I QUESTION THE GENERAL ASSUMPTION THAT FELINES ARE INHERENTLY DEFICIENT IN THE AREA OF GRAMMAR AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE.

Iz in ur meme / aminalizin teh langwich: A linguistic study of LOLcats

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As far as Internet culture goes, the pairing of cat pictures with grammatically erroneous captions has become one of the most pervasive trends of the past few years. LOLcats, as they are termed – a combination of LOL, Internet slang for "Laugh Out Loud," and cat, the domesticated feline found in perhaps too many American households – have evolved from an Internet fad to a culture all their own. That is not to say, though, that just any pair of a caption and a picture of a cat is a LOLcat; while websites like icanhascheezburger.com and lolcats.com accept submissions from all users, there is inarguably an art to creating a quality LOLcat. The trend inevitably evolves and new styles emerge, but the classic LOLcat embodies a certain few traits, specifically with regard to the captions created. This paper aims to examine LOLcat captions in terms of the language employed, which is notably distinct from correct English and yet is still intelligible to most English speakers. While it is understood that the language, called LOLspeak, inevitably encounters some variance among its users, the spelling changes and altered grammatical structure suggest a number of overlying patterns.

Many have referred to LOLcat language as "kitty pidgin," a kind of mangled English adopted by cats in order to communicate with their owners. However, the alterations that occur from English to LOLspeak do not completely match the usual characteristics of a pidgin language. In fact, they more accurately represent a mix of "baby talk," the variation many adults use when talking to infants and toddlers, and Leetspeak, the Internet lingo developed mainly by those playing online video games like Counterstrike. In an attempt to more fully understand LOLspeak, this paper will also investigate and hypothesize about the influences of LOLspeak and hypothesize about the influences of the language.

While the exact origin of LOLcats is not definite, what caused the trend to really take off was the all too web-circulated image of an overweight gray cat superimposed with text reading

"I can has cheezburger?*"*[1] and the subsequent founding of www.icanhascheezburger.com in January 2007 by computer geek Eric Nakagawa and his girlfriend Kari Unebasami. By the summer of that year, the website, an open forum welcoming "people to send in their cat pictures with similarly semi-surreal, childishly spelt captions," was so popular that journalist Ben Huh bought the site from Nakagawa for $2 million (Cox 6). By October 2008, Huh was receiving more than 8,000 LOLcat submissions per day, and the site itself was racking up 5.5 million hits a day (Cox 6). Currently, the site boasts more than 40 million hits per day, a number that only continues to grow ("Advertise on ICHC").

Most Internet memes[2] do not last as long as the LOLcat has, which begs the question of what has allowed the humor in them to remain fresh. For one, there is never a shortage of cat pictures online. Additionally, it is not just a meme to be viewed but also one that is easily imitated and limited only by the creativity of its followers. However, while there are theoretically infinite pairings of cat pictures and text, not every combination of the two makes a LOLcat. As Huh points out, the captions should be "semi-surreal [and] childishly spelt" (qtd. in Cox 6). The question then becomes, what qualifies a caption as childishly spelt, as a good or bad example of how a cat would talk? Personally, after reviewing a large number of LOLcat captions, several patterns already stood out in terms of the language employed. Certain orthographic alterations were consistent, including the change of the plural /s/ to a /z/, or the spelling of /kitty/ as *kitteh*. Another notable characteristic was the grammatically improper combinations of subjects and verbs in cases such as *Iz*, a contraction of 'I is' instead of *I am*.

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[1] This image can be found in the Appendix.
[2] A *meme*, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture."

In an attempt to understand the methods behind the madness that is LOLspeak, I

conducted a short study[3], asking ten different college students to judge a series of images in

terms of whether or not they were good representations of LOLcats and, specifically, LOLspeak.

Participants were shown two pages, one at a time, one with six LOLcat pictures and one with

eight. All the pictures on a single page were the same, differing only in terms of the text used.

In the first picture, a dog is stuck behind the gate of someone's house, while a small door

at the bottom of the gate is big enough for the cat to walk through with ease. For this picture, the

image with the best reviews used a caption that read, *For once da hoomin makes sense / Dog*

behind bars / kitteh gets cheezburger; participants noted the font, the spelling, and the reference

to "cheezburger." The one rated the least LOLcat-like had a speech bubble coming from each

animal, with the dog saying, *Hey, dat not fair. You gots a gate*, and the cat responding, *Whoever*

said life is fair? In this one, features participants noted as not fitting the LOLcat style included

the speech bubbles and the attribution of LOLspeak to the dog while the cat speaks standard

English.

