RESEARCH PAPER

Semantic Change in English Language: Social Media Neologisms

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Abstract

English has faced a gradual change since its inception. Apart from other changes, semantic change is quite obvious. This article analyses the semantic changes in English language and also highlights the role of CMC in semantic change which is a result of language contact. Focusing on neologisms used in social media, the study highlights a series of words and their meanings as used in CMC. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube etc. are popular social media/chat messengers which have altogether given new expressions to the old English words. For the analysis of the neologisms used in CMC, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were selected as sample. Using purposive sampling technique, the most popular terminologies used on these social media were analyzed to know whether and to what extent neologisms are created by CMC. The study discloses that so many meanings of the words of English language have changed, or used in slightly different sense.

Keywords: Change and Neologism, CMC, English, Impact, Semantic

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Introduction

We often realize that our habits, interests and topics of discussion change during different stages of our lives. Everything that is living goes through a process of change or evolution. In the same way, our principal communicative strength, language, undergoes the same procedure. Every living language has a common feature of change. We may not be consciously monitoring this fact but every other day we come across unique words, phrases and terminologies. These novel terms, that are steadily practiced by speakers, and acknowledged as specific lexemes, are known as neologisms (Pavol, 2002). Malec & Rusinek (2015) are of the view that the language change results in neologisms and Jean Aitchison divides them into two groups:

Firstly, the external factors predominantly the sociolinguistic factors that are societal factors outside the language system. Secondly, the internal psycholinguistic
factors i.e., psychological and linguistic factors which exist in mind of the speakers and in the structure of the language itself.

Katamba (2005) considers technology and digitalization as one of the external sociolinguistic factors for language change. Technology has rapidly developed in past few decades and has affected all the societal spheres especially language. The existence of technology in form of social media has been through immense escalation. The social media is ubiquitous in form of many different web sites, and mobile applications. The users of social media have used English language predominantly all over the world and brought novel inventions in language. Since so many users use social media all over the globe, the newly coined terms and words also have optimum prospects for a concentrated dissemination beyond the boundaries of the original speech community. This makes the fact clear that there is not only a vocabulary expansion in English language only but also the other languages are enjoying these coined terms as new addition in their lexicon.

Along with the progress in technology and evolution of language in the present era, Computer-mediated-communication (CMC) is also ubiquitous. Linguistic change is rapid and abundant which was a unique phenomenon in the past. There is a possibility that CMC, in short span of time, may create massive influence on the language. Crystal (2005) expressed his belief that 21st century English language will be highly influenced by CMC. The usage of internet has undoubtedly changed the mode we use for communication, contributing towards the creation of a unique features of online discourse. These features, in online discourse, are prevalent in present era what Crystal (2006) mentions as, ‘Netspeak’, or ‘Cyberspeak’. This study focuses on social media and the effect of ‘Netspeak’ in creating neologisms in English vocabulary.

According to Fowler (1983), A good language group depends upon the gift of speech as well as a good vocabulary. The English vocabulary holds a dynamic landscape. It has a remarkable flexibility, range and adaptability. It is because of the language contact with foreign languages as well as the readiness of English language to coin new words (McCarthy & Dell, 1994). In 17th and 18th centuries, a group of scholars believed that language and its rules should be fixed and there should be no change in it. This happened to be a misguided approach towards language. Change has always been essential part of any language that is living. The change under discussion is not only limited to the structure of the language but also to each and every aspect of the language e.g. there has been much addition in English registers since the advent of English language. Many Words are created or used in different sense. Multiple meanings of a word are used in context differently everywhere (Lyons, 1995). Algeo (1993) in this book "Among the New Words" has tried to state the origin and initial use of many expressions and the change brought in them in social climate. Pranjić (2016) in his research states that neologisms are newly coined words which
may be generated for numerous reasons and in numerous contexts. Neologisms are found and used all around. Moreover, with the proliferation of CMC, the number of coinage is escalating. Social media neologisms have assimilated in our language and has sharpened our communication that is all the time evolving.

