PERSPECTIVES ON THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET ON LANGUAGE CHANGE

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Abstract:The Internet is undeniably something that has changed people's lives in many aspects, language included, leading to the appearance of what is called nowadays Netspeak. Even though there are numerous opinions regarding the emergence of this linguistic variety, it is without doubt that changes in language due to the Internet are a growing phenomenon. In this paper I will approach the issue of the emergence of Netspeak, the changes that appear in language in order to form this linguistic variety, and the issue of it as a worldwide phenomenon. We will see that, even though the English language undoubtedly dominates the Internet today, other languages as well have the potential to, and do go through similar changes and form an Internet linguistic variety of their own. The paper will tackle the issue of globalization in the context of the Internet seen as a social construct rather than a technological one, which helps people connect with each other, with the dominant language being the English language, as well as the issue of regionalization, as different language communities are shaping their own identities on the Internet.

Keywords: Internet, linguistic communities, Netspeak, texting, language change

Introduction

This paper deals with the Internet linguistic variety, the methods through which it appeared, its differences from standard language, and the changes that languages have been submitted to in order to meet the needs of our modern times. The paper will approach the issue of the appearance of Netspeak[1], offering general information about it, such as reasons for its emergence as a worldwide phenomenon, as well as presenting different theories and different stand points that linguists have had in relation to it. Changes that appear at the level of vocabulary and grammar in various languages will be mentioned as well, in an attempt to prove the Internet is a phenomenon that has had the power to bring change to different linguistic and cultural communities, not only the English one, and that all languages have this potential of shaping a new identity for themselves, in relation to this new and modern medium.

Stand points

The Internet, a 20th century invention, is without doubt something that has changed people's lives in a huge way. Although in the 60s, when it started being used only by academics and experts, no one thought that it would become such a wide spread phenomenon, nowadays more than 7 billion people have access and use the Internet on a daily basis. Therefore it has become the symbol of social connectivity and fast information. John Naughton notices:

> "The Internet is one of the most remarkable things human beings have ever made. In terms of its impact on society, it ranks with print, the railways, the telegraph, the automobile, electric power and television. Some would equate it with print and television, the two earlier technologies which most transformed the communications environment in which people live. Yet it is potentially more powerful than both

[1] Term used by David Crystal in order to refer to the language variety used on the Internet.

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> because it harnesses the intellectual leverage which print gave to mankind without being hobbled by the one-to-many nature of broadcast television." (Naughton, 1999: 21-22)

Beside these aspect of it mentioned by Naughton, the Internet has become through the years a social creation rather than a technological one, being the only thing that can help people all over the world connect with each other anywhere and at any time (Crystal, 2004: vii). If we take into consideration this social aspect of the Internet and the fact that the center of human social interaction is communication we realize that people have developed a way of communicating with each other via this new medium the same way they do in face to face situations, or "real life". As David Crystal said:

> " as the Internet comes increasingly to be viewed from a social perspective, so the role of language becomes central…if the Internet is a revolution, therefore, it is likely to be a linguistic revolution" (Crystal, 2004: viii).

We cannot help but notice though that the type of language used on the Internet is rather different than written language, somehow taking the form of a new language, separate from the spoken and literary one, following certain distinctive patterns. That is why many linguists have chosen to call it Internet speak, Internet vernacular, Internet slang, or simply Netspeak, and to recognize it as a proper linguistic variety.

So how did Internet language appear? One of the reasons, I would say, is that Internet language appeared as a result of the need to convey information in a faster way, because our brains have become more and more used to assimilating information at a fast pace, and we started to find it frustrating if the amount of information we receive, regardless of its purposes, is not as fast as we expected it to be. I expect the same to have happened in the case of sending information, and the need to transmit it in a faster way may have led to that type of change in language that we now call "Netspeak".

David Crystal has come with another possible explanation, he says that the Internet version of a certain language is the combination between the version of that language used in speech and the literary version of the same language, the version used in writing.(Crystal, 2004) As we know, the written language is more formal, and becomes standard as a result of a linguistic convention. It takes more time to write an accurate text in literary language, because one needs to take into account, and make sure to comply to all the writing norms, such as punctuation, spelling, and so on. On the other hand, in the spoken version of that language, all those things are not obvious: people don't think about the correct spelling of the words they are uttering while they utter them. Punctuation might be inferred by changes in voice and intonation, but again, they come naturally to the speaker. So the Internet version of a language could be considered a combination of the two. It is written, but it does not respect the writing norms, it has a spoken-like spelling, and, more importantly, it is time-saving. I will give as an example the English "B4" – phonetically it is interpreted as "before", but the Internet version of the word saves more time while writing it: by pressing only 2 keys you get a 6 letter word.

