

Language of the Internet – change or decline?

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Abstract: *Language constantly evolves and technology accelerates that change dramatically. Over the past three decades, the development of communication technologies has recorded the fastest rate in history and has made remarkable impact on the English language. This language 'revolution' has been met with apprehension by the community in much the same way as every new technology in history did. The objective of this paper is to present actual technology-induced language changes in the English language, especially the language of texting and instant messaging, and analyse the objectivity of increasing debate among community concerning the changes. The paper also attempts to provide predictions about possible future development of the English language in the environment of fast-paced developing communication technology and potential areas of investigation of 'netspeak' in the ELT context.*

Keywords: *language; technology; texting; instant messaging; future*

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language, much the same as any other language, is ever-changing, evolving all the time, as words fall out of use or acquire new meanings. We only need to look back at the works of great writers like Shakespeare, Austen and Dickens to see how the English language has changed over time [1]. Societal change and education were often the dominant factors that led to language evolving in times past, but doubtless it is technology that has had the greatest impact on how we speak in recent years. Emoji, LOL, ROFL, selfie, blogging – these words meant little or nothing just a few short years ago but now are part of our everyday lexicon. The entire communication on the internet, be it text messaging, instant messaging or any other electronic communication form has generated what we call 'netspeak' [2], a new language made up of abbreviations, portmanteau words, acronyms, non-standard punctuation, etc.

In view of the fact that the English language has undergone enormous changes particularly over the past two to three decades, the apprehension voiced in different tones and fashions that the English language is being uncontrollably modified for the worse, appears to be justified. However, literature suggests that instead of 'decay' of the language, 'change' is probably a more appropriate word to define what the language is undergoing. In the continuation of the paper, some of the major aspects of the changes in the English language effected by the technology development over the past three decades will be presented. The paper also includes the historical survey of

different technologies introduced into society and their reception in contemporary time. Predictions about future evolution of technologies and their possible influence on the language will be briefly considered in the closing of the paper as well as possible areas of study of the language of the internet in the ELT environment.

2. HISTORICAL SURVEY

'Time and the world are ever in flight' – *William Butler Yeats*

All through the history of humanity, poets and philosophers spoke of the inevitability of fluctuation of life. Language also joins this fluctuating mode and gradually transforms itself over time. English of several hundred years ago, e.g. the language of Shakespeare, sounded remarkably strange to the English of the XIX century, let alone the English of modern time. Thus, there is nothing surprising in the fact that language, being at the core of human expression, cannot escape this universal law. In spite of this, a large number of intelligent people condemn and resent language change. As Aitchison in [3] puts it: 'All through the past century and even before, letters were written and indignant articles published, all deploring the fact that words acquire new meanings and new pronunciations'.

From the time of the Industrial revolution and by the first technological inventions, it was the societal factors and education that were major enablers of language changes. With the introduction of the 'second machine age' [4] or the beginning of computer age, the blame was

shifted on fast-pace evolving technology – and has never ceased since.

A brief look back on the major technological inventions that triggered a faster pace of language change shows that the anxieties about the emergence of new technologies have been with us for quite some time – unjustifiably though, as history has proven. As Crystal in [5] aptly puts it, in the fifteenth century, the arrival of printing was widely perceived by the Church as an invention of Satan, the hierarchy fearing that the dissemination of uncensored ideas would lead to a breakdown of social order. Around 400 years later, similar concerns about censorship and control were widespread when society began to cope with the political consequences of the arrival of the telegraph, the telephone, and broadcasting technology. The telegraph would destroy the family and promote crime, they said. The telephone would undermine society. Broadcasting would be the voice of propaganda. In each case, the anxiety generated specifically linguistic controversy. Printing enabled vernacular translations of the Bible to be placed before thousands. And, when broadcasting enabled selected voices to be heard by millions, there was an immediate debate over which norms to use as correct pronunciation, how to achieve clarity and intelligibility, and whether to permit local accents and dialects, which remains as lively a debate in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth. And then came the Internet – the global voice with communication at the core, and its suite. 'Join the communication', 'share information' is the imperative of today. With the arrival of the mobile phone and its synergy with the Web, 'the number of people involved in the communication revolution has skyrocketed' [6] as the entire planet has come right under our thumbs.

