

Social Media and English Language

Dr Saptorshi Das

KIIT School of Management, KIIT Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar

das.saptorshi@gmail.com

Prof Sayantika Bose Chakraborty

Techno India College, Kolkata

syantika.bosechakraborty@gmail.com

Abstract: Can we imagine a life without Facebook, WhatsApp or Instagram? I guess, most of us cannot. For many of us, our lives are fuelled by social media. Staying in touch with people, keeping pace with the happenings around us, celebrity gossip.... None of it would be possible without the blessing that social media is. Social media has totally revolutionized the ways of interaction and communication in myriads of ways. The important question that this paper raises is whether this shift away from real life communication towards a more virtual sort has had a significant impact on the way we converse in English or write in the language. Moreover, if the answer is yes, then the paper endeavors to identify the ways and areas where the influence is more pronounced.

Keywords: *Social media, Internet, Communication, Educators, Students, Influences.*

INTRODUCTION

Let's face it. We cannot survive without social media. At least, a majority of us cannot. Social media has made the world a much smaller place than it had been before. It is almost like one huge, gigantic family, wherein people are constantly in touch with another. Thanks to social media, the sheer volume of people we can converse with all the time, has drastically improved in the recent years. And it is not just the volume of people that we are able to communicate with. Social media has introduced us to a myriad range of personalities, an entire gamut of differing perspectives, and an ever-changing variety of approaches to life and its nuances. It has helped build new relationships and forge new bonds. However, in spite of all the positivity attached to social media, there is one major drawback to its use: a major distortion of the English Language. Or more appropriately, a complete evolution of the English Language. I mean, in the year 2013, when Oxford English Dictionary announced their Word of the Year, it proved how much the vocabulary that initiated on the net has slowly crept into the English language. Guess what the Word of the Year was? "Selfie"! And it does not stop at "selfie". "To Google" is widely accepted as a verb, and thanks to Facebook, "to unfriend" is "proper" English.

Sad but true, only social media professionals, academicians and journalists (not those writing in popular tabloids for some undeserved fame), what the majority of us write on social media is unedited, unsupervised and unchecked for proper and correct use of the language. And endowed with this liberty to use the English language in whichever way we wish to on social media, distortion is inevitable. And therefore, for effective conversations to take place, leaving no room for misunderstandings and misinterpretations, a basic knowledge of the English language (if not more) is necessary.

The impetus on the ability to effectively communicate in English -to read, write and speak - is of paramount importance. And therefore, not just teachers, but even students of the English Language ought to assume an active role in the teaching-learning process, instead of merely being passive receivers. This could be possibly only through constant innovation in the teaching methodology, through which students could be made an integral part of the learning process. Conventional methods of teaching are just not enough anymore, and fail to instill either interest or active thought processes in students. A huge challenge that confronts the language teacher, therefore, is to make the teaching-learning process innovative, learner-friendly, interactive and energetic. Cumulatively, a herculean task indeed!

And in this task, the role of social media cannot be undermined, as it provides interested learners with the opportunity to participate in real and relevant conversations taking place online. The greatest advantage of social media over any conventional media is that, it gives learners an opportunity to get acquainted with the content in a very user-friendly way. In case of newspapers or television, users are forced to assume the role of mere receivers of the information, whereas, while using the internet, users are given a chance to comment on the content, which is definitely a more enriching learning experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It may be noted that there seems to be no unanimously endorsed definition of the term 'social media', and researchers often use terms like Web 2.0 (Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009), social networking (Livingston & Brake, 2010), social software (Owen, Grant, Sayers & Facer, 2006; Minocha, 2009) or simply, the internet. Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition of social media as 'a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 61) may be adopted as the most effective definition of the term 'social media'. The term might be used to encompass, amongst others, social networking services (Facebook, Whats App), blogs (Blogspot), microblogs (twitter) video sharing (YouTube), and image sharing (Flickr), enabling people to connect and collaborate.

