

The Social Media as an Open System

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ABSTRACT: Language use is inevitable in the existence of the human race. It is, therefore, dynamic and changes over time. Human languages are open system (they welcome new words), so new words always get added to them while some words undergo semantic expansion. Languages do not exist outside societies that use them. This is why sociolinguistics looks at how languages are used in societies. Social media, a virtual speech community, has been in existence for over ten years and possesses its own register. The negative attitude attached to the use of language in social media notwithstanding, this study analyses the use of words in this virtual speech community called social media especially the formation of words, slangy expressions, acronyms and many others. Findings reveal that social media keeps churning out new words and many of these new words have been added to dictionaries especially Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

Key words: sociolinguistics, language, social media, communication, semantic expansion

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a “system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.” (Bloch and Trager 5) It is a veritable tool for human communication. Language is a social art, one of the hallmarks of social behaviour. It is basic to social interactions and significantly represents important aspects of social behaviour and human interaction. Language helps sustain interpersonal relationships. People use language to disseminate important information about who they are, what they represent, and where they come from. Language use varies among social classes and that is one of the reasons why people’s character, background, affiliations and personalities are judged based on their choice of language/dialect. Suffice it to say that language plays an important social role in society, so it would not be preposterous to term language a social institution. Languages do not exist outside societies that use them. According to Akindele and Adegbite, “language does not exist in a vacuum. It is always contextualised, that is, it is situated within a socio-culture; so language exists as an aspect of culture.” (3) This is why sociolinguistics studies the role language plays in society; the basic premise of sociolinguistics is the dynamic nature of language. These societies where language is used are called speech communities.

Human languages are open systems of communication. They keep welcoming new words in line with social and technological inventions in societies. Language is always evolving and technology and globalisation are its worthy 'partners in crime'.

II. REVIEW OF RELEVANT SCHOLARSHIP

Open System of Communication

In English, the word classes/parts of speech are divided into two; the open system and the closed system. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs belong to the open system while pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions belong to the closed system. The open system is so named because they admit/accept new words into their group. The closed system does not admit/accept new words into their group. Its members are fixed and do not usually change.

With development and globalisation, new words are added into different languages especially the English language that is a global language. The Oxford advanced learner’s dictionary, for instance, has ‘the Oxford dictionary word of the year’ annually.

Sociolinguistics (Language and Society)

“Sociolinguistics ... is that part of linguistics which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon. It investigates the field of language and society ...” (Trudgill 32) Sociolinguistics deals with examining how language functions in society, i.e., studying language through social and cultural influences. It also looks at the relationship between linguistic and social variables like dialect, religion, age, ethnicity, education, gender and class. Sociolinguistics examines why men speak differently from women, why rich

people speak differently from poor people, and why educated persons do not use language the way uneducated people do. It also examines why people adjust the way they speak to suit different social situations. Hudson defines it as “the study of language in relation to society.” (Hudson 1) Wardhaugh concurs:

A language is what the members of a particular society speak. However, as we will see, speech in almost any society can take many very forms ... many speakers may use more than one language. However we may define language, we should know that definitions of language and society are not independent: the definition of language includes in it a reference to society (1)

Language and society are Siamese twins. They work hand in hand to examine how and why people use language in different social situations because people speak differently in different social contexts. Sociolinguistics analyzes the diverse ways language and societies are entwined. According to Coulmas,

The primary concern of sociolinguistic scholarship is to study correlations between language use and social structure ... it attempts to establish causal links between language and society, [asking] what language contributes to making community possible & how communities shape their languages by using them ... [It seeks] a better understanding of language as a necessary condition and product of social life (11)

Examining language in society also deals with having an understanding of the social networks in which language is rooted. A social network defines a particular speech community in terms of interpersonal relations between members of that community. The people you associate with can influence the way you speak. “The sociolinguist’s aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language.” (Holmes 16)

Speech Community

“In many ways, speech is a form of social identity and is used, consciously or unconsciously, to indicate membership of different social groups or different speech communities.” (Yule 25) Speech community describes a distinct set of people that use language in a unique and mutually accepted way among themselves. For one to be accepted as a member of a speech community, one must have the competence to use language in such a way that it will be acceptable to the given situation.

Speech communities can consist members of a social group, a small group of family members or friends. Persons that belong to this group often develop jargon/register (sets of vocabulary and grammatical conventions) that will serve special linguistic purposes. They share a set of norms and expectations regarding the use of language.

