

## Why did LOL infiltrate the language?

Written by Administrator

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The internet slang term "LOL" (laughing out loud) has been added to the Oxford English Dictionary, to the mild dismay of language purists. But where did the term originate? And is it really a threat to our lexicon?

 "OMG! LOL's in the OED. LMAO!"  
If you find the above string of letters utterly unintelligible, you are clearly an internet "noob".

Let me start again.  
Golly gosh! The popular initialism LOL (laughing out loud) has been inducted into the canon of the English language, the Oxford English Dictionary. Blimey! What is going on?

The OED defines LOL as an interjection "used chiefly in electronic communications... to draw attention to a joke or humorous statement, or to express amusement".

It is both "LOL" where all the letters are pronounced separately, but also commonly "lol" where it is pronounced as a word. The phrase was ushered in alongside OMG (Oh My God), with dictionary guardians pointing to their growing occurrence "in e-mails, texts, social networking... and even in spoken use".

As well as school playgrounds, words like "lolz" and "lolling" can be heard in pubs and offices - though often sarcastically, or in parody.  
Love it or loathe it, "lol" is now a legitimate word in our lexicon, says Graeme Diamond, the OED's principal editor for new words.

"The word is common, widespread, and people understand it," he explains.  
The word serves a real purpose - it conveys tone in text, something that even the most cynical critics accept.

"I don't 'LOL'. I'm basically someone who kind of hates it," says Rob Manuel of the internet humour site b3ta.  
"But the truth is, we do need emotional signifiers in tweets and emails, just as conversation has laughter. 'LOL' might make me look like a twit, but at least you know when I'm being arch."

**Death of the dictionary**  
But for young internet entrepreneurs like Ben Huh, of the Cheezburger Network of comedy sites, "LOL" is much more than a necessary evil. It's both a tool and a toy.

<strong>OED definition</strong>
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LOL (l?l?l?l?l?l) colloq.  
A. int. Originally and chiefly in the language of electronic communications: 'ha ha!'; used to draw attention to a joke or humorous statement, or to express amusement.  
B. n. An instance of the written interjection 'LOL'.

"'LOL' is a part of everyday life. I use it all the time in e-mail exchanges. It's a polite way of acknowledging someone," he says.  
"And yes, I do say 'LOL' out loud. In almost an ironic sense, like a slow handclap after a bad joke. 'Lol' means 'yes, I understand that was funny, but I'm not really laughing'."

But no matter how much irony we cake it in, the L-word grinds the ears of many people over the age of 25.  
"The death of the dictionary" is how one blogger greeted its induction to the bastion of English.

While on Facebook, there are at least half a dozen "anti-LOL" groups, where lol-ophobes dream of loll-ageddon:  
"If something is funny, 'ha', 'hehehehe', or 'hee hee' is perfectly fine depending on the joke, and more descriptive than 'lol'," writes one hater.

Another complains that lol "doesn't sound anything like laughter. In fact you physically CAN'T say it while smiling. I'm all for bastardisation of the language, but with lol, that thing you thought was rubbish really is rubbish".  
Wags point out that "LOL" is almost always disingenuous.

"How many people are actually laughing out loud when they say LOL?" asks David Crystal, author of Language and the Internet.  
But those laughing least of all are the language purists, who lament "LOL" as a hallmark of creeping illiteracy.  
"There is a worrying trend of adults mimicking teen-speak," says Marie

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Clair of the Plain English Campaign, in the Daily Mail. "They [adults] are using slang words and ignoring grammar. Their language is deteriorating." But is "LOL" really a lazy, childish concoction? When the OED traced the origins of the acronym, they discovered 1980s computer fanatics were responsible. The oldest written records of "LOL" (used to mean laughing out loud) are in the archives of Usenet, an early internet discussion forum. And the original use was typed by Wayne Pearson, in Calgary, who says he wrote the first ever LOL in reply to a gag by someone called "Sprout". "LOL" was "geek-speak that filtered through to the mainstream", says Manuel. "I first saw it in the 1990s - at the end of emails. Then it got picked up by the young kids. Then it went naff. But it came back ironically - with people saying things like 'megalolz'." Grandparents, for example, often adopt "LOL" as one of their first "internet words", says Huh. "'LOL' and 'OMG' are like mamma and dada." But many mistake "LOL" for "lots of love", leading to some unintended "LOLs", such as the infamous tale of the mother who wrote: "Your grandmother has just passed away. LOL." It has also lent its name to some wildly popular internet crazes, like Lolcats, whose appeal spread far beyond the realms of cyber-geeks.

**More than funny**

So why has "LOL", above all other web phrases, become such a phenomenon? Because it's simple and multipurpose, says Tim Hwang, founder of ROFLCon, a whole festival dedicated to "internet awesome". "The magic of LOL is that it's both exclusive and inclusive," he says. "On one level, it's simple to understand. "But it also conveys something subtle - depending on the situation. It means more than just 'funny'. For example, if I had my bike stolen, my friend might reply 'LOL'. It helps overcome an awkward moment." For school kids, acronyms like "LOL" and "KMT" (kiss my teeth) are a kind of secret code, a badge of belonging, says Tony Thorne, author of the Dictionary of Contemporary Slang. "I go into schools and record slang words - all the new terms kids are saying - words like 'lolcano'. And if you talk to kids they will say this is our language - this is what identifies us." But aren't these slang words also harmful to children's vocabulary? Not at all, says Thorne. "Government educationalists get all worked up about words like LOL - they see them as substandard and unorthodox. "But the small amount of research on this issue shows that kids who use slang abbreviations are the more articulate ones. It's called code switching." If we have a literacy crisis, it's among adults as well as children, says Thorne. And slang is not the culprit. In fact, it is enriching the language. Diamond agrees: "There will always be a minority who want the English language to remain as a frozen beast, that doesn't admit changes," he says. "But language is a vibrant, evolving animal."