Jonathon Keats, **Virtual Words: Language on the Edge of Science and Technology**, Oxford University Press, 2011, 192 pp., $19.95 (hardcover).

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The neologism, the strained recursive acronym, and the process of adding or dropping a vowel—these may well be the core technologies of contemporary technoculture. Each technology (or at least each copyrightable variant); each trend; each concept; each new practice; each noun, adjective, or verb; and every achievement, real or imagined, seems to foster a new proliferation of terms. Defenders of the old faith of the English language—the sort who like to remind you that Shakespeare wrote in English—alternately pout and smirk at a language run riot, its growth knowing no reason but its own cancerous fecundity. Or perhaps this panoply represents the latest example of the fertility of language and the carnivalesque delights to be had in a surfeit of words. Or is it a plastic-y bubble of marketing cant, of meaningful human advancement sublimated into product differentiation? Or could it be traces of a future spilling forth its possibility into the language of the present, that old future of the optimistic days? These seem to be the coordinates in which discussions of the language of technology take place. Thankfully, Jonathon Keats' *Virtual Words: Language on the Edge of Science and Technology* takes us elsewhere. True, Keats does seem to take pleasure in the Rabelaisian tumult of it all, just as he also keeps his hatchet sharpened for the occasional worthy target, but this is a book about such enthusiasm and skepticism, not defined by them.
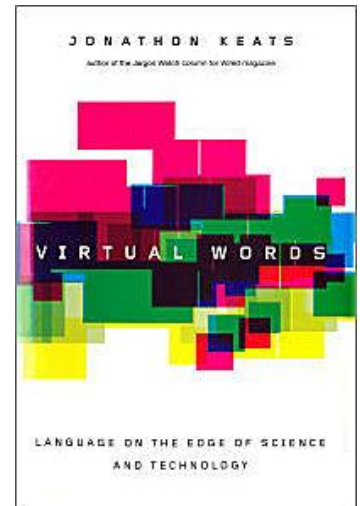
First, what it is not: *Virtual Words* is not a dictionary of slang or technical terms, nor is it a quasi-anthropological field report on the latest piquant sayings. As such, it might disappoint those who are hoping for exhaustive genealogies of related terms or minutely detailed accounts of their emergence and spread, although Keats does touch on these issues at times. This may come as something of a surprise, as he writes *Wired* magazine's "Jargon Watch" column, which would satisfy one's desire for an evolving contemporary glossary (and well-curated index of the latest chatter). Neither does *Virtual Words* focus on some "big idea" concept of "virtual" language, nor argue that words are more or less "virtual" now, and for that we can be thankful. *Virtual Words*' subtitle does it far more justice than its title (which one imagines was selected more for sound than sense): This is a book about the relationship between language, science, and technology.

Where *Jargon Watch* focuses on definition, *Virtual Words* tells stories. Each chapter focuses on a single word (e.g., "flog," "steampunk") and the story behind its origin, its spread, and, occasionally, even its demise. Generally speaking, the length of each chapter has a direct relationship with its quality, and some of those that deal with the most familiar terms are also some of the weakest. For example, the section on the "Great Firewall" will not be of particular interest to anyone likely to read this book, and his discussion of "copyleft" feels rather perfunctory. Fortunately, these are the exceptions, and most of the

entries come in at a keener angle. Essays where Keats deals mostly directly with the story of the emergence of new language are among the best. His account of the Cold War politics behind the christening of the element "Copernicium," along with his discussion of "k" and its progenitor "OK" (perhaps the most successful American proto-meme), manage to boil down complex histories into tight, entertaining prose, and either one is worth the price of the book. His somewhat jaded look at the "the cloud" provides an excellent remedy to the narrative of the term's seemingly inevitable triumph, and his pathology of the failed neologism "Bacn" should be required reading for anyone interested in the relationship between digital technologies, social networks, and influence. Although Keats organized his chosen terms into six sub-headings, *Virtual Words* still reads like a more or less disconnected series of columns that resonate around some similar themes, but don't necessarily add up to a single, sustained argument. *Virtual Words* is probably best read as a sort of nonfiction short story collection, where each individual section stands or falls on its own.

One might argue that the collective effect could be seen as a sort of tableau of the issues of language in our time, but that would hold the work to a standard it cannot hope to satisfy, and one that, I suspect, Keats had no ambition to. In the breadth of its reach, it reminds one of another *Wired* contributor's work, Nicholas Negroponte's 1995 book, *Being Digital*. Both are far-ranging books, loose and agile. However, unlike *Being Digital*, Keats' work is animated by neither manifesto nor prophecy. *Virtual Words* is probably best read as a series of forays into diverse discursive terrain, or as Keats describes it, as "dispatches from the field" (viii). It's a treacherous metaphor, and one that fortunately does not greatly inform his practice. Rather than taking up the traditional anthropological position of the expert whose lived experience "out there" gives them unique authority to translate that world to us, Keats speaks primarily in a journalistic voice, relying on the plausibility of the story he tells, rather than the authority of his experience. Keats describes himself as a "generalist . . . writing from serial and cumulative observation" (viii). As a generalist, Keats reports, rather than pioneers.

The journalistic mode of effacing the narrator has its own hazards, but Keats never fully disappears into his eponymous words. This should come as no surprise to those familiar with his resume of puckish conceptual art, where he skates the boundaries of science and philosophy in the guise of the thinking man's P.T. Barnum. His past exploits include a venue for quantum entanglement marriage, as well as pornography targeted at plants or God (respectively). Keats is not a man that speaks only in a whisper. However, Keats the philosophical prankster is silent in *Virtual Words* (unless, of course, the prank has escaped his readers thus far), but Keats remains. At its best, *Virtual Words* is the work of an amateur in the old sense, of an interested mind sharing the stories of a world that fascinates him. This might seem a rather melodramatic description of a book written mostly in the neutral grays and faint pastels of journalist nonfiction, but it is nonetheless apt. So perhaps this is a book of enthusiasm—not enthusiasm for the novelty of new words, nor for the preservation of the old, but the enthusiasm of an engaged mind focused and sharing its fascination. *Virtual Words* reminds one that language is not only alive, but lively.