Social media neologism has contributed, to a large extent, in ESP (English for Specific Purposes). The words used on social media have become a part of social media register. According to Crystal (2006), internet has largely influenced the English language and has made it a new register. It is so because many old words are being used in different sense. In a review of Crystal’s Language and Internet, Thorne & State (2003) write that the cyber communication gives birth to abbreviations, emoticons and neologisms. It happens because new technology brings new features and most of the old words are used to present some different meanings i.e. wall, poke, tag, and share are some examples from popular social network Facebook which issue fourth changed meanings. Stern (1975) believes that meanings are changed because of certain factors i.e., psychological ones. Hence his opinion seconds this study because the psychology of the chatters in CMC is prone towards creativity. People like to coin new words or give new meanings or expressions to existing words. The prevalent word on social media, tweet, is the example of the change in meaning. The neologism tweet is quite different from its initial meanings. This will be correct to say that such neologisms have become more popular than the initial meanings they contained or expressed. This is because of the capacity of English language to change in various aspects. There have always been changes in English throughout its history and social meanings used in English language have also changed. (Graddol, Leith, & Swann, 1996). This change in social meanings is often unconscious/change from above. Change in language, particularly in meaning, happens unconsciously to the speakers i.e. above their conscious level. Speaker change the meaning of some word with new trends (Wenz, 2013). CMC itself is issuing fourth new trends online which have resulted in creation of many neologisms. The communication was never so rapid in the past as it has become in present era. Millions of the online people use various social networks. Each of these networks contain its specific layout and terms. The cyber conversation as well as the layout of the social networks help creating neologisms. Jackson & Amvela (2000), while investigating the vocabulary, are of the view that the meaning of a word is combination of many of relations: relation with words having opposite or similar meanings etc. Hence words do change their meaning in contexts and certain situations so have they changed in online discourse. This change has been diachronic nature. Many English words have been changed in meanings under Latin influence (Stehling, 2014). Küpper (2011) seconds this statement saying in his conference paper that meanings have had regular changed in the history of English language. This suggests that change in meaning is not something new. Moreover CMC, just like the Latin influence, has given a proliferation to the change in meanings of many words. Fischer
(1998) defines a nonce formation as a neologism created by a writer/speaker immediately to shelter some instantaneous requirement. This is one of the strongest arguments in favour of the creation of neologisms. The conversation in CMC has become quite rapid and people are coining new words and neologisms in their daily online interaction.

**Material and Methods**

This is qualitative and descriptive research. In this study, the researchers have delimited the study to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in order to collect frequently used neologisms. The data was collected from these 3 websites and is presented in shape of various words and their old and new meanings. Selected neologisms on these social media are also displayed in data analysis to show that the online use of these neologisms has great escalation. These neologisms are used everywhere in spoken and written forms. We find the use of these neologisms in newspapers and TV News as well. Purposive sampling method is used to select these social media websites. These websites may be considered representatives of rest of all the social media networks because they are ubiquitous in Pakistan. Most of the online community is Pakistan is expected to be active member of these websites. All the celebrities in Pakistan (politicians, crickets, singers and actors etc.) use Twitter. All of these have their Facebook accounts as well. Moreover, online business especially amid COVID-19, is carried though Facebook pages. The activities/business activities of all the mentioned people as well as of the general public is available on YouTube. Hence these social media networks are daily accessed and used. People are also Using Facebook and YouTube for earning money. On a small-scale study, the main pages/home pages of these social media networks were selected which are replete with neologisms. Some on these are entirely new words, some are blends but most of them are old words used in entirely new sense. Hence this study focuses on the neologisms used on three dominant social media networks.

