to the proposed expansion pack for *Ultima 8*, and another user replied, 'Cancelled! because U8 is bad (both the game and sale volume) - a fail…' The word may be applied to people as well as objects: in 2009, a user on the *Ultima Online* Forums posted regarding an annoying schoolmate, 'He's a bit of a fail. Keeps going "Women belong at the stove" - and then gets his arse kicked by a girl at Judo :D'. The collocation *epic fail* is attested from 2006 in the *Final Fantasy XI* section of the ZAM Forums, where a user remarked, 'Eyes on Me made its FFXI debut as a blue magic spell! ¶ epic fail', presumably alluding to the fact that before 'Eyes on Me' became the name of a spell, it was the title of a song featured in *Final Fantasy VIII*, an instalment of the game that proved unpopular on the forums.

Fail has since been adopted into the general discussion group community. For instance, in 2006, a user on the Fanfiction Forum discussed what a terrible father a panda featured in the series *Ranma ½* had been, and concluded, 'So it'[d] probably take quite a miracle to excuse him of all the fails in his chubby life.' *Epic fail* was used on the Chamber of Secrets Forums in 2011, when a user grumbled that two characters who belonged to different school houses in *Harry Potter* should have entered into a romantic relationship by the end of the series, and

went on, ‘It would have played well, if done right, playing up interhouse unity, something a lot [of] fans feel like JKR[owling] did an epic fail on in the last two books.’ Of course, the slangy *fail* carries a degree of subjectivity entirely lacking from its jargon antecedent: whether the throw of a die is a *fail* or a *save* is merely a matter of numbers, but the evaluative application of *fail*—or, even more forceful, *epic fail*—to people and things in Internet discussion groups is dependent entirely upon the view of the writer.

9.6 *Epic*

Epic, in the words of *Urban Dictionary* (2008, July 10), is ‘the most overused word ever, next to fail’. Indeed, in the slang of newsgroups and web forums, it is an adjective that may be applied to practically anything, and signifies ‘excellent’ or, more neutrally, ‘on a grand scale’. The *OED* traces the use of *epic* as a slang word meaning ‘excellent, impressively good’ back to 1983, when an article in *USA Today* included it in a list of compliments found in the slang of students at the University of Florida in the coastal city of Gainesville. The dictionary’s second attestation is from a 1985 issue of the magazine *Surfing*, and Dickson (2006: 230) explicitly identifies it as surfing slang. This variety has had some influence on discussion group slang, as we saw with *krad* (§6.4.2), and *epic* is attested in alt.surfing from 1991: a user recounted how he’d spent the weekend riding ‘an epic hurricane swell in North Carolina’. Over the next three years, *epic* was used in the newsgroup to describe sessions of superb surfing, beaches with favourable conditions, waves ideal for surfing, impressive surfing manoeuvres, and first-rate films and magazine articles (though not necessarily about surfing).

The single constant throughout these usages is that *epic* was positively connoted. However, in online slang, *epic* may be paired with a negative word as well as a positive one. It is possible that the word was simply adopted from surfing slang and then broadened, but it seems more probable that *epic* is a product of mixed etymology—something to which slang terms are ‘more than usually susceptible’ (Adams, 2009: 11). I would argue that the connotative ambivalence of *epic* has its roots in gaming jargon. No doubt derived from the Standard English sense of *epic*, ‘of or resembling the matter of heroic poetry’, the word was adopted among players of tabletop games to describe quests carried out on a grand scale. This application is first attested from 1989, when a poster in rec.games.frp argued that game masters of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* should endeavour to make their players work hard to revive their fallen characters, in spite of the easy mechanics of the game: ‘If

ressurection were as simple as AD&D makes it, then there would be major repercussions on the structure of the world […] Its a lot simpler to have a ressurection be an epic quest, if for nothing else it adds flavor to the campaign.'

