The Transformation of the English Language in the Internet Age: An Evolution or Mutation?

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Abstract

Is the English language evolving or mutating into a stunted version of its former self? Is the Internet a contributor to the degeneration of the English language? Is the beauty and dignity of the language completely lost in the written word of social media? These are questions that plague the minds of academics, school teachers, writers and language enthusiasts the world over. Many changes have occurred that have shocked and outraged the speakers of the English language at every stage. It evokes a similar reaction from people who blame the influence of the Internet and social media for 'textese' (where all words are abbreviated through a combination of letters and numbers), and the invention of new words that seem to have no meaning. They also worry that accepted meanings and connotations of English words are being abandoned for modern meanings. On the whole, the English language is rapidly becoming unrecognizable. However, this paper seeks to mark its observations on the trends of evolution and changes that the English language has undergone, since it was brought to the British Isles by the Angles, Saxons and the Jutes in the fifth century. Since that time, the myriad of changes to the English language have only succeeded in transforming the language into a competent tool for expressing the unique experiences of the modern man.

Key Words: English Language, Internet, degeneration, etc.

Introduction

Our world has become an increasingly digital universe, with digital technology taking over almost all aspects of modern life, from shopping at the grocery store to doing our Christmas shopping (which are all done online), to taking the bus to work or watching our favorite

sports on TV (both of which we can follow and get updates from on Twitter). Communication and correspondence of any sort is carried out within minutes – in the time it takes to double-click your mouse – and life goes on as usual in lightning speed. In such a fast-moving digital world, it is not surprising that our manner of communication has also changed and evolved very rapidly in the most unprecedented, and sometimes shocking, ways. A steep rise in the availability and use of the internet has been an important factor that has led to many of the changes we see today in the English language. According to an annual study conducted by wearesocial.com, a global marketing and advertising agency, the number of Internet users worldwide in the year 2018 is 4.021 billion, having increased by 7% every year in the past years. Out of this, the number of social media users worldwide is 3.196 billion, and has gone up by 13% every year (Kemp). India remains among the top countries that have shown the highest increase in social media usage, as technology improves in leaps and bounds, and social media becomes more easily accessible to the common man.

The most common social media sites, favored by the current generation – popularly known as the millennials – are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. A point to be noted is that, out of the four sites, the content of two sites (Snapchat and Instagram) are predominantly image-based, and one of them (Twitter) relies heavily on the brevity of the message for its success. That leaves Facebook, where people would rather 'friend' and 'poke' than have an actual conversation! This gives one an idea of the limited scope of the written word on most social media platforms.

Technology and the Internet Transform the English Language

The advent of the digital era has set in motion a series of rapid changes in the lexicon of the English language, as well as styles of writing and various expressions used. We see the inclusion of new words like 'selfie', 'to Google', 'photobombing', 'to friend' (and 'unfriend') and so on. These are just a few examples of the kind of words that have become part of the English language used on social media. Some of these words have become so common that they have even been included in the Oxford English dictionary. Apart from invented words, we also have the appropriation of existing vocabulary to stand for something different. For instance, the word 'wall' stands for the page where one creates their Facebook posts, rather than the wall of a building. 'Wireless' used to stand for a landline phone, walkie-talkie or a microphone that did not have any wires attached to it. Now it refers to an Internet hotspot device. 'Tablet' is another interesting word, as it used to refer to medicine pills or a small rectangular fragment of stone, ceramic or marble. Now it refers to a smart device that is somewhere between a 'smartphone' and a 'laptop'. As it is obvious, some of these words are impossible to explain without employing other neologisms and invented words from the digital age.