**Results and Discussion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Examples of Neologism from Facebook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neologisms</td>
<td>Old Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Friend</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

641
**Table 2**

Examples of Neologism from YouTube

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neologisms</th>
<th>Old Use</th>
<th>New Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>To post some video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel</td>
<td>Band of frequencies used in radio or television</td>
<td>A division designed to display the users’ videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like</td>
<td>To regard</td>
<td>To find some post good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>The place where you live</td>
<td>The main page of website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share</td>
<td>To use something with others</td>
<td>To share your videos with people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trending</td>
<td>Prevailing tendency</td>
<td>Popular videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upload</td>
<td>To move to a larger network</td>
<td>To share your videos online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>A structure of brick or stones</td>
<td>Sharing pictures for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow</td>
<td>To report one’s presence</td>
<td>To see the posts first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>To publish</td>
<td>To publish videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribe</td>
<td>To pay to get publication regularly</td>
<td>Free following of a video channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel Art</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Display Pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>A place from where people can borrow books, music or videos</td>
<td>A collection of online videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dashboard</td>
<td>The parts of the inside of the car and has controls on it</td>
<td>Something that provides a high-level overview of recent activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>A group of people that lives in same area</td>
<td>The YouTube users who can watch your videos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**

Examples of Neologism from Twitter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neologisms</th>
<th>Old Use</th>
<th>New Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>To make fast and loud sounds</td>
<td>To post some message or video</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

The results show that a great semantic change is visible in CMC. Both the factors that help in creation of neologisms as discussed above i.e. Sociolinguistic factors (external) and psycholinguistic factors and internal language system (internal). As Stern (1975) believes that there are many factors of this semantic change and believes psychological ones to be more dominant. The study seconds his opinion because for many purposes people use neologisms. Sometimes the neologisms are creator by the general public online and sometimes by the social networks themselves. These neologisms get popular in a very short span of time because the communication in present day has become quite rapid. Pranjić (2016) acknowledges the role of social media and CMC in the rapid development and prevalence of these neologisms. The data presented above is merely a representative of the bulk of the neologisms that have been developed in past some years. The change in English language especially in the meaning was never so rapid. It is true that English language, like any other living language, has been changing since its inception but those changes seldom took place. CMC has revolutionized the lexical world. It has overwhelmingly influenced the language. Crystal (2006) believes that English language is extensively influenced by CMC. There are so many other examples in favour of this study which are in fashion i.e. Selfie (Capturing or drawing one’s own picture) is ubiquitous. This word and activity has become so popular that mobile phones with better selfie cameras are developed. Hence technology is affecting language and new words are affecting the creation of better technology. In coming time, which seems quite apparent, more words may be coined with the advent of CMC. Presently COVID-19 is a buzz word along. The morphological process of blending is used in the creation of this word.
which is ubiquitous. Poh (2017) provides a list of words which have been created by social media networks:

**Like**: *(verb)* joining a page on *Facebook* or appreciating someone’s comment or share.

**Unlike**: *(verb)* withdrawing one’s liking from a page on *Facebook* or a video on *YouTube*.

**GIF**: *(verb)* a file format that supports static and animated pictures

**inbox**: *(verb)* sending private messages to someone in his/her virtual mailbox

**sext**: *(verb)* indulge in sex chat through internet or mobile

**OMG**: *(exclamation)* Oh My God. Used for expressing fear or surprise

**LOL**: laughing out loud; used to show that you are laughing a lot

**hashtag**: *(noun)* a word or phrase followed by a (#) sign, used to stress on a message or specify the message

**unfriend**: *(verb)* removing someone from a friend list on social networks.

Oxford online dictionary also accepts and explains a number of internet neologisms which used to be non-existent before the proliferation of CMC. Hence there is a visible change in semantics of English language after the proliferation of CMC. This process will be even quicker in future and many more words will be added in dictionary. The influence of CMC has yet to develop English language in a unique and interesting language. The creation of better technology is coming with novel words. Google, the famous search engine, has been used as a verb. The same word has been a part of many other technological inventions such as Google Plus, Google Home, Google Mini, Google Drive, Google Phones etc. In the coming years, some of these words may become part of English language because of their worldwide proliferation. Hence CMC is contributing in development of new words, terms and phrases which was slow or non-existent before CMC.
References


Wenz, F. (2013). An Insight on Semantic Change. GRIN Verlag