Before making any assertions about positive or negative impact of technology, we need to take a closer look into the actual linguistic properties of the language yielded by the so-called 'electronic revolution' [5]. In doing so, we need to point up actual changes that have occurred and produced this new 'revolutionised' language so as to obtain a reasonable and as objective as possible insight into what the 'revolution' has yielded. In that vein, the most common misconceptions or myths that inevitably accompany every emerging technology need also to be addressed.

3. INTERNET LANGUAGE - NETSPEAK

It is only some twenty years ago or so that the world encountered electronically mediated communication. The World Wide Web was invented in 1991, first emails were sent in mid-90's, weblog (web+log) came into existence in 1997 although blogging was actually introduced in early 2000's, Google search was available in 1999,

mobile phones accompanied by texting facility were widely introduced in late 90's. Instant messaging, Facebook and Twitter introduced us into the new millennium. Each of these have their own distinctive features, however all of the technologies above rely on the written language highlighting a single goal: sharing information. In doing so, these internet outputs apply their own linguistic conceptions. Besides already traditional but still in use email, probably the most utilized of all communication forms are texting, introduced with mobile telephony, and instant messaging (IM), more common in recent time. Language conceptions of texting and IM have been adopted by a great number of social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Viber, Whatsapp, etc.

3.1. What has the netspeak given us?

It goes without saying that texting and IM abound in abbreviations which are generally blamed for 'ruining' the language however a deeper insight into the frame of operation of these internet 'platforms' is needed.

For the purpose of illustration, here is the list of common Internet abbreviations, and chat acronyms that make up what is called netspeak, also sometimes called 'chatspeak'.

AAMOF	As a matter of fact
AFK	Away from keyboard
BC (B/C)	Because
BFF	Best friends forever
BRB	Be right back
BTW	By the way
CU	See you
DIY	Do it yourself
FYEO (4YEO)	For your eyes only
GR8	Great
IDK	I don't know
IMO	In my opinion
JK	Just kidding
LMHO	Laughing my head off
L8R	Later
LOL	Laughing out loud
NOYB	None of your business
NP	No problem
OMG	Oh my god
OT	Off topic
OTOH	On the other hand
ROFL	Rolling on the floor laughing
TIA	Thanks in advance
TMI	Too much information
TTYL	Talk to you later
ATM	At the moment
TY	Thank you
SMH	Shaking my head [7]

Besides the wide use of abbreviations, the internet language has introduced an array of novelties, both lexical and grammatical. Some words have been re-appropriated and given new meaning, e.g.

- HOTSPOTS were locations in travel guides described as 'hotspots for nightlife' or 'dining hotspots', whereas in the netspeak the primary association is 'a WiFi'.
- DRONE meant an irritating noise, now it is a small, pilotless aircraft generally used for video recording in hard-to-reach places.
- CLOUD is a formation in the sky, however the netspeak recognizes it as a model where data is maintained, stored and backed-up remotely and made available to its users over a network.
- TROL is not only an ugly cave-dwelling creature, but also an individual who makes intentionally offensive posts online to gain a reaction.
- COOKIES we enjoy eating, but the internet ones – small pieces of data sent from a web browser and stored while you browse – do not boast of delicious taste.
- The net BUG, an unwanted piece of code that stops the execution of a program, is as much irritating as little creepy, crawly insects.

And the list is by no means exhaustive. Generally speaking, network is a medium where conveying information is in the focus, as mentioned above, hence no wonder that some economical solutions were implemented in the language of the 'global village' medium. In this respect, many noun forms are also used as verbs, e.g. the noun FRIEND has somehow unnoticeably slipped into the verb, so you can 'friend' or 'unfriend' people you meet in cyber space. The meaning of the noun FRIEND has also changed because only a decade ago a 'friend' used to be a person you enjoyed talking to and spent time with, and now you actually do not need to like the person or even know them in cyber environment. Technology has also made additions to vocabulary in other areas, thus nouns like Google, Instagram, Tweeter derived verbs to google, to tweet, and they have become a part of common real world speech. Some new conventions have also been established, e.g. words in uppercase means 'the person is shouting' [8].