Educators are constantly looking for innovative ways to engage students in a way that propels social media to emerge as a viable replacement of the conventional learning environment predominant so far (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs & Meyer, 2010). The research is on to provide new avenues to teaching the language, thereby blending technology and pedagogy (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010; Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Veletsianos & Navarrete, 2012). According to recent research findings, students and teachers constantly use these emerging technologies and platforms in several facets of their daily lives (Browning, et al. 2011; Chen & Bryer, 2012). However, the percentage of people using them for academic purpose is quite limited (Chen & Bryer, 2010; Lenhart, et al., 2010; Tiryakioglu & Erzurum, 2010).

Several studies have reported that the use of social media for direct and social communications surpass the use for academic purpose. Interestingly, these studies have also put forth the fact that an increasing percentage of women students demonstrate competence in and a favourable attitude towards the use of technology (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). From the perspective of the teacher, several surveys were conducted to unravel the reasons for the limited use of social media as a supplementary tool for academic activities and the teaching-learning process.

Primary factors highlighted in the research surveys were revealed as: workload, cyber security, privacy issues, and lack of motivation for adopting innovative practices (Chen & Bryer, 2012; Tiryakioglu & Erzurum, 2010). While a large number of educators celebrate the potential of social media to enhance the learning abilities of their students, others fear that the increasing use of this platform might adversely affect the effectiveness of the traditional teaching-learning methods (Derrick, J. and K. Ecclestone, 2008).

Researchers like Absolum (2009), Hillier (2011), Knowles (2008), Barton et al. (2011), Ivanic et al. (2008) and Beder (2011) have highlighted in their works that for effective learning of the language it is quite imperative that the learning environment is relaxed and comfortable. They have also identified the parameters that lead to a conducive ambience in the class as the acoustics, attitude of the other learners and most significantly the behaviour of the teacher. They have put forth the statement that the primary way in which the teachers can bring about a significant development in the learning abilities of the learners is through their ways of interaction and the communicative style. They have also opined that various forms of social media have gradually enabled the learners to transcend the boundaries of their classrooms. The social media services encourage high levels of participation among the learners which is quite effective for language learning. According to them, the virtual world entails variegated flavours like persistence, wide area network, multi-user and different avatars.

DISCUSSION

Social media has revolutionized the ways of interaction and communication in myriads of ways. The social lives of all and sundry have been hugely influenced by the services of the internet – this is a fact that can hardly be denied. The important question that this paper raises is whether this shift away from real life communication towards a more virtual sort has affected the way we speak and write English. Moreover, if the answer is yes, then the paper endeavours to identify the ways and areas where the influence is more pronounced.

The pace of communication is an area which has undergone a colossal change due to the emergence of social media. The fact that social media enables us to communicate with a larger number of people on a far global scale than we can ever think of interacting with on a local level, has lent enormous pace to the flow of communication. The average number of friends that a young person has on Facebook in recent times is much larger compared to the number of friends in real life. Hence, the rate of communication or the pace of interaction has to definitely be faster in order to maintain the bond of friendship with so many people simultaneously. As a matter of fact, the written exchanges need to be concise and meaningful, which makes the process of communication speedy and effective. These exchanges are simultaneously shared between all the people connected through social media, which makes communication economic in terms of time.

Twitter has a 140 character limit; thus, comments need to be precise and cryptic. At the same time, the essential meaning of the message has to remain unchanged. Owing to the compulsion of writing brief messages, acronyms have now taken the place of whole sentences; TGIF (Thank God it's Friday!), WTH (What the hell!), LOL (laugh out loud), TY (Thank you), OMG (Oh my God), ASAP (As soon as possible), TTYL (talk to you later) are just a few that demonstrate how social media speeds things up by lessening the need to write longer phrases.

Emoticons are yet another way to convey the user's feelings and emotions without actually putting them in words. One can definitely protest that this is a lazy form of writing, but then, social media is not about creative writing; it is just a faster and more convenient way to interact with people. That too, with greater impact.