Inventive vocabulary and the evolution of the English language is not just a new concept occurring due to the technological developments of recent decades. The language has imbibed various words from different languages, and invented new ones to keep up with the changing times. However, the Internet age has perhaps hastened the speed in which these changes are carried out. So-called 'influencers' of social media are the catalysts towards this change, and words they coin are soon carried on by their 'followers', and so on. Another aspect that sets this age apart from the previous ones is the speed at which new vocabulary is not only introduced, but used, overused, and also discarded. Using supposedly 'outdated' words can give rise to embarrassing reactions like 'that is so 2015' or '2007 called and wants its vocabulary back'! This means that learning the new 'Internetese' becomes very important if one is to stay relevant on the various social media platforms.

Is Social Media Driving the Decline of the English Language?

It is not surprising, based on the above observations, that the conventions, forms, and rules of the English language are, in some cases regrettably, not a huge priority for most social media users. College professors lament the dire fall in the standard of written English among students. Ryan Lytle, a staff writer for the *U.S. News & World Report*, states in his article that the way students communicate with one another through social media and text messaging has gradually bled into high school classrooms across the country. In the same article, a survey states that out of around 700 students of ages 12 to 17 surveyed by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 85% of the respondents reported using a form of electronic communication, whether through text message or social media. Nina Jasilek the Assistant Course Director for London School of Publishing states that the main effect that social media has had on the English writing skills of students is that messages tend to become much shorter. For example, "I will send her a message on Facebook" is shortened to say "I'll fb her'. This sort of abbreviation of words and the abrupt shortening of sentences is a trend that carries over into formal writing. Sentences and phrases that they write in assignments, essays etc. tend to become shorter owing to the staccato-style of writing adopted on social media sites.

Another factor that shapes the standard of the English language, especially written English, is the fact that students are able to carry out spellchecks and grammar checks on their writing applications like MS Word. There are also other apps like Grammarly.com that proofread and correct all written communication on social media platforms, emails etc. as it is being written. This means that social media users, especially younger people, are not sticklers for spellings, grammar or sentences structure. Sometimes, even punctuation becomes simply ornamental. The common expressions, sentiments and exclamations are instead being represented with emojis.

Is the Language Evolving or Mutating?

Many scholars and observers of the English language put forth the argument that the language is, in fact, growing and evolving, as it has been through the centuries. There have been numerous influences on the English language, from its earliest roots. The evolution of the English language can be separated into three major periods: Old English (450 – 1100 A.D.), Middle English (1150 – 1500 A.D.), and Modern English (1500 A.D. onwards). During these periods, the English language has undergone significant changes, thus becoming very different from the language that was brought to the British Isles by the Angles, Saxons and the Jutes in the fifth century. Following these changes that have coincided with major political and historic upheavals to the island nation, the English language continues to evolve and grow through what we refer to as the Modern Age.

The Late Modern English sees its advent after the sixteenth century, as a direct result of the establishment of colonies and trade relations by the Crown throughout the world. This brings not only spices, different fabrics precious stones, and other precious cargo, but also the language and vocabulary from those diverse nations. These changes too have, in their times, caused trepidation and a suspicion that the English language would be worse off for all the changes. John Dryden (1631 – 1700) expresses his worry for this trend with the words, "…I rather fear a declination of the language, than hope an advancement of it in the present age" (qtd in Wells 39). However, we know now that some of the most glorious literature was yet to come.

Thus the changes observed occurring to the English language are not to be viewed as mutations or even a degeneration of the sanctity of the language. In fact, it should be viewed as the very nature of the English language to shun rigidity and antiquation, and instead evolve through the absorption of the lexical changes around it and remain as a relevant and diverse form of expression of the modern experience.

Change Could Also Mean Growth

Dire though the circumstances may seem, all is not lost as far as the English language is concerned. Many would argue that the Internet and the digital age have only helped the English language to grow, rather than deteriorate. Many of the usages and neologisms ascribed to the age of the Internet and digital technology has enhanced the English language, thus proving that it is an ever-growing and living language. English seems to be the 'mother tongue' of the information and communication technology tribe. 'Internetese' and 'textese' are just some of the words used to describe the particular jargon and usages that are characteristic of this language. As technology and the Internet become more of a household mainstay with each passing year, this language is no more restricted to the office cubicles of

software engineers and 'techies' hunched over laptop and servers. It is now the normal spoken and written language of the tech-savvy common man.