By the following year, *epic* had been extended to describe characters who had reached extraordinarily high levels; in other words, the sort of characters who could complete an *epic* quest with ease. Another user in rec.games.frp posted about the great deal of thought he had put into creating an imaginary setting for his friends to play *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* in. He wrote, 'I find myself grappling with more philosophy than the players will ever appreciate or for that matter ever have a chance to observe unless they reach the most epic level… which brings us back to the "is a player with a 1000th level character really playing ad&d?" discussion.' When tabletop game players started to become video game players, they took *epic* with them, and applied it not only to heroes and their adventures but to the foes they battled as well: in 1999, a user in alt.games.everquest remarked, 'Everyone can understand not being a match for epic monsters like Griffins and Hill Giants and their kind, but when you are not a match for anything that my friends is messed up.' While *epic* players and quests may be desirable, *epic* monsters certainly aren't, and the ambivalent application of the gaming word seems to have converged with the evaluative function of the surfing word to derive a new item in discussion group slang. Influenced by its slang parent, the online *epic* is subjective, describing objects according to the writer's opinion; but influenced by its jargon parent, it may describe the monstrous as well as the marvellous.

An example of its positive usage may be taken from the Diablo Forums of Incgamers.com, where in 2004 a user enthused that the newly-released game *Halo 2* was 'amazing' and 'so epic feeling it [was] insane'. On the negative end of the scale, we saw that the adjective is often collocated with *fail* in §9.5, but that is not its only pejorative application. In 1999, one poster in alt.games.everquest indicated that he believed the claim of the game's new developers that they wouldn't radically change any of the character classes, and another poster replied, 'Your stupidity is epic.' To take examples from outside of the gaming community, in 2009 a poster on the Giant in the Playground Forum described a certain rollercoaster as 'an epic disappointment'. Conversely, in 2010 a user on the Chamber of Secrets Forums wrote of a moment in one of the *Harry Potter* films, 'Hermione totally has epic hair here'. It should be noted that when *epic* is used to qualify a word that is not explicitly positive or negative, the default is the former—a holdover from *epic's* surfing slang

parent. Thus, ‘Hermione totally has epic hair’ is understood to mean that Hermione’s hair is impressively good, not remarkably bad.

9.7 *Griefer*

A *griefer* is not a *griever*, ‘one who grieves’, but rather ‘one who causes other people grief’. In the gaming community, it refers specifically to ‘a player who causes other players grief’, and is in a fact a clipping of *grief player*. The earliest attestation of the compound is from 1999 in rec.games.computer.ultima.online, where a user related how he had known a player who was punished by a game master ‘for being a little prick and killing players and spamming constantly.’ He went on, ‘This is the grief player, whose sole purpose is to get some attention by any means - probably something they don’t get at home/IRL.’ In 2002, another user—this one a player of the game *Asheron’s Call*—explained that the ‘epitome of the grief player’ was ‘if your heart feels joy in doing wrong or causing grief to others’. The compound had been clipped to *griefer* by 2000, when a poster in rec.games.computer.ultima.online advocated getting even with aggrieving gamers and another disagreed (excerpted below).

> **Dorian:** Grief play against a grief player is not grief play […] Is teaching an asshole a lesson grief play? No.
>
> **Kiril Threndor:** Do they learn anything from it or take any notice? No.
>
> **Dorian:** If you do it right they do. What do you think the motivation behind the SBR[†] was? Inviting the griefers over for tea?
>
> ([†]An anti-*griefer* guild.)

The same year, and in the same newsgroup, *griefer* was adapted to mean ‘a poster who causes other posters grief’. This sense is first recorded from 2000, when one poster despaired of all the *trolls* in the newsgroup and another replied, ‘Fortunately for us, and unfortunately for the trolls/idiots/maroons, the newsgroup plays by Felucia [sic] rules, not by Trammel rules, so we’re free to “grief” back the griefers here :)’. (Felucca is a zone in *Ultima Online* that allows players to kill other players, while Trammel is a zone that prohibits it.) The placing of *grief* in inverted commas emphasizes that the poster is consciously constructing an analogy between posting in the newsgroup and playing a video game, the chief difference being that on Usenet, weapons are substituted with words and one defeats one’s opponents by arguing them down. This post is also the earliest attestation of *grief*, ‘to behave like a griefer’, which has

been derived from *griefer* by the removal of the apparent agentive suffix *-er*; such noun-to-verb back formations are common in Standard English as well as offline varieties of slang (Mattiello, 2008: 129).

