The academic who wants to autocorrect our sense of humour

Tom Whipple Science Correspondent

It was obvious what Hannu Toivonen meant — but it was still embarrassing. "I was signing off my e-mail," he said. "It was meant to say 'Best Regards'. What it actually read was, 'Best Retards'."

Autocorrect had struck again. Most people would have sent an apology, hoped no offence was taken and put it down to the curse of sending e-mails on the move. Professor Toivonen, however, is a computer scientist. So he instead conducted a study into the unintentional humour of the erroneous predictive text — with the goal of teaching computers to be funnier.

Belly full of laughs: plans for a polenta dinner can quickly take a bizarre turn

His paper, *Let Everything Turn Well in Your Wife: Generation of Adult Humour Using Lexical Constraints,* reached several conclusions. First, "Meet at the bum stop" is a funny text, as is "Excellent masturbation with breakfast hamper!!! Sorry I mean location". However, "Just off from berk . . . sorry I mean work" is less so.

Such idiosyncracies are celebrated at damnyouautocorrect.com. Its latest submissions include a screenshot of one text: "My sister Julie decided she wanted to have a few drinks after dinner and then I went homosexual."

Most people who have a tablet or smartphone have grown so used to the phenomenon that sending an e-mail to the boss in which, say, pencil is given an anatomical twist, has ceased to be notable, let alone a sacking offence. However, this is the first time that it has been subjected to scientific scrutiny.

Professor Toivonen, from the University of Helsinki, began the research in part because he is interested in making computers humorous. "It is about understanding what mechanisms lie behind humour," he said. Texts are a particularly good mechanism for that."

He and his colleagues took thousands of real texts and experimented with slightly changing them, in much the way that a rogue autocorrect does, then asked people online to rate how funny they were. What he found was, in some ways, not surprising. "Taboo words are a cheap trick to make a text funny. Inserting a taboo word increases the likelihood a text will be humorous."

He also found that context helped a lot — replacing nouns with nouns and verbs with verbs — and that the funniest texts were those in which everything was normal until the very end. What, though, was the point? Professor Toivonen is not looking to create more common predictive text slip-ups, or even funnier ones. What he is aiming to do is more about defining humour algorithmically.

"There is a research field called computational creativity," he said. "It is about how to make computers more creative. Telling jokes is one sort of creativity. Some of the applications for this line of work could be in computer dialogue systems, to make them more human-like."

Another, he claimed, would be in suggesting jokes to people as they typed, to make the texts appear funnier.

Meanwhile, he has come up with a foolproof mechanism to ensure that they never happen in the first place: "I've switched my autocorrect off."

In the river, whatever the weather

The hardiest members of the Serpentine Swimming Club braved the cold for an early morning dip in Hyde Park. Temperatures have been milder than usual since the start of the year, but this week the January chill has returned to weed out the part-timers.

Members of the oldest swimming club in Britain take to the water every morning, including Christmas Day. The swans on the river don't seem to mind the company.

Password that gets you everywhere

Murad Ahmed Technology Reporter

A new leader has emerged on an annual list of common passwords adopted by people to protect their online accounts. However, it is still not that hard to guess.

The word "password" has been unseated as the most used — and therefore the worst — password. It has been displaced by the equally easy to hack "123456", suggesting that millions of online accounts remain insecure.

The research, by the web security company SplashData, is compiled from files containing millions of stolen passwords that have been published online, revealing those cracked most often by computer hackers in 2013.

Despite revelations that intelligence agencies use sophisticated techniques to snoop on internet users, the study

The most common

1	123456	11	123123
2	password	12	admin
3	12345678	13	1234567890
4	qwerty	14	letmein
5	abc123	15	photoshop
6	123456789	16	1234
7	111111	17	monkey
8	1234567	18	shadow
9	iloveyou	19	sunshine
10	adobe123	20	12345

suggests that many people make it remarkably easy to access their internet accounts. According to the research, popular passwords include "qwerty", "abc123" and "letmein", as well as strings such as "111111" and "12345678".

SplashData said that the annual list, which it has been compiling for the past decade, was particularly influenced by a major security breach at Adobe, the makers of Photoshop, last October. It emerged that almost two million of the 130 million people affected by the hacking appeared to be using the password "123456".

"Seeing passwords like 'adobe123' and 'photoshop' on this list offers a good reminder not to base your password on the name of the website or application you are accessing," Morgan Slain, the chief executive of SplashData, said.

Experts suggest that users should adopt a number of different passwords, all of which should be made up of a random string of words, letters or numbers. According to Trustwave, which advises on tackling cybercrime, 30 per cent of internet users re-use passwords across multiple social-networking accounts.

Nazi stunt at party costs Briton his job and €1,500

A British man was fined by a French court yesterday after wearing a Nazi uniform at a stag party attended by a Conservative MP who lost his post over the incident.

Mark Fournier, the party's stag, was given the maximum fine of €1,500 (£1,234) at a police tribunal in Albertville after he was prosecuted for wearing the Nazi uniform and insignia, which is outlawed in France.

Fournier, an Oxford graduate, was sacked from his job as a result of the controversy and has not worked since.

Aidan Burley, a Conservative MP, was dismissed as parliamentary private secretary to Justine Greening when she was Transport Secretary, after pictures were published of the drunken bash at the ski resort and it was reported that guests had been toasting the memory of Nazi leaders.

The party took place on December 3, 2011, in a restaurant in the upmarket Val Thorens. Fournier, who was photographed in full SS regalia whilst giving the Nazi salute, initially faced more serious charges, including denial of war crimes or crimes against humanity and incitement to racial hatred. They were dropped in favour of a sole charge of wearing the uniform of an organisation guilty of crimes against humanity.

An internal Conservative party inquiry released last night after the case finished found that Mr Burley was "stupid and offensive" but is not racist or anti-Semitic.