Although all languages have the potential to form an Internet linguistic variety of their own, it is without doubt that the Internet nowadays is dominated by the English language, fact that has raised questions among linguists, one of the biggest anxieties being: "Will the English-dominated Internet spell the end of other tongues?" (Crystal, 2004:1), which is, in my opinion, unfounded. The dominance of English on the Internet will not bring other languages to an end, because other languages are catching up with the Internet phenomenon. As there have been studies made about this by English linguists, who particularly analyzed those changes that appear in the English language, there are also studies about other

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languages and the influence Internet has had upon them, such as French, German, Korean, and so on, proving that this phenomenon does not only affect the English speaking communities, nor that the English language is affecting other languages, as far as Internet communication is concerned.

Evolutionary linguists would say that the emergence of a new language pattern (mostly by means of vocabulary), that has appeared as a consequence of the impact that the Internet has upon language as we know it, is an evolution, but I would beg to differ. In my opinion, there is no evolution in language. Since the word "evolution" implies something becoming better that its previous version, we cannot say that languages evolve and that a previous version of a language is better that the current version its speakers use. The same principle goes for all linguistic varieties of a language; in other words, all the dialects of a language are equal to each other, and all as good as the standard version of that particular language. Language can only change in accordance with cultural, psychological and anthropological evolution of humans. As humans evolve constantly, and I am not talking about biological evolution, but technological and social, language does nothing but change in accordance with the needs of its speakers. Any version of that language at any point in time is the best version of the language for the people who use it. The same thing applies, in my opinion, to Internet language as well. We cannot talk about evolution *per se* in language, but a revolutionary change that takes into consideration the needs of communication of Internet users, as David Crystal himself claimed:" the way in which we use language on the Internet is becoming so different from our previous linguistic behavior that it might genuinely be described as revolutionary" (Crystal, 2004: 5).

Internet language is the successor of texting language, which appeared with the first cell
phones. As it is happening nowadays with the language used on the Internet, the emergence of a particular texting pattern in language had given rise to all sorts of concerns. In an article written in 2002, John Sutherland wrote:

> "As a dialect, text ("textese"?) is thin and - compared, say, with Californian personalized
> license plates - unimaginative. It is bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk… The dialect has a few hieroglyphs (codes comprehensible only to initiates) and a range of face symbols…Linguistically it's all pig's ear… it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates."(Sutherland, 2002)

Sutherland was not the only one to think that this change in language patterns could have a negative impact on people, but David Crystal comes again and tries to debunk this myth in the German magazine Spotlight in 2008. He claims that most of text messages are sent by adults anyway, who actually use more standard language rather than abbreviations and other such phenomena, and that the children who do actually text, inevitably improve their writing skills:

> " When one sees that most text messages are standard, then it follows that the more children text, the more practice they're getting in reading and writing. The more you text, the better your literacy scores are: that's actually what the research is now showing over and over again. Texting is good for your education, not bad…the mythology is a complete nonsense and all the negative things are actually positive."(Crystal, 2008:16-17)

Furthermore, we can say that the Internet introduces us into a kind of hyper reality in which everything happens at a very fast pace, thus the need for people to keep up with this pace is shown in their writing. Katherine N. Hayles notices that:

> "As digital media, including networked and programmable desktop stations, mobile devices, and other computational media embedded in the environment, become more

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> pervasive, they push us in the direction of faster communication, more intense and varied information streams, more integration of humans and intelligent machines, and more interactions of language with code. These environmental changes have significant neurological consequences, many of which are now becoming evident in young people and to a lesser degree in almost everyone who interacts with digital media on a regular basis." (Hayles, 2012:8-9) .

From the quote we see that she notices this hyper-reality that the Internet has created, even going as far as talking about the phenomenon of hyper-reading saying that:

> "With the advent of digital media, other modes of reading are claiming an increasing sharing of what counts as "literacy", including hyper – reading and analysis through machine algorithms ("machine reading"). Hyper – reading, often associated with reading on the web, has also been shown to bring about cognitive and morphological changes in the brain. Young people are at the reading edge of these changes…Students read and write print texts in the classroom and consume and create digital texts of their own on screens (with computers, iPhones, tablets, etc)" (Hayles, 2012:12).