Both *grief* and *griefer* have entered the language of Internet discussion groups beyond the gaming community. In 2002, a user in alt.surfing accused another of being a 'yuppie' rather than a proper surfer, and the victim responded, 'Maybe you can explain to us just what it is about being a griefer that is so very satisfying.' Both the verb and noun occurred in a thread posted on the Fanfiction Forum in 2009, in which a user lamented the existence of people who attempt to puncture fans' enthusiasm for their objects of devotion, and other users concurred (excerpted below).

> **SleepyNin:** do we see the dangers of the Anti-fan? […] The ones who simply CANNOT let a person enjoy [a franchise]?
>
> **Left Shoe:** Griefers (of all sorts) need to die slowly and painfully.
>
> **Lord Raine:** I actually think griefing is the sole reason that some people go into certain forums

In its adoption by discussion groups, *griefer* has become almost a synonym for *troll* (§6.1.1), except that *trolls* hope to elicit *flaming* while *griefers* just want to upset people. As with *troll*, *griefer* exhibits Traugott's (1989: 34–35) second tendency: it has shifted from an externally-based sense denoting 'a player who performs exasperating physical actions (even though they are virtual)' to a meaning that depends on a textual situation, a user whose discourse is aimed at aggrieving other users. In either case, the word is subjective, as the writer assigns a malignant purpose to someone else's actions when that might not have been the person's intention at all.

10 CONCLUSION

10.1 Statistical Analysis of Semantic Patterns

Having determined the types of semantic change to which the Internet discussion group slang words analysed in the preceding chapters have been subjected, we can at last compile the statistical prevalences of these changes. It is important to note that these prevalences do not include derived words that are metaphorical, pejorative, and so on but that *have not themselves been* metaphorized, pejorated, and so on—that is to say, they have inherited those semantic denotations or connotations from their parent words. For instance, *spamfest* is pejorative and metaphorical, but it has not undergone pejoration or metaphorization; it is merely the compounded product of two words that had each already been pejorated and metaphorized. It should be kept in mind that although these findings may serve as an indicator of semantic trends in Internet discussion group slang, as the lexis is constantly evolving and expanding, these statistics should not be regarded as a perfect representation of the variety—especially considering that only 67 words from it were examined in the preceding chapters. Among these words (see Wordlist A.1 in the Appendix), the types of semantic change in operation were, from most to least common:

Metaphor: 22 words (32.8%)
Pejoration: 19 words (28.4%)
Broadening: 6 words (9.0%)
Narrowing: 5 words (7.5%)
Amelioration: 4 words (6.0%)
Hyperbole: 3 words (4.5%)
Metonymy: 2 words (3.0%)

(See Table A.1 in the Appendix.)

The pre-eminence of metaphor is to be expected: Ullmann (1962/1979: 202) calls it the ‘supreme source of expressiveness in language’, and we are already familiar with the importance of creative expression as a motivation of slang. The prevalence of pejoration is only a little lower, and from this we may conclude that Internet discussion group slang, like other slang varieties, ‘tends to judge rather than to define’ (Eble, 1996: 50), and does so disparagingly far more often than approvingly. The remaining types of semantic change are

all quite infrequent, and the differences between their values do not seem particularly significant.

There are, of course, many other instances of semantic change in the data that cannot readily be assigned to any one of these types, particularly those that are dependent upon categorical shifts, such as the derivation of *squeeable* ‘worthy of being squeed over’ from *squee* ‘to make inarticulate noises of excitement’. These changes are not easily generalizable according to the established labels, and must be examined on an individual basis. This is, perhaps, one of the drawbacks of the traditional classifications of semantic change. Traugott’s (1989: 34–35) broader tendencies can, at least, accommodate some of these instances. Of the 67 words examined, the numbers that exhibited the tendencies were as follows:

Abstraction (Tendencies 1 and 2): 30 (44.8%)
Subjectification (Tendency 3): 35 (52.2%)

(See Table A.2 in the Appendix.)

