

Impact of Digital Technologies on the English Language

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Abstract

The paper deals with the current phenomenon in the communication environment. It examines the impact of modern technologies on the development of the English language, and points to the specific impact of digital technologies on the emergence of new vocabulary (neologisms), on specifics in written and spoken communication influenced by digital technologies, and points to the specific language of cybercultures and social groups in cyberspace. The information provided in the paper are only a part of the extensive research in the field of Internet linguistics and they aim to call the discussion and attract the target group to the newly investigated area of interdisciplinary environment of technology and linguistics.

Keywords:

Digital technologies
Internet linguistics
Internet slang
Tech neologisms
English language

1 Introduction

Technology always has influenced language quite dramatically. There are many examples from the very early history up to modern days. Industrial revolution started considerable shifts in the way we live and by extension, how we talk about the world. It is evident, that science and technology are the most productive sources of neologisms even in recent times of the Internet and digital technologies. New words and phrases were created for the new products, machines and processes developed during industrial revolution in Britain throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, such as combustion, hydraulic, train, telephone, telegraph, engine, pulley, reservoir, lithograph, camera, piston, electricity, condenser, etc. In some cases, old words were given utterly new connotations (e.g. factory, pump, apparatus, syphon, vacuum, cylinder, locomotive, etc.).

Language is a living organism that responds to external stimuli, social, economic changes, and technological developments. As society changes, the way and means of communication also change, the vocabulary and the dynamics of language use are changing. If we used trivial examples from films or musical texts from the 1950s and compared them to the present one, the social difference would be a generational gap, and the language would be perceptible at first hearing.

If we look at the means of communication from the historical point of view, for older generation seems unbelievable that it is not so long ago we sent the letters by mail and were throwing them in the mailboxes. We were looking for a public phone box and for coins so that we could call home that we missed the train. For young generation mailbox is something different, public phone boxes have become a piece of history, and smartphones are no longer only vocal communication devices, but more or less multifunctional devices connected to the international network of all the digital devices, similarly as a velocipede has become a bike.

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2 Technology development

When technology of printing press become fully functional, since the 1400s it has changed the language. It enabled to develop new styles, new spelling, new punctuation systems, and so on. When the telephone came in in the 19th century, it changed the way we communicated before, people adopted new forms of communication. New patterns of dialogue become reality when broadcasting started in the 1920s.

Neil Postman (1993), an American author, educator, media theorist and cultural critic wrote: "Fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe." If we compare Gutenberg's printing press, that enabled a substantial and rapid spread of information, culture and education, as well as entertainment, pamphlets and tabloid prints, to paraphrase this quotation, we can argue that 20-25 years after the Internet has become part of our professional and private lives, we do not have the old world plus the Internet but a totally different world.

The big change happened in the 1990s. For most people, the arrival of the Internet has changed their life, communication, and social habits. They started emailing in the web and all of these things during that decade. What are the implications of that for language? The Internet is changing language allowing us to use it in ways we were never able to do before. If the readers are older than 35 - 40, most of them probably first sent an email, I suppose, around 1995-98. The same people first enter into a chat room, if they ever did, probably in late 90s. They could first encounter the World Wide Web not before 1991, because the web was not invented until then. They could do a Google search in 1999. The word weblog actually came into existence as early as 1997, but nobody actually blogged until the early 2000s. That is less than 20 years old text messaging, round about the turn of the century instant messaging, early 2000s social networking - Facebook YouTube 2004 – 2005, and nobody expected we are going to be able to send messages with a hundred and forty characters able to send these messages all over the web people would have said nonsense. Then in 2006, it comes Twitter doing precisely that hundred and forty characters. The story continues. The technology development is rushing at a mad speed.

3 Technology and its impact on the language

A lot of new words have been created under the influence of digital technologies. According to Anderson (2006), "...neologism is a relatively recent or isolated term, word, or phrase that may be in the process of entering common use, but that has not yet been fully accepted into mainstream language". If we consider the widely accepted and more general definition of neologisms as "newly invented words or existing words combined to create a new meaning", we come to the conclusion that the rise of the Internet produced lots of neologisms that have made their way into common usage. Official linguistics have not accepted the terms "tech neologism" or "modern-day neologism" so far, but it defines those newly appeared and often frequently words used by cybercommunities and internet subcultures, apart from the fact that many have enriched the vocabulary of formal and informal English and have become common terms used in everyday conversation and writing.

As a typical example of such a neologism influenced by modern technologies is the verb "to google" due to the increasing popularity and dominance of the "Google Search Engine" (Burns, Enid, 2007) at the turn of the millennia, in 2002, the American Dialect Society chose it as the "most useful word" of the year (American Dialect Society, 2003). Something that is typical for those tech neologisms of these days is the speed at which words representing slang expressions become the official vocabulary accepted and published in prestigious vocabulary editions. That way the word "google" in meaning of "to use the Google search engine to obtain information . . ." was added to the Oxford English Dictionary (Gleick, 2006) and to the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary in 2006 (Fig. 1).