The picture on the second page shows a gray kitten popping his head out of a cereal box

and looking directly at the camera. The three images rated highest had captions that read, *I'm in*

ur cereals / makin ur raisins, *o hai! / i shredid yoar weets*, and *No eets meh! / Iz da prize!*.

Participants noted the spelling in all of them as representative of LOLspeak, with one person

referring specifically to the use of "o hai." The reasons for the others being judged as bad

include the use of speech and thought bubbles and the formatting of the picture as a motivational

poster, a separate Internet meme entirely.

The participants in my study had not done any sort of research into LOLspeak, but each

of them had some idea, if only subconsciously, of what did and didn't qualify as an example of

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[3] The pictures used for the study can be found in the Appendix.

it. My results show that while practically anyone with a computer can superimpose text over a

picture of a cat, it takes a certain understanding of the style and language used in order to qualify

the image as a LOLcat. Clearly, there is a fairly good consensus not only on what LOLspeak is,

but also on what it is *not*.

On icanhascheezburger.com, visitors to the site can find a link to "LOLspeak as a Second

Language (LKSL-101) in Five Easy Steps," a page whose purpose is self-explanatory. Although

they are not presented as rules, the five guidelines presented, each with numerous, more detailed,

sub-guidelines, are: "Step one: Think of something to say … Step two: 'Engrish' it … Step three:

Misspell everything. There's no wrong way to do this… Step four: Add exclamations and extra

words … Step five: Add additional information … Again, nothing right or wrong here, just

whatever comes to mind" ("Five Easy Steps"). While these guidelines hold some validity, I

argue that "There's no wrong way to do this" is not necessarily true, as shown in the participant

responses from my study. And while there is not necessarily one correct way to "do" LOLspeak,

I posit that there are certain patterns that should be followed and others that should be avoided.

In order to determine these linguistic patterns, I conducted another study, this time using

two different online translators intended to convert English into LOLcat[4]. The first translator can

be found at www.speaklolcat.com and the second at www.slangoholic.com. I placed the same

passages from the Wikipedia article about cats into each of the translators, then analyzed the

changes that each made to the original passage. My results are shown in Table 1[5]. As far as

phonological changes are concerned, both translators converted/with/ to /wif/, changing [θ] to [f],

and in the examples of /that/ to /dat/ and /their/ to /deir/, there is the change from [ð] to [d].

Also, by dropping the /g/ in the spelling of the gerunds, [iŋ] becomes [ɪn]. Other examples of the

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[4] The passages used and translations found in study can be found in the Appendix.
[5] Note: Results are based only on passages I examined and include any changes, even if they only occurred once.

phonological changes made by slangoholic.com are [vɛɹi] to [vɛwi], [ɪt] to [it], and [əðəɹ] to

[əd ɹ]. Speaklolcat.com also changes [hjumɪn] to [humɪn̩], [ænd] to [æn], and [pleɪj] to [pəleɪj],

all examples of simplification of consonant clusters. While there are many phonological changes

from English to LOLspeak, the only morphological change encountered is the change from the

past tense verb /-ed/ suffix, in one case to /-d/ and in another to /-eded/, as in the example of

speaklolcat.com and slangoholic.com changing "valued" to /*valud*/ and /*valueded*/, respectively.

In terms of syntax, the main change to occur is the one by speaklolcat.com, in which the article

/a/ is eliminated, specifically but not only after a preposition. For example, "imprint on them at a

very young age" becomes /*imprint on them at vry young age*/. Lexically, the only changes found

among the two translators are those of /people/ to /*peeps*/ and /cats/ to /*catkind*/.

Table 1. English → LOLspeak

speaklolcat.com	slangoholic.com
/-ed/ suffix → /-d/	/-ed/ suffix → /-eded/
/with/ → /wif/	/with/ → /wif/
/to/ → /2/	/to/ → /ta/
/for/ → /4/	/for/ → /foar/
/the/ → /teh/	/the/ → /teh/
final /s/ → /z/	final /s/ → /z/
/human/ → /hooman/	/human/ → /hyooman/
/-sion/ or /-tion/ → /-shun/	/-sion/ or /-tion/ → /-shun/
/that/ → /dat/	/their/ → /deir/
/people/ → /peeps/	/people/ → /peeps/
/other/ → /othr/	/other/ → /uddah/
/very/ → /vry/	/very/ → /vewee/
/cats/ → /kats/	/cats/ → /catkind/
/and/ → /an/	/and/ → /adn/
/should/ → /shud/	/should/ → /shoodz/
/wrestling/ → /wrestlin/	/wrestling/ → /cat-fytein/
/play/ → /pulay/	/bites/ → /bytez/
/house/ → /haus/, /houz/	final /-se/ → /-es/