These values may appear lower than expected; however, similarly to the results of the traditional classification, it must be noted that there are many cases of words that are abstract or subjective, but that have not undergone abstraction or subjectification themselves—they have simply retained that aspect of their meaning from the already abstract or subjective words from which they have been derived. To return to the example of *spamfest*, the word abstractly denotes ‘an abundance of spamming’, but its abstractness has been inherited from its elements, *spam* and *fest*, both of which have immaterial senses (‘to post worthless content’ and ‘an undesirable abundance’) ultimately derived from concrete ones (‘a brand of tinned meat’ and ‘a celebration’).

There does not appear to be a single case in the data of a word violating Traugott’s first two tendencies and developing a more concrete meaning. However, there are two instances in which words have violated the third tendency and undergone semantic objectification: *lurk* and *ninja* have both shed the negativity of their earlier senses (‘to remain furtively in one spot’ and ‘to steal another gamers’ rightfully earned loot’) to become connotatively neutral in discussion group slang (‘to read posts without making any of one’s own’ and ‘to make a post in a thread just before somebody else does’). Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, the tendencies hold true.

It is also of interest to note the types of things the slang words denote, and so I have divided the words into five categories: persons and entities (mostly nouns), behaviours (mostly verbs), attributes (mostly adjectives), and remarks (six interjections and one imperative). These categories are further divided into negative, positive, and neutral. Of course, certain words belong to more than one category. Some have more than one connotation, like *fanboy* and *fangirl*, which may be either negative or positive depending on the context of their use. Other words have more than one denotation, like *troll*, which may mean 'one who trolls' (a person) or 'an act of trolling' (a behaviour). Such words are counted in multiple categories in Table 10.1, which is why the total percentages in the table would exceed 100% if added up. Of the 67 words examined, the prevalence of each category is as follows:

Table 10.1: Words for Persons, Entities, Behaviours, and Attributes

	Negative	Positive	Neutral
Persons	11 (16.4%)	2 (3.0%)	1 (1.5%)
Entities	3 (4.5%)	3 (4.5%)	3 (4.5%)
Behaviours	21 (31.4%)	2 (3.0%)	12 (17.9%)
Attributes	5 (7.5%)	6 (9.0%)	1 (1.5%)
Remarks	4 (6.0%)	3 (4.5%)	0
TOTAL	44 (65.7%)	16 (23.9%)	17 (25.4%)

(See Table A.3 in the Appendix.)

By far the most populated word category is that for negative behaviours (31.4%), with that for negative persons coming in third place (16.4%); these words are insults directed at other users or their conduct, such as *twink*, *n00b*, *trolling*, and *spamming*. The second most populated category (albeit only by a single word) comprises neutral behaviours (17.9%): words that describe actions that are neither positively nor negatively charged, such as *lurking* and *copypastaing*. None of the categories for entities are highly populated, and they show no preference between negative, positives and neutral connotations at 3% each. Regarding attributes, the negative and positive categories are almost neck and neck at 7.5% and 9.0%, while the neutral category is only 1.5%. There are no neutral remarks at all, which is understandable given that the remarks' purpose is to express the writer's approval or disapproval of something or someone—and they are almost equally divided between the two, at 4.5% for positive remarks and 6.0% for negative ones.

The total number of negative terms is more than double the respective totals of positive and neutral terms (65.7% versus 23.9% and 25.4%). This is consistent with our earlier observation that discussion group slang judges more frequently than it defines. Now, we may observe that its judgement is directed particularly at people and their actions—and that the verdict is almost never favourable and often outright condemnatory.

These findings are not unique to discussion group slang. Eble (1996: Appendix 2) reports that of the 93 most popular slang words recorded by students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1976 to 1991, ten of them signified 'socially inept person'—more words than in any other category save 'excellent', which came in at eleven words. While the discussion group slang recorded here has only six words for positive attributes, it is worth noting that this is the only category of positive words that contains more members than its negative equivalent, albeit only by one word.