According to Hudson,

The term SPEECH COMMUNITY is widely used by sociolinguists to refer to a community based on language ... If speech communities can be delimited, then they can be studied, and it may be possible to find interesting differences between communities which correlate with differences in their language (24)

A speech community is characterised by the common/shared language spoken by its members; these members “have something in common linguistically.” (Hudson 25) Everybody belongs to a speech community; there must be persons we share common linguistic grounds with. Wardhaugh considers speech community as “some kind of social group whose speech characteristics are of interest and can be described in a coherent manner.” (116)

What Social Media is

Social media is a part of computer mediated communication. It is the future of communication, a countless cluster of internet based tools and platforms that increase and enrich the sharing of information. This new form of media makes the transfer of text, photos, audio, video and information in general increasingly easy and fluent among internet users. Social media has relevance for a large number of users especially in business and marketing. Social media comprises platforms like blogs, Youtube, Facebook, twitter, instagram, BBM, LinkedIn, whatsapp, badoo, snapchat and many others that are not popular. According to Dewing, “the term ‘social media’ refers to a wide range of internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities.” (1)

In this generation, social media, the world over, is the most interactive form of public and human relations. It makes provision for one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications. Our spheres of communication have been expanded and extended through social media. According to Seargeant and Tagg, “how we communicate online has a profound and lasting impact on language and society”. (1)

Information is got 24/7 on social media; it works through creating and sharing. Social media connects people; in person or online. Suffice it to say that social media platforms are online communities. These online communities, just like physical communities, have their own register.

Social media as a Speech Community

In sociolinguistics, social media depicts the structure of a speech community. Social media is a virtual speech community with billions of members worldwide. Social media/network explains linguistic variation in terms of community norms. It lays emphasis on the relationship between speakers and how this relationship leads to language change. Language is dynamic and social media has had an effect on the evolution of language. Social media and its underlying human interaction are driving forces in language change.

Statement of the Problem

Computer mediated communication, a communication style that combines features of writing and speech, has been castigated for its informality and one-sided interest in speech sounds alone. It has been said that it is an impediment to language learning especially at the stage of writing. Persons are no longer interested in learning the correct spelling of words and are only interested in shorthand, i.e., stenography. **You** is substituted with **u**, **are** with **r**, **you are** and **you're** with **your**, **its**, **it's** and **it is** with **is** in social media platforms. Teachers have raised an outcry that this lamentable writing system has crept into regular writing and school work. But little or nothing has been done to research language variation and change in social media.

Can something good come out of language use in social media? Has social media contributed to the lexicon of English? This research paper examines social media, a virtual speech community, as an open system despite its characteristic idiosyncratic spelling.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data for this study comprised twenty six social media generated new words that have found their way into dictionaries especially Oxford dictionaries. These words were purposively chosen over a period of one week online presence on different social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, and blogs.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The constant variables in a speech community are the members of the speech community and their common lingua. Because the dynamic nature of language cuts across all human languages, through interaction between members of this virtual speech community, English is rapidly expanding.

Every human language is an open system which is in constant close knit interaction with its environment. For every innovation and invention in technology and science, there must be a name. Our forefathers wouldn't know what a computer is because it did not exist in Nigeria during their time on earth. Other examples include chillax, droolworthy, jeggings, mini-me, bromance and many others.

The English language has sacrificed itself on the cross of linguistic inventions. Many new words have been formed, coined, clipped and blended. Social media has proved itself to be a vehicle of language change in this century. In social media platforms, new words have been created like selfie and emoji while some words have undergone semantic expansion like friend, follower and like.

The words below are mutually intelligible. The meanings of most of them can be found on oxforddictionaries.com.

- selfie
- twerk
- selfie stick
- bae
- tweeks
- twitter
- twitter troll
- emoji
- emoticon
- tweet
- retweet
- friend
- timeline
- follower
- block
- like
- hash tag
- sexting
- shade

- slay queen
- woke
- on fleek
- twitterable
- twitterati
- hater
- wall/page

Twerk (v)

The word twerk is a type of dance or dance move that involves thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance.

Emoji (v)

Emoji(n) plural emojis, a small digital image, symbol or icon used to express an idea in electronic communication to express the emotional feeling of the writer, was chosen as 2015 Oxford dictionary word of the year.

Selfie (n)

Selfie an image of one taken by one using a smartphone's front camera especially for the purpose of sharing it on social media, was 2013 Oxford dictionary word of the year. This word has been adopted by many smartphone companies for their front cameras.