Moreover, the word "to google" is specific because its varieties have been established in a short time and in most other languages: googliť/vygoogliť (Slovak) googeln (German) загуґлить (Russian), etc.

Main Entry: **goo·gle** 
 Pronunciation: \gü-gəl\
 Function: *transitive verb*
 Inflected Form(s): **goo·gled; goo·gling**  \-g(ə-)liŋ\
 Usage: *often capitalized*
 Etymology: *Google*, trademark for a search engine
 Date: 2001
 : to use the Google search engine to obtain information about
 (as a person) on the World Wide Web

Fig. 1: An extract of the June 2006 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) considered the most authoritative dictionary of the English language..

There are many other neologisms in the English language coming out of all the technology concerning the Internet, information and communication technologies and communication environment involved in digital communication. Many of them are related to social media, others to texting, hardware, software, applications, darknet, some of them represent a special terminology used by specific groups of the Internet users.

Generally, there are several word formation using prefixes, most of them prefix “e-” (e-banking, e-book, e-health, e-learning, e-shopping, e-mail, e-business, e-commerce, e-cigarette, etc.), or “cyber-” (cyberbullying, cybercitizen, cyberculture, cybercrime, cyberspace, cyberterrorism, cybersex, etc.). The “e-” was at first just a convenient abbreviation for electronic. “Cyber-” is a prefix that represents something related to computers, virtual reality and electronic communication. There are some other, more specific prefixes, like the prefix “i-” that mostly indicates things related to Apple Inc. (iCal, iSync, iChat, iBook, iDVD, iLife, iMessage, iPod, iSight, iPhone, iWeb, iTunes, iCloud, and others). Prefix “i” stands there for “Internet”. Also prefix “net-” indicates everything related to the internet (network, netiquette, netizen, Netflix, ...) but also suffix “-net” (internet, intranet, darknet, ...).

A specific feature is represented by a group of words used by the internet community that can be interpreted as the internet slang. Internet slang, frequently called netspeak, or chatspeak, internet lingo, or net lingo, internet shorthand, cyber-slang) refers to different kinds of slang used by different communities on the Internet. It does not constitute a homogeneous language variety. Although it is difficult to make a clear definition of the Internet slang, the following types of slang may be observed:

- **Letter homophones:**
They include abbreviations and acronyms (“CU” for “see you”. “LOL” for “laugh out loud”, “BTW” for “by the way” and “FYI” for “for your information” as well as the very popular “OMG”);
- **Keyboard-generated emoticons and smileys:**
They represent mostly emotions, supplementing face to face communication (☺, ☹, <3, :-D) ;
- **Leet:**
Leetspeak, also known as eleet or L337 \$P34|< is an alternative alphabet for the English language that uses various combinations of ASCII characters to replace Latin letters. It originated in 1990s as a coded language of the Internet elite, recently used by online gamers and computer hackers. For example, the name of the author of this paper may be expressed as jUr4j /\1\$71|\4. “D0 '/0U U|\|D3R574|\|D 17?”.

If we return to the above mentioned definition of “neologisms” and focus on “...existing words combined to create a new meaning”, there is a specific group of word that had exist before, but they have gained new meaning. For example, “firewall” was originally a building part to prevent the spread of a fire, while today is mostly understand as a system designed to prevent unauthorized access to or from a private network. Some other examples include “Trojan horse”, “tablet”, “troll”, “virus”, “mouse”, “cloud”, “surf” and other.

4 Conclusion

David Crystal - an authority in the field of linguistics. Highly reputed internationally for his research. Pioneer if the Internet linguistics wrote: “It is, of course, too soon to say what permanent effect the Internet will have on

languages. Electronically mediated communication (EMC) has been in routine use for only around twenty years, and this is an eyeblink in the history of a language. It takes time—a lot of time—for a change to emerge, for individuals to get used to its novelty, for them to start using it in everyday speech and writing, and for it eventually to become so widely used that it becomes a permanent feature of a language, recorded in dictionaries, grammars, and manuals of style. There are already some telltale signs of what may happen, but everything has to be tentative.” (Crystal, 2014)

We do not have to worry that technology will destroy the language. On the contrary, study has shown that technology enriches language with new dynamic components and the language as a means of communication behaves naturally. The impact that digital technologies have is particularly specific by dynamics and by new communication environments. The study showed that research would also need to be done on the impact of English on national languages that take up technical terminology from the English language as a global world language.

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