

Cyber speak apparently destined 2b

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By CHRIS KICK

Staff Writer

WOOSTER -- "Language is the archives of history," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, poet and philosopher in his 1844 essay "The Poet."

More than 160 years later, Emerson's observation of the relationship between language and history still holds true, especially through the increasingly popular use of "cyber language."

With tools like e-mail, instant messenger and chat, exchanging a message over the Internet literally is a click of a button, and to keep apace with that blitzing speed, language also is changing.

If you want to communicate electronically to someone a joke was funny, you type ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing). If you're unsure about something, it's AFAIK (as far as I know). If someone's preparing for bed, you tell them DLTBBB (don't let the bed bugs bite). If you want to communicate love, it's FTBOMH (from the bottom of my heart).

And the new language doesn't stop at acronyms. Several symbols created from basic punctuation marks and known as "emoticons" also are used, mostly to include the emotion with which a message was sent.

If the communicator was feeling happy, the symbol might be something like :-), if sad and frowning, then :-(. If the sender can't stop talking, it might be :(). The colon represents the eyes, the dash a nose and the parenthesis the mouth.

While Internet language is fast, creative and fun, it carries with it a degree of consequence and controversy, especially when it is used in places other than the Net. Kim St. Clair, senior English teacher at Northwestern High School, said there's a place for Internet language, but it has to be kept separate from the formal language of class assignments.

"Like any generation, you have to stay connected with it, but there's still a place where proper, structured English must be used," she said.

St. Clair said her students seem to know the difference between formal and informal language, though occasionally these kinds of terms appear, especially in students' free-writing and reflections.

She said students sometimes write "im" in place of "I'm" and she sees frequent misuse of hyphens, something she said she does herself when using e-mail.

Beth Smith, who teaches junior and senior English at Norwayne High School, said she sometimes sees students in formal writing use "y" in place of "why," and other misuses that show they're trying to shorten words and abbreviate. She said students abbreviated before the use of Internet language, but not as much.

Smith said there are advantages to the language, but also is concerned of the long-term effects on spelling and the distraction Internet communication causes students while they are working. Instant messenger, she said, often is open on a student's computer the same time he or she is writing an assignment and the two can be hard to juggle.

"I think it's great that they can talk to people instantly," she said, "but I also see it as a distraction."

She said she's discussed recently with her English class how language has changed and how from 1,000 years ago much of it is not understood. She also has discussed with students the future of language and what influence abbreviations may have.

Smith, not a big fan of instant messaging, said, "I just can't bring myself to use abbreviations when I e-mail somebody."

St. Clair said many of her students are unfamiliar with idioms once known by all, such as "out of the frying pan ..." and may only remember these if a grandparent has used them. But while some meanings may have been forgotten, others are added.

"The mouse is not a furry little creature on the ground," she said, referencing the computer use of the word.

Cyber language is so developed it has its own dictionaries to keep straight the meaning of its many terms. The site www.netlingo.com features detailed lists of cyber acronyms, abbreviations and emoticons, and has a list for newly added terms.

Perhaps most offensive to English teachers are phrases like "2B or not 2B," which is a cyber distortion of Shakespeare's "To be or not to be ..."

But it's a language that adds new words regularly and looks only to continue.

"It's not a fad," said St. Clair. "It's becoming a way of life."

Reporter Chris Kick can be reached at (330) 287-1635 or e-mail ckick@the-daily-record.com.

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