Selfie stick (n)

A selfie stick is a metal device in which a smartphone is mounted to enable a user to take a photograph of himself or herself. This stick sets the camera/smartphone beyond the normal range of the arm.

Bae (n)

This is an acronym that stands for before anyone else. It describes a person's love interest and usually replaces the person's name.

Tweeps (n)

Twitter + peeps= tweeps

A Twitter user's followers on Twitter are called tweeps.

Twitter (n)

Originally, it is the sound of a bird. On social media, it is an online social networking platform

Twitter troll (n)

Twitter users that post annoying messages on the platform to provoke other users.

Emoticon (n)

A pictorial representation of a facial expression through the use of punctuation marks. They are synonymous with emojis.

Tweet (n) (v)

A tweet is a message on Twitter that comprises 140 characters.

Retweet (v)

To re-tweet a post means re-posting that tweet.

Hash tag (n)

This is a hash mark (#) used within a message which helps identify a keyword or topic when searched for. This makes it easier to find messages with specific or same content.

Sexting (v)

Sex + texting = sexting

This is the act of sending erotic messages and pictures to someone's love interest through mobile phones.

Shade (v)

In social media platforms, to shade someone means to act in a disrespectful manner geared towards dissing another person.

Slay queen (n)

A slay queen is someone that is vain and fashionable. The person's fashion style has to be in tandem with trends in fashion and society.

Woke (adj)

This means staying alert to injustice in society with regards to racism. The phrase 'stay woke' was coined during the 'black lives matter' awareness. This word was shortlisted for 2016 Oxford dictionary word of the year.

On fleek (phr. v)

On social media platforms, this phrase is synonymous with words like awesome and beautiful. For instance, when a girl's eyebrows have been well contoured, they are said to be on fleek.

Twitterable (adj)

This is the ability of a message to be tweeted. Twitter worthy.

Twitterati (n)

The entire twitter community especially the frequent users of the social media app.

Hater (n)

A hater, on social media, is a critic, a dissenting voice. The sentence, haters gonna hate, was coined because of the word.

Wall/page (n)

An area on one's social media account where one can post one's thoughts, pictures, views and criticisms. Facebook walls, for instance, always read thus "what is on your mind?"

The expansion of the meaning of a word occurs due to constant use of that word and the speaker's intended meaning is not exactly the same each time the word is used. If a particular speech community accepts the different meanings of the word, semantic expansion has occurred. The social media platform called Facebook has expanded the meaning of words like friend and block.

Friend (n)

The word friend generally means someone you like and enjoy being with. The person has to be known to you. But, on Facebook, a total stranger can even be one's friend. It can also mean to include somebody on a long list of friends on Facebook.

Block (v)

Block, on Facebook, means to stop another Facebook user from seeing another user's post but in real life it means to physically impede progress through obstruction.

Timeline (n)

Timeline, on Facebook, refers to space on one's profile where one can see one's posts, friend's posts and stories one have been tagged in. These are organised by dates. But generally, timeline means a schedule of events and procedures.

Follower (n)

The word follower, generally, on social media, is another internet user that has subscribed to receive another user's updates (pictures, videos and posts). Followership is celebrated on social media because it is tantamount to social popularity.

Like (n) (v)

Like, on Facebook, is a solidarity marker. It is used to show support for comments, pictures or videos. It is sort of paralinguistic because it is done without dropping a comment. But in real life, it is done verbally. Social media is obviously having an impact on the English language.

V. CONCLUSION

Although the social network has been projected to be a bad influence on people's spelling ability, it has obviously contributed a lot to the lexicon of the English language. Many new words have been added to English and some words have been expanded in meaning. According to Abati, "the interface between man and technology through the social media has also resulted in much useful creativity. New words have been invented through the social media, which are now gradually finding their way into mainstream English and the dictionary." This is a lucid evidence of the evolving nature of English. Creation of new words and new meanings for existing words show the relevance of social media and the mark it is making on the English language.

Social media has provided a platform for experimenting language and developing language especially the English language. It has influenced language both positively and negatively.

In the words of Wilson,

It's a matter of fact that social media is transforming the way that language is looked at and used. Its hold over language usage is evident in the amount of communications we have daily, the number of people with whom we communicate and the nature and style with which we choose to communicate. As technology and social media continue to advance, there will surely be more language altering shifts occurring (1)

Language is a living thing, so people need to keep an open mind about the new words and concepts social media keeps churning out. In order to fully belong to this virtual speech community, internet users need to learn the words in order not to be left out.

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