We develop therefore this new type of language in order to satisfy our needs, which are faster assimilation and transfer of information.

Changes that appear in language

Language (in general) has the potential to undergo many types of changes, which occur, of course, in relation to each language's own features such as (Crystal, 2004:7-9):

- graphic features
- orthographic features
- grammatical features or structures
- lexical features
- discourse features
- phonetic and phonological features

This part of the paper will point out and classify all the changes that appear in language, as far as the Internet variety is concerned. As I previously stated, changes that are influenced by the online medium are changes that support the need for the users to simplify and make the act of communication quicker. In order to form new words, structures, phrases or meanings, we usually employ a set of lexicological devices, with the purpose of shortening the words, or to slightly change their meaning, or even to borrow words from other languages in order to have a wider selection of words used to express inner thoughts. Some of the devices are:

1. **Abbreviation**, which is basically a reduction of a word or phrase to several letters or numbers, is the most common way of forming new words, and it is not a new phenomenon, although due to the wide use of the Internet it has become employed more often than before.

i**. Abbreviation to initials**, also called acronyms, for example LOL which stands for *Laughing out Loud*, or its French counterpart MDR – *mort de rire* (died of laughter), the English BRB - *be right back* and the German WD - *wieder da* which had the same meaning; the Romanian cf - *ce faci?* and the French cv - *ca va?* through which people ask the receiver how they are doing, the English OMG - *oh my god*, STP - *s'il te plait*, which in French stands for "please" and the Romanian NPC - *n-ai pentru ce*, meaning "you are welcome". In the case of Korean, and other Asian languages, most of the words that I have encountered and that undergo abbreviation to initials are words that have entered the language via English,

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words that could also be considered to be corrupted words. This is mainly because, despite the fact that Korean has a phonetic alphabet, the letters are grouped in clusters/ syllables, therefore, the phenomenon of reducing a group of words to just their first letters of the syllable does not happen in the case of Korean words, but only in the case of words borrowed from other languages and written in Hangeul[2], or words that were borrowed but keep the same spelling.

ㅂㅂ<바이바이*ba-i ba-i*[3], (Bye bye). 바이바이 is in fact the English word written in Korean letters, that has the same pronunciation and that has undergone abbreviation to its initials, namely the first letter of the first syllable in Korean.

ㄱㄱ<고고*gogo*,(Go Go). Idem ㅂㅂ

ㄴㄴ<노노*nono*, (No no). Idem ㅂㅂ

(ch, jap)

ii. **Alphanumerics** are based on homophony (same phonetic pronunciation of another existing word). As professor Tataru said: "Alphanumerics are to be read uttering their component letters in isolation because their basic mechanism is homophony" (Tataru, 2002:92). For example CUL8R - *see you later* in English with its French equivalents A+ - *a plus*, a2m1 – *a demain*, A12C4 - *a un de ces quatre*, all of which basically mean the same thing: "see you later" or "see you tomorrow" (CU 2morrow). A few other English alphanumerics would be: 2moro - *tomorrow*, W8 - wait, B4 - before, Gr8 - great, F8 fate, D8 - date, G2cu - got to see you. On the same phonetic principle the Chinese use 88 in order to say "bye bye", since they have more or less the same pronunciation, and GG to say "brother".

iii. **Abreviation of a word to component letters** - due to its nature, the Korean alphabet allows another type of abbreviation to occur to words, namely reducing one word to random letters within it. Korean does have phonologic orthography, but it is a featural writing system. Geoffrey Sampson analyses Hangeul script in "Writing Systems. A Linguistic Introduction" (1990) and "Writing Systems: methods of recording language" (2014). He notices that the symbols do not represent whole phonemes, but rather the features that make up the phonemes, such as voicing or its place of articulation. In Hangul, the featural symbols are combined into alphabetic letters, and then the letters are joined into syllabic blocks, so that the system combines three levels of phonological representation.