It is telling that the majority of the college students' insults are levelled against people for being 'socially inept' rather than physically unattractive, financially disadvantaged, a member of a certain ethnicity, lacking in critical thinking skills, or any one of a number of qualities that could be evaluated negatively. As slang is a tool for social cohesion and exclusion, it is no wonder that a lack of social graces is the most salient of faults in the view of the college slang-speakers. Of course, in the world of newsgroups and web forums, a user's physical appearance, financial circumstances, and ethnicity are indeterminate unless the user chooses to reveal them, and so one's ability to interact successfully with other users—one's social aptitude, in other words—is also the personal quality most frequently scrutinized by discussion group slang. *Griefer*, *flamer*, *haxor*, *n00b*, *pir8*, *postwhore*, *smurf*, *troll*, *twink*, and sometimes *fanboy* and *fangirl*, all pass judgement on the referents' failings when it comes to the quality or quantity of their posts, their motivations for posting, or the way they interact with their fellow posters. One of the purposes of slang is, after all, to reinforce one's membership within a group, and one method of achieving this is to push other group members to the outskirts by criticizing their conduct as somehow violating the accepted protocol of the group. It may not be particularly noble, but then slang has always been the language of the people.

10.2 Final Comments

I began this study with the hypothesis that the techniques of semantic change operative in the English slang of Internet discussion groups would be similar to those found underpinning semantic change in other varieties of English, although the discussion group slang's basis in text rather than speech and body language would lead to certain differences in how the change was carried out. The data analysed in the preceding chapters have, I believe, confirmed this. The slang of newsgroups and web forums reveals the same processes of semantic change found in offline varieties of slang, as well as in Standard English: metaphor, pejoration, amelioration, broadening, narrowing, hyperbole and metonymy. However, some of the morphological and orthographical shifts that have accompanied changes online do not have any obvious parallels in the offline world—such as the use of interjections as speech acts in place of physical gestures (see §6.2.8), the deliberate misspelling of words for connotative effect (see §6.4), and the respelling of acronyms to increase their resemblance to simple morphemes (see §6.5). The international nature of discussion group slang has also caused it to differ from geographically restricted varieties of slang in its preference for Standard English as a source of derivational fodder over subcultural and regional linguistic varieties that might be unfamiliar to a global audience.

Established theoretical frameworks have proven adequate for explaining the data; aside from the aforementioned traditional classifications, Traugott's (1989: 34–35) three tendencies in the directionality of semantic change have largely been borne out. Regarding the first two tendencies—where meanings exhibit shifts from an external situation to an internal one, and from an external or internal situation to a textual and metalinguistic one—the direction of change has invariably been towards abstraction. Traugott's third tendency, that meanings are inclined to become increasingly subjective, holds true for many of the slang words examined, but there are cases in which the trend is broken (see §6.1.3 and §9.2).

Having reached these conclusions, what is to be done next? A little over a decade ago, David Crystal (2001: 241) wrote, '[T]he sheer scale of the present Internet, let alone its future telecosmic incarnations, has convinced me that we are on the brink of the biggest language revolution ever.' Now the revolution is underway, and all the linguistic researcher can do is to try and keep up with the charge. In addition to newsgroups and web forums, there are many other platforms of Internet communication—instant messengers, chat rooms, blogs, and social networking websites—whose lexes exhibit their own multitudinous instances of

semantic change, some no doubt similar to those chronicled here, but others displaying their own unique ingenuity. And that is only considering change at the level of words. What about at the levels of sentences and signs? Furthermore, what of the morphology and syntax of Netspeak?

It is hoped that by unearthing a small part of the slang of cyberspace, this dissertation will encourage a greater interest in its study, and perhaps serve as an initial site from which further excavations may be carried out. Many treasures remain to be discovered, whether they are dug up from the sunken stone circles of the newsgroups or tracked down to the vibrant plazas of the web forums—or found even further afield, in the rising realms of social networking and microblogging. After all, Netspeak is a global phenomenon, and as such its potential for exploration stretches from here to the ends of the earth.