There have been innumerable additions to the stock of English words, thanks to all the people constantly engaged in social networking who keep coining new words and adding new meaning to existing words. As a result of this process, the English language is perpetually evolving and vocabulary growing to accommodate these fluxes. For instance, the traditional Old English 'friend' and 'befriend' have lost their importance to 'friend' and 'unfriend' - that is to add or remove people from the list of Facebook friends. Google is no more just a mere search engine. It has now become the universally accepted term for the conventional phrase 'search/look for it' in everyday speech. So many other words, like, 'status', 'profile', 'wall', 'troll' and 'like', are just a few other instances of words that have been endowed with a completely new connotation due to the widespread use of social media.

The profound change in grammar, punctuation, syntax and vocabulary of the language may be considered as subversion of the language by the conservative generation of language teachers. The kind of meta-English written by younger generation these days can be at times utterly confusing, for example the generous use of exclamation mark (!) and ellipsis (...). It is so common now to see messages or comments or any form of exchange on social networking sites strewn with unnecessary dots. According to the rules of English, grammar an exclamation mark is a punctuation mark usually used after an interjection or exclamation to indicate strong feelings or high volume (shouting), and often marks the end of a sentence. Nowadays, even a simple message of 'Good Morning' comes with at least three exclamation marks put after it throwing all the rules of English grammar to the winds.

Words, nowadays, may be English in sound, but the fact is that they have been subjected to the punishment of excessive abbreviation, compression and modification. So, 'for' becomes '4', and words like 'forgive' become '4giv', 'forget' becomes '4git', 'fortune' becomes '4tune', 'forever' becomes '4eva'! Wow! The abbreviations are sometimes hilarious, wherein, 'see' has been reduced to a single alphabet 'c', 'you' to 'u', 'tea' to 't'. And the list can go on and on.

Even the answer scripts of English sometimes bear these abbreviations as the learners are so habituated to these compressions. Evaluators almost drop in shock to see 'straight' written as 'Str8', 'at' as '@', 'come' as 'cum', 'that' as 'dat', and so on and so forth. The emerging challenge before a language teacher is to enable the learners to differentiate between correct and incorrect English as well as motivate them to socialise for an overall development of their personality. Even if the teaching of grammar, syntax and morphology is not that rigorous or stringent as it used to be in the earlier classes of English language, a basic sense of the language must be instilled in the learners. This is indispensable as the ability to write clearly enables clarity of thought process which in turn leads to the ability to communicate effectively.

CONCLUSION

This paper clearly brings out the fact that the extensive use of social media has definitely made English a dynamic language as it has evolved by incorporating a plethora of terms and phrases coined by the social media.

English teachers are making use of this platform in an innovative way to bring newer approaches in the teaching-learning process which is quite interesting. Research has proved that the acquisition of language is influenced by the society and therefore interactive in nature. According to the theory of language socialization, language learning is interwoven with cultural interaction and "mediated by linguistic and other symbolic activity". Social media provides ample opportunities to the language learners to participate in real and relevant conversations that take place online thereby practice the language in actual situations even outside the classrooms.

Through the word coinages the Internet has gradually led to the development of a language of its own kind – a language which thrives on brevity and condensation. This new genre of language has, to an extent, been amalgamated in the conventional use of English with the dictionaries making way for these terms and phrases. Social media has also succeeded in breaking down a lot of barriers as people now write for a larger audience. It may be borne in mind that respect for privacy and social etiquettes have undergone a huge transformation with the emerging of this common platform. The creation of blogs and other online platforms should be encouraged by the language teachers as this immensely help in enhancing the communicative abilities of the learners. At the same time through blogs teachers can themselves interact with other teachers and through different case studies the teaching of language gains a new positive dimension. Social media is surely transforming the way we communicate and it is definitely expanding our social lives by enabling us to explore newer horizons through online connections.

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