For example: ㅅㄹㅎ<사랑해*saranghae* (I love you). The same initials can be used for 싫어해*shirohae* which means " I hate you"

ㅇㅋ<오케이*okei* (OK)

ㄱㅅ<감사합니다*gamsahabnida*, (Thank you)

ㅊㅋ●<축하해*chughahae*, (Congratulations)

iv. **Abbreviation to the first syllable**

As I mentioned, because of the way that Korean language is written – it's writing system – we cannot abbreviate pure Korean words to their initials, or the first letter of the first syllable, this being only a phenomenon that happens in the case of words that are borrowed from other languages. Thus, in Korean we can say that a new category of word formation appears which is the abbreviation of a word to its first cluster of letters / syllable. This happens in the case of longer phrases that need to be shortened in order to satisfy the demands of communication via Internet.

금사빠<금방사랑에빠지다 - *geumsappa* < *geumbang sarang-e ppajida* (Falling in love with someone so easily). This structure has undergone abbreviation to the first syllable of the words that form the phase. This way a whole phrase was reduced to just 3 syllables.

[2] Korean alphabet

[3] Revised Romanization of Korean was used.

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알못●<알지못하다 - *almot* < *alji mothanda* (not knowing something).

2. **Contraction**

i**. Aphaeresis** – a phenomenon that consists in the elision of the front part of a word, the remaining part being the last few syllables of that word, the most common example being bout< about. In French we have auj that comes from "aujourd'hui" (today) and an example in Romanian would be T BESC from "te iubesc" (I love you).

ii**. Syncope** which consists in the elimination of the middle part of the word (Tataru, 2002:93). In some instances the missing part of the word is replaced by an apostrophe, for example o'er (<over), ne'er (<never). We can find syncope in Romanian words as well, such as app (apropo). In Korean we have 걍<그냥*gyang* < *geunyang* (just), 어케<어떻게*eoke* < *eotteohge* (tr.how), 낼<내일*nael* < *naeil* (tomorrow), 땜에<때문에*ttaem-e* < *ttaemun-e* (because)

iii. **Apocope**, or the elimination of the last part of the word, such as: fab < fabulous, sis < sister, bro< brother. In Romanian we have multu (multumesc) and cupla (you're welcome). Korean also undergoes apocope, as in the example: 넘<너무, 스퍼<스퍼일러

3. **Portmanteaux / fusion of morphemes of different words**

In English, as well as other European languages, portmanteaux are formed by blending 2 words, the first one having undergone apocope and the second one aphaeresis (Tataru, 2002:97).

Although in English not only the words that are used on the Internet have undergone these types of changes, i.e. vlog (< video + blog), skype (< sky + peer- to peer), but also words that are currently listed in the English Thesaurus, that have officially entered the vocabulary, some such example being the word smog (<smog+fog) and brunch (<breakfast + lunch). This phenomenon appears in other languages too, such as French where *courriel* comes from "courrier electronique" which means email.

4**. Perverse spellings or simple spellings**

The perverse spellings are deliberate and they presume spelling of different phrases in a simpler manner. A few examples would be "outta" instead of "out of", "gotta" instead of "got to", "seeya" instead of "see you" and others.

This phenomenon takes place again due to the fact that people need to convey information in a fast way, and expect others to do the same, so they just simply eliminate spaces and even certain letters. This is a good example that holds the idea that Internet language is a combination between spoken and written language.

> "Non-standard spelling, heavily penalized in traditional writing … is used without sanction in conversational settings. Spelling errors in an email would not be assumed to be an indication of lack of education …but purely a function of typing inaccuracy. " (Crystal, 2004: 88)

Here Crystal refers to the instances in which grammar or spelling mistakes that would appear in an email or on chat rooms had been overlooked and considered merely a slip of key, a typo as it is called nowadays.

Conclusion

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We can say that even though there is no doubt that the English language has influenced and will continue to influence the Internet greatly, other linguistic communities are catching up with the internet linguistic phenomenon as well. Even though the use of the English language on the Internet is definitely proof of globalization, helping people bond, different linguistic and cultural communities have begun to shape their own identities on this new social and technological medium. As we could see, European languages, as well as Asian languages have done just that, but, of course, in relation to each language's own features, employing various lexicological devices in order to form a new linguistic variety. As we saw, Korean language brought about some new ways in which change in langue can appear, ways that are not possible in the case of European languages, for example. As far as Chinese is concerned, although its writing system does not allow for much change to be done, being a logography, in which set of units or writing that represent words or morphemes, it also caught up with this Internet phenomenon and started making changes in written language on the Internet, employing a phonetic principle. All in all we can definitely say that the internet has had a great influence on language, and that is has brought about a linguistic revolution.

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