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APPENDIX: FINDINGS OF SEMANTIC PATTERNS

Wordlist A.1: Analysed Slang Words and Their Derivatives

1. *Banhammer*
2. *Camp*
3. *Copypasta*
4. *Delurk*
5. *Epic*
6. *Eyeroll*
7. *Facepalm*
8. *Fail*
9. *Fanboy*
10. *Fanboyish*
11. *Fandom*
12. *Fandomy*
13. *Fangasm*
14. *Fangirl*
15. *Fangirlish*
16. *Fanon*
17. *Fanwank*
18. *Fap*
19. *Fappable*
20. *Fest*
21. *Flamefest*
22. *Flame*
23. *Flamer*
24. *Flame war*
25. *Flame bait*
26. *Gank*
27. *Grief*
28. *Griefer*
29. *Hax*
30. *Haxor*
31. *Headcanon*
32. *Headdesk*
33. *Hijack*
34. *IMHO*
35. *Interwebs*
36. *Krad*
37. *Leet*
38. *LOL*
39. *LOLfest*
40. *Lurk*
41. *Lurk more*
42. *Lurker*
43. *Lurkfest*
44. *Necro*
45. *Nerf*
46. *Ninja*
47. *N00b*
48. *N00dz*
49. *Permaban*
50. *Pir8*
51. *Postgank*
52. *Postwhore*
53. *ROFL*
54. *Smurf*
55. *Spam*
56. *Spamfest*
57. *Spammy*
58. *Squee*
59. *Squeeable*
60. *Troll*
61. *Troll fest*
62. *Trufax*
63. *Twink*
64. *Twink fest*
65. *Unlurk*
66. *Warez*
67. *Woot*

Table A.1: Lexeme Subject to Traditional Types of Semantic Change	
Metaphor	*troll, flame, flame war, flame bait, lurk, hijack, headcanon, fanwank, banhammer, postwhore, fanon, fangasm, nerf, twink, necro, ninja, gank, postgank, camp, fail, epic, griefer*
Pejoration	*troll, flame, fanboy, fangirl, fest, eyeroll, facepalm, headdesk, leet, krad, n00b, pir8, n00dz, haxor, spam, smurf, nerf, twink, necro*
Broadening	*banhammer, leet, nerf, fappable, camp, fail*
Narrowing	*n00b, fest, pir8, warez, n00dz*
Hyperbole	*hijack, krad, ROFL*
Amelioration	*lurk, postwhore, hax, ninja*
Metonymy	*banhammer, copypasta*

Table A.2: Lexemes Subject to Traugott's Tendencies of Semantic Change	
Abstraction (Tendencies 1 and 2)	*banhammer, camp, eyeroll, facepalm, fanboyish, fangirlish, fandomy, fangasm, fanon, fanwank, flame, flame war, flame bait, gank, hax, headcanon, headdesk, hijack, LOL, lurk, necro, nerf, ninja, postgank, postwhore, ROFL, smurf, spam, troll, trufax*
Subjectification (Tendency 3)	*banhammer, epic, eyeroll, facepalm, fail, fanboy, fanboyish, fangasm, fangirl, fangirlish, fanon, fanwank, fappable, fest, flame, postgank, hax, haxor, headcanon, headdesk, hijack, leet, necro, nerf, n00b, n00dz, pir8, postgank, postwhore, smurf, spam, squeeable, troll, trufax, twink*

Table A.3: Lexemes for Persons, Entities, Behaviours, and Attributes			
	Negative	**Positive**	**Neutral**
Persons	*fanboy*, fangirl*, griefer, flamer, haxor, n00b, pir8, postwhore, smurf, troll, twink*	*fanboy*, fangirl**	*lurker*
Entities	*fanon*, n00dz*, warez**	*fanon*, n00dz*, warez**	*fandom, headcanon, interwebs*
Behaviours	*camp, fanwank*, fail, fest, flame, flame war, flame bait, flamefest, gank, grief, hijack, LOLfest, lurkfest, necro, nerf, postwhore, spam, spamfest, troll, troll fest, twink fest*	*fanwank*, fangasm*	*banhammer, copypasta, delurk, fap, IMHO, LOL, lurk, ninja, permaban, postgank, ROFL, unlurk*
Attributes	*fanboyish, fangirlish, krad*, leet*, spammy*	*epic, hax, fappable, squeeable, krad*, leet**	*fandomy*
Remarks	*eyeroll, facepalm, headdesk, lurk more*	*squee, trufax, woot*	

(Some words may be either negative or positive, depending on the attitude of the writer; these are indicated with asterisks. Other words are used to describe both persons and behaviours, and so are listed twice.)