Impact of Cyber Technology on English Language: A Macro Phonological and Sociolinguistic Analysis of Textese

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Abstract

The blizzard of computer technologies has strongly influenced all aspects of human life. Its immense force has led to a tectonic shift that has challenged many long practised and cherished pedagogical beliefs. In addition to the inroads that ICT has made into the language classrooms, the onslaught of internet and mobile technology has had an unprecedented influence on the grammar, lexis and usage of English language. The changes witnessed by English language under the influence of mobile and internet technologies have generated a debate that ranges from its outright rejection and denigration to its acceptance and extolment. One of the marked influences is the evolution of the variety of English that has been called as "SMS language", "textese", "internet language" etc. While John Sutherland (2002) calls it "penmanship for illiterates" and an aberration, David Crystal (2008,2012) considers it as a normal and positive phenomenon. In this backdrop the present paper will try to explore the grey areas lying within these sharp boundaries. The kind of regularity that has been observed in the phonological and sociolinguistic usage of this new variety of English both in the written and spoken form shall be analysed and discussed.

Keywords: language change, internet technology, mobile phone, ICT, phonology, syntax, pragmatics,sociolinguistics

One of the most obvious features of the human language is that it undergoes change both in its structure and usage. All languages are in a state of flux and keep on absorbing, negotiating and manoeuvring new influences, concepts and expressions. Another related fact with the language change is the response it generates among the language conservatives and language liberals. The conservatives or so called purists hold the change as corrupt, vile and pervasive while the liberals regard it as enriching, progressive and empowering. A peep into the history of English language reveals that many grammarians, lexicographers or the rhetoricians like Thomas Sheridan, Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, considered the language as a monolith and took it upon themselves to preserve it from any corruption. But notwithstanding such attempts, English language has been following its natural course and taking the scientific, technological and academic innovations in its stride.

One of the developments in the past couple of decades has been the evolution of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). According to McQuail (2005), CMC is defined as "any human communication that occurs through the use of two or more electronic devices" (p.3). The CMC is the upshot of the influence that Internet and its allied applications have on different forms of human communication. It has influenced the written as well as the spoken form of language (Crystal:

2001,2005,2011,2013; Waldrone, Kemp and Wood: 2016). This truncated form of communication has become so widespread that it has made inroads in media, advertising and academics. Different names have been given to this form of communication such as "textese", "internet slang", " web slang", "chattish", "netspeak", " net lingua", "digital language" (, Crystal 2008, Dansieh 2013, Thurlow:2006). The change that English language is undergoing under the influence of textese is also being held as corruption by modern day purists like Sutherland and John Humphrey. While Sutherland (2002) calls textese "snot talk", "unimaginative", "bleak sad shorthand", "drab shrink talk" and "linguistically all pigs ear" that "masks dyslexia" and is a "a penmanship for illiterates". John Humphrey (2007) calls the users of textese as "vandals who are pillaging are punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary" . At the same time language expert like David Crystal (2008) regard the influence of textese on language as a positive development. He holds that textese as a newly born genre of modern English and is not affecting the major part of standard (formal) English (Crystal:2008,2013).

Despite being labelled as an "aberrant, "apocalyptic" or "depraved" (Sutherland:2002), it has however been observed that the changes happening in the English language under the influence of textese are not random but follow a pattern and design as is the case with all instances of language change. It is argued here that textese rather than being treated as a deviation, needs to be studied as an emerging nascent variety that fits into many phonological, syntactic and semiotic rules. The present study focuses on some phonological and sociolinguistic parameters to point out that the textese is a linguistic register in its own right and as such follows a pattern and regularity in its lexical and syntactic structures.

Literature Review

Most of the literature available on the subject revolves either around the negation or acceptance of textese, or on the impact of textese on the literacy skills of the students. Proysen (2009) argues that the textese creates hurdles for the second language learners and impedes their pace to learn punctuation and spellings. He also holds that the learners are not able to separate the domains of use between the textese and standard English. Thurlow (2006) writes that the textese not only degrades traditional literacy skills but also corrupts the standard English and it signals the slow death of language and poses a threat to social progress. On the other hand Crystal (2005) , writes that "it should be exulting that the Internet is allowing us to once more explore the power of written language in a creative way" (p.2). Plester, Wood and Bell(2008:142-143) maintain that textese is a "playful use of language that enables creating a variety of graphic forms of the same word …(it is) a creative expression of … engagement with language". Baron (2005) also pleads in the favour of textese by arguing that in comparison to speech, the orthography of English is recent. He maintains that even Shakespeare spelled his name in six different ways.

So far as the linguistic aspects of textese are concerned, not much literature is available on that. Although some studies on the discursive and sociological aspects of textese have been carried out but other aspects have not been exhaustively studied so far. LiekeVerheijen(2013) enumerates the following linguistic features of the textese: orthographic abbreviations / contractions, phonological abbreviations, acronyms / initialism, clipping / shortenings, emoticons, typographic symbols etc. Segerstad (2002), Thurlow (2003), Papen and Tusting (2006), LopezRua (2006) also mention the linguistic properties of textese in their respective works.