Globalization and the English Language

In the twentieth century, English has emerged as a global language, as a direct result of globalization. The collaboration between academics and professionals of different countries with the native speakers of the language has also contributed to its global status. Many countries have chosen English as the language of education, diplomacy, science, and technology.

In the study entitled "Evolution of English in the Internet Age", M. Talib Al-Kadi and Ali Ahmed quote the observations of McCrindle and Wolfinger thus:

> Technology, American culture, multiculturalism, and globalization are four forces shaping language today. Technology has done more than extending our vocabulary; it has changed the way we use language, communicate and express ourselves. It is the younger generations who are at the forefront of this language revolution. (22-23)

Endorsement of Dictionaries

As mentioned earlier, there has been a rapid influx of new words and neologisms into the English language. This is endorsed by the conventional dictionaries like the Oxford English Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary that add new words (most of them stemming from social media) into the lexicon.

For instance, in the year 2018, the Oxford English Dictionary has added the following words among others:

- e-publishing *n.*: the production of books, magazines, newspapers etc. that can be read using a computer, for example on the Internet or on a CD.
- nothingburger, *n.* and *adj.*: a person or thing of no importance, value, or substance. Mow *esp.:* something which, contrary to expectations, turns out to be insignificant or unremarkable.
- Idiocracy, *n.*: a society consisting of or governed by idiots (or people characterized as idiots); (also) a government or ruling body formed of people considered stupid, ignorant, or idiotic. Also as a mass noun: society or government of this kind.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary has added around 25 new words adapted from the modern English usages, into their lexicon, with a few of them being:

- TL;DR (*abbrev.*): "too long; didn't read" – used to say that something would require too much time to read. A two to three line summary of the entire text usually follows this abbreviation.
- bingeable, *adj.*: a television show or series having multiple episodes or parts that can be watched in rapid succession.
- airplane mode, *n.*: an operating mode for an electronic device (such as a mobile phone) in which the device does not connect to wireless networks or cannot send or receive communications (such as calls or text messages) or access the Internet, but remains usable for other functions.

The quick growth of a whole new sub-set of jargon and colloquialism has even led to the creation of a unique dictionary that is purely the product of social media – the Urban Dictionary. This is a crowdsourced web dictionary where common users contribute towards the content. Zanzotto and Pennacchiotti, in their study, attribute the Urban Dictionary's validity as a true indicator of the Internet language to the fact that "…it is specifically dedicated to specific community languages and to the tracking of new verbal expressions…" Urban dictionary was created in 2003 as a kind of forum to collect definitions of new 'street' words and colloquial expressions. At present, Urban Dictionary is considered a reliable source for finding newly introduced colloquial words and expressions. Crowdsourcing ensures that the nature of the content is collaborative, balanced, objective and truthful.

The Expression of the True Millennial Experience

The late baby boomers, the Gen-X and the Gen-Y are some of the generations that fall into this overwhelming spectrum referred to as the 'millennials'. Theirs is a truly unique experience, as they stand at the cusp of the truly futuristic world that their forefathers considered only fantasy fiction or near impossibilities. This generation grows up rapidly, and lives a life that stops for none. They are highly connected to the web, and receive information on the go, and sometimes even let go of it just as rapidly. The framework of the English language of today is structured and defined according to the tendencies and culture of this fast-paced life lived by the millennial generation.

The reminisce of earlier years with #TBTs which stand for 'Throwback Thursday', and they get 'hangry' (angry due to lack of food) when they've been starving. When incredulity leaves them in a state of speechlessness, they exclaim "I can't even!", and they approach all challenges with an attitude of YOLO (You Live Only Once). This approach to life calls for a unique lexicon that can aptly describe and portray their experiences. In that sense, English is indeed catering to the native speakers of the language, the millennials of the World Wide Web, and thus remains true to its form, evolving to include the changing times.

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