/may/ → /cud/	/it/ → /eet/
(prep.) a (word) → *(prep.) (word)*	/be/ → /b/
	/young/ → /youn/
	/of/ → /uv/
	/how/ → /hao/

Since LOLspeak began as, and continues to be mostly a written language rather than a spoken one, much of LOLspeak is based in the spelling changes that occur. The final /s/ changes to /z/, /how/ becomes /hao/, /should/ becomes /shud/, and so on. One good source for spelling change guidelines is the webpage entitled "How to speak lolcat," part of the LOLCat [sic] Bible Translation Project[6]. According to the moderators of lolcatbible.com, it is important to know how to use "homonymous misspellings" ("How to speak lolcat"); that is, using examples from the site, /ghost/ becomes /goast/ or /ghoast/, "borrowing from 'toast' or 'coast,'" and the classic change from /hi/ to /hai/ ("How to speak lolcat"). The same listing explains, "words that end in a silent 'e' that have a consonant before often exchange the two last letters" ("How to speak lolcat"). This guideline is exemplified in slangoholic.com's alteration of /cease/ to /ceaes/ and /engage/ to /engaeg/.

Acknowledging the changes from English to LOLspeak, orthographic and phonological, is a major step to understanding the latter, but it cannot be thoroughly investigated until its major influences have been identified – that is, whether it is a language unto itself, a dialect or variation of English, or something else entirely. The language of LOLcats has been referred to by many as "kitty pidgin," a pidgin being a contact language developed between two different groups that do not speak each other's language but desire to communicate, usually for trade purposes. According to <u>Language Files</u>, an introductory text put together by the Department of Linguistics

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[6] The LOLCat Bible Translation Project is an online collection of Bible passages translated by numerous users into LOLspeak. Since the site's inception in July 2007, nearly the entire Bible has already been translated.

at Ohio State University, "Many pidgin languages, regardless of their source languages, share

certain characteristics," (Bergmann 457). The phonological and morphological characteristics

noted include consonant cluster reduction, the absence of affixes, and the use of reduplication in

word formation. Among the syntax patterns in pidgin languages are subject-verb-object word

order, a preference for prepositions over postpositions, the use of conjunctions over subordinate

clauses, and a lack of article usage. Semantically, pidgins usually have a limited vocabulary, but

"to compensate for the lack of variety, … meanings are extended" and "compounds are more

frequent" (Bergmann 458-459).

There are certainly some similarities between "kitty pidgin" and the rules proposed by

pidginists regarding contact languages. As explained by Language Files, "In many cases, the

vocabulary of pidgin languages is derived from the socially and/or economically dominant

language in the contact situation (called the superstrate language)" (Bergmann 454). Indeed,

LOLspeak is a variant of English and not of the sounds produced by the cats themselves. As

discussed already, there are numerous instances of consonant cluster reduction, as in

speaklolcat.com's changes of [hjumɪn] to [humɪn], [ænd] to [æn], and [pleɪj] to [pəleɪj]. The

semantic pattern of limited vocabulary is also somewhat characteristic of the language used in

LOLcats, but this can more likely be attributed to cats' limited exposure to objects or concepts

beyond the domestic sphere.

While it can be argued that "kitty pidgin" is the contact language adopted by cats in order

to communicate with humans, further investigation shows a lacking correlation between

LOLspeak and the prototypical pidgin language. The most obvious difference is that pidgins are

spoken and LOLspeak is mostly reserved for written language. In terms of the other

characteristics of pidgins, reduplication does not seem to occur more than in proper English, and

since the subject-verb-object sentence structure is already characteristic of English, it does not resemble pidgin structure when it carries over to LOLspeak.