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Objectives

The present study is based on the assumption that the features of the textese like that of deletion, aberevationetc or not random but follow a regular pattern. The study is driven by the falling objectives:

a)   Based on Dressler"s (1996), phonological principle of 'figure and ground' which predicts that "the figures tend to be foregrounded and the grounds to be further back grounded" (p :42): , the study will try to explain regularity found in the deletions of sounds in textese.

b)   In English phonology, in order to maintain the stress time rhythm, function words go unstressed while lexical words are stressed at the appropriate syllable. This principle of English phonology will be used to explain how lexical words in textese undergo more deletions than the function words.

c)   Using sociological parameters to argue that textese is not a deviation or an aberration but an independent register of English.

Methodology

Corpus of the study was collected from the text messages received through WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook and Telegram from the students and friends. The messages received were reconstructed and compared with their text message versions. Both qualitative and quantitative tools were used to analyse the data.

Discussion

Purists or grammaticists in all ages have denigrated the changes that English language has been witnessing right from its Germanic origin. The borrowings from Latin, Scandinavian, Greek or other languages, which form the core of the language today, were once held as a deviation or "inkhorn" penmanship. The efforts to insulate English from changes have been fruitless as over the centuries English language has changed, developed and consequently spread across the globe. All natural languages undergo the process of change because of their flexibility and malleability. The social, political and technological forces always register their influence on languages which often leads to the changes in phonology, vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics of a language. English has successfully absorbed the changes that emanated from the introduction of printing press in 1476. It withstood the Great Vowel Shift between fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and took the massive borrowings from different languages in its stride.

The evolution of textese in the present century is yet another influence which is pervading all aspects of English language. Unlike the common perception that holds these changes to be negative and detrimental, the fact is that these changes follow a pattern and fit into the rule governed system of languages. Most of the changes can be explained by applying the basic principles that we already know about the nature of languages. For example some of the dominant characteristics of textese like the deletions of sounds (letters) can be explained with Dressler's (1996) principle of figure and ground. The analysis of the data collected for the purpose of the present study reveals that deletions are not random but regular and rule governed. Dressler's (1996) principle of figure and ground holds that "the figures tend to be foregrounded and the grounds to be further backgrounded" (p.42). Figures here refer to the consonants and grounds refer to the vowels. The analysis of the data points out that the consonants do not undergo massive deletions and provide the phonologically established

principle of 'consonantal frame' to the words, like 'tmro' (tomorrow), 'frm'(from), 'tdy' (today), 'bt' (but), 'ppl'(people), 'blv'(believe), 'wlk; (walk), 'nt' (not), 'fst' fast), etc, on the other hand vowels comparatively display massive reductions. The principle also explains the nature of abbreviations in textese, as in abbreviated forms of words consonants are retained while vowels are deleted. A noticeable finding from the data is that textese is closer to the spoken form of the language than the written form. This explains the deletions of double letters and use of 'k' instead of 'c' in words like 'kol'(call), 'krem'(cream), 'kraft'(craft) etc. Moreoever, some additions and contractions are also observed like 'nope' (no), ' watchadoin' (What are you doing?), 'watsap' (Whay is up?), 'dun n0' (don't know), 'k' (okay), 'SS' (Screen shot), 'IDK'(Idon't know), 'IDC'(I don't care) etc.

Another principle of English phonology that can be used to explain the regularities in textese is related to the prosody of English language. In connected speech, open class (content) words are stressed at the appropriate syllable while as closed class (function) words are unstressed and are used in their weak forms. During the analysis of the collected data, it came to the surface that in textese, content words are largely retained. It may be because the function words perform the core grammatical function without which sentences may lose their structure and form.

Regarding the perception that the textese is an aberration and has a negative influence on students, it has been observed that students are aware about the acceptable areas of use of textese. In school and college assignments students generally stick to the standard written form of English language. The "text messages" of the students received were compared with the formal class assignments of these students and it was observed that they know which variety to use where. The need of the time is to accept textese as an independent register of English which has its own domains of use. The way slang, misspellings and deviant pronunciations are accepted as the characteristics of non-standard varieties, the same needs to be done in case of textese as well.

Conclusion

The shape that English language is taking under the influence of textese has widened its reach and expanded its domains of use. The astonishing pace with which cyber technology is surrounding all spheres of human activity is bound to influence the interface between the technology and the humans. Any attempt to insulate the language from these enriching influences is bound to boomerang and as that would be depriving the language of the vitals on which it thrives and nourishes. The need of the hour is to salvage language studies from the uninformed and unscientific armchair scholars as that would help in dispelling the unfounded confusions created among the students and learners. Moreover it is equally important to initiate study all aspects of textese treating it as an independent register of English language.

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