Additionally, social media speech tends to shorten the sentences, bringing us the portmanteau or word merge, thus we encounter words like BLAUDIENCE (blog+audience), MOCKUMENTARY (mock+documentary), STAYCATION (stay+vacation), FRENEMY (friend+enemy), COSTPLAY (costume+play) [9], etc.

3.2. The speech for defence

"Go back ten or fifteen years and you would have found endless articles about how our use of the internet, messenger and texting was ruining everyone's vocabulary and we would soon be able to speak in nothing but grunts and emojis" [10]: 'Texting is penmanship for illiterates' (Sunday Telegraph, July 11, 2004), 'The English language is being beaten up, civilization is in danger of

crumbling' (Observer, March 7, 2004); electronically-mediated communication is contagious, polluting traditional writing: '[T]he changes we see taking place today in the language will be a prelude to the dying use of good English' (Sun, April 24, 2001). However, distinguishing between language change and language decline is very tricky business since yesterday's change is often today's norm. We may simply need to wait long enough before an innovation stops being treated with opprobrium by language elites [6].

It cannot be denied that the greatest share of changes laid out above does not make an impression of a move forward in the quality of the language. None of the introductions of this new language shares the sophistication of style, complexity of the discourse and depth of thought. And it is exactly the reason why the questions on the quality of this new linguistic expression surfaces in debates among language professionals. However, a question needs to be put: Is the language of texting and instant messaging supposed to be the language of poetry or prose where the writing conventions are expected to be applied? Is it writing at all? Might it be that this novel language is not expected to have anything in common with writing? Would anyone expect to write a regular daily message to a close friend observing the rules of written conventions?

In his talk named 'Txtng is killing the language... JK!!!', the renown linguist John McWhorter refutes this statement – regardless of the possible misinterpretation on part of those not familiar with the language of texting, as JK in the abbreviation language reads: Just Kidding. McWhorter illustrates that texting is not writing at all. Writing comes along as a kind of artifice, a form with a complex structure, reflective, whereas speech is much looser, more telegraphic, lacking concern with rules [11]. In her book titled *Always on*, Naomi S. Baron extends this description of the written language observing that with writing, you are supposed to be on your best behavior, because someone could re-read what you had inscribed. Grammatical or orthographic errors might come back to haunt you. Electronically-mediated communication is written, though we tend to think of it as more like transient speech. Most messages we read and delete; like speech, they're gone [6]. And here is the point of agreement between the majority of linguists: Despite the fact that texting involves the brute mechanics of something that we *call* writing it is no more than fingered speech [11]. Whenever we need to convey information we tend to use as few words as possible. Regardless of the style, we do not bother to leave the impression of an eloquent person, but simply follow the linguistic pattern needed for the purpose which has nothing in

common with complexity. This is probably how abbreviations made their way into texting being unintentionally more or less subtly introduced. To sum up, texting is only a medium for sharing information in written form uttered in spoken language. And 'spoken language is inherently evanescent' [6]. Hence, is it sensible to conclude that something so ephemeral has the power to change the grand structure of the language corpus developed and modelled through centuries?