As proposed by lolcatbible.com's guidelines to writing in LOLspeak, "In lolcat speak, a lot of words are misspelled. Think baby talk, but with a cat flair. This is probably one of the hardest parts to get down correctly" ("How to speak lolcat"). The creator of this site acknowledges the resemblance of LOLspeak to baby talk, and in fact there are a number of correlations to be made between the two English variations. In Charles A. Ferguson's study "Baby Talk in Six Languages," published in 1964 by the American Anthropological Association, he lists several features of baby talk, a term he defines as "any special form of a language which is regarded by a speech community as being primarily appropriate for talking to young children and which is generally regarded as not the normal adult use of language" (Ferguson 103). Among the phonological features noted by Ferguson are "simplification of consonant clusters (e.g., English *tummy* for *stomach*)," "replacement of *r* by another consonant (e.g. English *wabbit* for *rabbit*)," "replacement of velars by apicals (e.g., English *tum on* for *come on*)," and "Some kind of interchange among sibilants, affricates, and stops (e.g., English *soos* for *shoes*)" (Ferguson 105). He also notes the grammatical use of the diminutive, as well as a "greater use of nouns rather than pronouns and verbs" and the use of third person construction in place of the first person (Ferguson 106).

Much of LOLspeak resembles the features proposed by Ferguson's study. As it is also characteristic of pidgins, the simplification of consonant clusters has already been noted. The replacement of /r/ by another consonant is exemplified by slangoholic.com's conversion of /very/ to /vewee/, or [vɛɹi] to [vɛwi]. The change from /with/ to /wif/ on the part of both translators seems to resemble a similar phonological change, one that is also representative, at least in

common knowledge, of baby talk. The use of the diminutive is not as apparent in LOLspeak but

can be seen in the preference of /kitteh/ to /cat/, although both are used. Use of the third person

instead of the first also carries over to LOLcats, as in the example of *moderator kitteh /*

disapproves ur submishinz.[7] This preference has helped to perpetuate such LOLcat icons as

Ceiling Cat and Basement Cat.

Just as LOLspeak is not solely representative of a pidgin language nor of baby talk, there

is also the influence of Leetspeak and other Internet-based trends to be considered. Since he

started blogging about the creation of culture in 1999, Anil Dash has been cited by the Wall

Street Journal and the Associated Press for his April 2007 post "Cats Can Has Grammar." In it,

Dash identifies a couple of important LOLcat phrase structures, including "I'M IN UR *X Y*ing

your *Z*…[8] based on i'm in ur base, killin ur doods" and "Invisible *Item*[9]" (Dash). Other phrases

perpetuated throughout LOLcat culture are *do not want* and *I can has [item]*. The first example

mentioned by Dash, as he explains, is based on a screenshot from an online game that became a

meme of its own, and it is a perfect example of the influence of Leetspeak on LOLcat language.

After all, the creators and followers of LOLcats are understood to be those people who already

spend massive amounts of time on the Internet, whether playing games or browsing forums like

SomethingAwful, where the i*'m in ur base* meme originated. Other examples of Leetspeak's

influence include references to online games, science fiction trends, and other Internet memes.

Speaklolcat.com seems to sway more toward Leetspeak-like translations, using, for instance, /2/

and /4/ instead of /to/ and /for/, respectively. It is important, however, to distinguish, as the

lolcatbible.com article does, between Leetspeak, LOLspeak, and the language of text messaging:

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[7] This image can be found in the Appendix.
[8] An example of this can be found in the Appendix.
[9] An example of this can be found in the Appendix.

"TxtSpeak's main purpose is to shorten the amount of keys needed to get the message across. This is not lolcat speak" ("How to speak lolcat").

In konklushun, teh LOLkitteh speach is, liek Becky Hogge writed, "a rich source of material for linguistic analysis" (Hogge 52). Teh influence of Leetspeak, and rezemblins to baybeh talk and pidgin langwichez, iz strawng. Dis iz perhaps cuz teh kittehz nevar supozd to leev teh hauz, so dey haz lotz of interakshun wif baybehz, teh peeps hoo speekz to teh baybehz, an compootr geekz, awl of wich iz moastly resurvded foar teh domesstik settin. Oar, iz possibul teh LOLspeak poak fun at, bai exaggerashun, dat teh kittehz iz treeteded an speakd to liek childrinz.[10]

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[10] Translation: In conclusion, LOLcat speech is, as Becky Hogge writes, "a rich source of material for linguistic analysis" (Hogge 52). The influence of Leetspeak, and resemblance to both baby talk and pidgin languages, is strong. This is perhaps because cats are domestic animals, so their main sources of human interaction are with babies and the adults who tend and speak to them, and computer geeks, all of whom are most often encountered in the domestic setting. It is also possible that LOLspeak is meant to poke fun at, by exaggeration, the fact that cats are often treated and spoken to by humans as if they were children.

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