The obvious lack of favour of critics for the language of netspeak voiced in prejudices about the adverse impact of texting on young generation was the subject of study of the renown linguist, David Crystal who challenges these prejudices, or the so-called 'myths' about the regressive and degrading impact of texting on the English language. The myths proposed by 'language defenders' are as follows: 1) text messages are full of abbreviations 2) the abbreviations are newfangled by the youth of today, 3) abbreviations promote misspelling 4) abbreviations are common in students' tests and exams [12]. In his research on the accuracy of the myths above, Crystal reports that abbreviations account for only 10% of the entire language corpus used in texting, remarking that this phenomenon is hardly a new one. For the purpose of illustration, the Victorian fascination with language games was amazing; from Royal family down, people played language games: ICUR2WS4M (I see you are too wise for me) [12]. Victorians or people of any other era were not technologically supported for their own exploration of language. They would have probably been texting in the same fashion as we do today if only they had had what we do. Each time has its own frame, and technology is our frame. As for the third myth, Crystal points up that according to the studies performed, the best texters are always the best spellers – 'you need to know where letters are to leave them out' [12]. The final myth relies on very rare exceptions – students are perfectly aware what distinction is between the language of texting and the one they write in their tests and exams. Moreover, given the fact that young people do not use the language of texting in places where it is not expected, but write in an ordinary way, observing conventions of the written language, it is sensible to conclude that young people develop simultaneously bilingual and bidialectal writing skills and 'being bilingual is cognitively beneficial' [11]. Their capacity to adopt and utilize these writing concepts is the 'evidence of a balancing act, expansion of their linguistic repertoire' [11].

Finally, when defying myths of supposedly profound, dramatic and lasting impact of newly developed lexical forms in the language of texting and instant messaging, LOL and SLASH are among words that evolved as the part of new

language structure. Initially, in texting, LOL stood for Laughing Out Loud which both young people and adults used when they wanted to indicate laughing. SLASH (/) was commonly used for providing alternatives, e.g. *and/or*, or to show that something has two uses. In modern texting language, these words represent 'pragmatic particles' as linguists call them, i.e. LOL is a marker of empathy, accommodation, while SLASH is a marker of topic change [11]. Hence the only dramatic phenomenon about these two words, and undoubtedly a raft of others, is only the speed at which their meaning has changed over only a short period of time, let alone their long-term influence on such a magnificent structure of the English language. And this goes for a great number of words whose development on the internet could also be tracked and described in detail. However, it is not the subject of this paper.

3.3. 'You ain't seen nothing yet' [9]

The consensus exists as to the emergence of distinctive varieties of language closely related to the fast-pace evolving technology, the Internet in particular, however the future developments will certainly widen this scope of technological innovation which will multiply the impact not on language only, but on all segments of society. 'Many new technologies are anticipated, which will integrate the Internet with other communication situations, and these will provide the matrix within which further language varieties will develop [5].

As for the language yet to come, predicting the future depends on understanding the present. The majority of self-proclaimed 'experts' who argue that language is disintegrating have not considered the complexity of the factors inducing language change. They are giving voice to a purely emotional expression of their hopes and fears [3]. A closer look at language change has indicated that it is natural, inevitable and continuous, and involves interwoven sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors which cannot easily be disentangled from one another. There is no evidence that languages are moving in any particular direction from the point of view of language structure. It is always possible that language is developing in some mysterious fashion that linguists have not yet identified. Only time and further research will tell. There is much more to be discovered [3].

Although the application of the language of the Internet in the ELT environment has not been the subject of this paper, this topic, still in infancy, will doubtless find its niche in the realm of ELT in years to come. The language of instant communication media is certainly not applicable in either general ELT or academic contexts, however the fact that this novel, abbreviated language is used by the majority of non-native speakers of English suggests material for potential areas of

investigation of the 'netspeak' phenomenon, e.g. the extent to which English language learners are acquainted with the remarkable corpus of the language of instant messaging or their sensitivity to linguistic contrasts of standard language of tests and exams and non-standard language of instant communication media.

4. CONCLUSION

Accelerating evolution of technology has had a marked impact on all varieties of the English language. By the rule which reads that technologically-induced changes inflicted on language are always met with apprehension by the community and often depicted as regressive and degradable, current language modifications and emergence of varieties of language have commonly been the subject of language debates. In their research of phenomena of modern Internet language forms, the leading language professionals have attempted to illustrate that changes the language is undergoing are often misinterpreted, stating that they are part of a natural process which is far from being damaging to the complex corpus of the English language.

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