

HG2052: Language, Technology and the Internet
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Assignment 1: Analysis of a medium of communication
October 18, 2014

Abstract

With the seemingly endless onslaught of new technological gadgets we face in this day and age, new social media sites, and thus new mediums of communication have also surfaced. Consequently, our language use evolves along with these new mediums, and there has been a substantial amount of research being done on how such social networking sites have shaped our use of language. In this paper, I will attempt to analyze a medium of communication, more specifically, Twitter. I will look at how Twitter has affected language use, its effects on society, and compare the language used to both text and speech.

1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has increasingly become a significant part of interpersonal communication, and also an integral part of our lives – research has shown that the use of social networking sites has increased by 64% since 2005, and that users of ages 18-29 are the most frequent users of such sites (Jones, 2013). Coincidentally, youths are the leaders of language change in Internet communication. This implies some form of relationship between CMC and change in language use, and leads one to wonder how social networking sites such as Twitter affect our use of language, as well as their effect on society. There have also been disagreements among linguists over the classification of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), of whether it is more like speech or text. As such, this paper shall consist of two main parts - analyzing Twitter as a social networking site and its effects on language and society, and comparing the language used on Twitter to both speech and text, so as to address the uncertainties as mentioned above.

2. Twitter

2.1 About Twitter

Dubbed the “SMS of the internet” (D’Monte, 2009), Twitter is a social networking site that enables users to post short messages, called ‘tweets’, with a limit of 140 characters (Sagolla, 2009). Created as a side project by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, Biz Stone and Noah Glass in 2006, Twitter was first conceived with the idea of posting status updates through text messaging in mind (Miller, 2010). Users can send direct tweets to specific users, or post tweets that will be read by all their followers, or the general public, depending on whether their accounts are protected – protected tweets can only be read by the user’s followers. The site can be accessed through SMS, website interface, or its application created for mobile devices. In the beginning, it was difficult to define what Twitter was exactly; it was called a social network and a micro blogging site, but it was finally seen as more of an information network than a social network (Lapowsky, 2013).

2.1.1 Some statistics on Twitter

There are currently 271 million monthly active users on Twitter, and approximately 500 million tweets are sent every day (Smith, 2014). Twitter is also currently the fastest growing social networking site in the world, with the number of registered users standing at 554.7 million in 2013, as compared to just 6 million back in 2008 (Jones, 2013). While many people use Twitter just for the sake of posting updates about their lives, or tweeting about random facts, 87% of all Twitter tweets indexed in Google are news oriented (Lee, 2014).

2.2 Twitter and Language

There has been much research done on Twitter, the language used, and its effects on language. Professor David Abulafia, a leading Cambridge don, has raised the alarm that the use of Twitter is detrimental to the art of essay writing, due to the different style of writing used on such social networking sites as compared to language used in essay writing; he claims that the 140

character limit on tweets causes users to ignore grammatical rules so as to shorten expressions to allow them to fit into one tweet (Henry, 2013). Abulafia argues that we have lost the ability to write in proper grammatical sentence, and are writing short expressions in a “meta-language, with meta-spelling”. His claim was reinforced by a survey conducted by Cambridge Assessment, where more than 600 university lecturers identified writing as one of the top three areas in which undergraduates performed the worst (Henry, 2013).

On the other hand, a recent study shows just the opposite – research has shown that the use of Twitter actually improves language use as it forces people to express more ideas with fewer characters (Hindustan Times, 2014). Yet, upon closer examination of the research method, it would seem that one should take the conclusion with a pinch of salt; researchers looked at the 100 most frequently used words and found that only 2 were shortened, which led them to conclude that Twitter might be improving language use instead of having detrimental effects. This argument is flawed in a few ways – First, they concluded that Twitter improves language skills only because the most common words were not shortened. This does not take into account the fact that the sentences used may be grammatically incorrect. Furthermore, the results do not provide sufficient evidence to claim that Twitter actually improves language skills – this conclusion is way too far-fetched as not abbreviating words is hardly an indicator of an improvement in language skills. Secondly, besides the fact that analyzing the top hundred most commonly used words is too limited a sample, the researchers failed to realize that the most commonly used words in English are largely made up of prepositions, determiners, and conjunctions, which are already short, and can hardly be shortened any further, if at all (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Hence, the fact that the researchers only examined the top 100 words used makes the results inaccurate because it does not, in actual fact, indicate that people do not shorten words in their tweets. In addition to that, one of the creators of Twitter, Dom Sagolla, even published a style guide, “140 characters”, for the short forms used on Twitter. Therefore, the claim that people do not shorten words when tweeting is not true, and hence the claim that Twitter improves language skills is clearly false in this case.

2.3 Twitter and Society

Twitter is not merely a social networking tool for people to connect with their friends or read about the mundane updates of other users' lives. Used correctly, Twitter can be a very effective tool in helping users achieve personal and collective agendas as well. This can be seen especially in the areas of politics and activism. Twitter is a very powerful campaigning tool as it allows users to connect easily with politicians who are active on the site, thus making the connection between them more personal and hence making politicians seem more attentive to the citizens' voices. It also allows politicians to evaluate citizens' reactions before important announcements are made officially, which could be highly useful in aiding decision-making processes. The importance of Twitter in politics has been highlighted by the rapid increase in the number of politicians who are taking to Twitter in recent years. Prior to Barack Obama's re-election, he hired a team of specialists for the sole purpose of analyzing tweets and status updates (Lee, 2013). More and more politicians in countries such as Chile, Japan and Germany have seen the advantages of using Twitter as a medium to connect with the masses, and have since created accounts for this purpose (The Economist, 2010).

In the area of activism, Twitter has enabled activists to make their voices heard on a greater level, thus drawing more attention to the causes that they support. Users usually post tweets with 'hashtags', which signal the cause that they are rallying for. For example, in an incident when an unarmed teen was shot dead by police in Missouri, enraged netizens posted pairs of pictures of themselves (e.g. antagonistic and smiling) with the hashtag '#IfTheyGunnedMeDown', asking which version the media use to portray them if they had been the ones who were shot, because they felt that the media had unfairly portrayed the victim as being antagonistic, which led people to comment that he deserved to be shot (Poniewozik, 2014). There have been many other protests such as this on Twitter, and although such protests may not change the situation, they get a lot of attention from the media as journalists pay very much attention to Twitter. Hence, such protests get the stories behind them to many newscasts worldwide, which usually restrict coverage of overseas news (Poniewozik, 2014). To add on to that,

Twitter has also affected society in a sense that it spreads news very rapidly, almost instantly, all over the world (Morganteen, 2014). Thus, Twitter has enabled the dissemination of news and information globally at unprecedented speeds, and hence has allowed more people to keep up with important information no matter where there are in the world. On the flip side, the site has also been used by extremists, gang members, and criminals, to spread propaganda and recruit new members. For example, al-shabab, a radical group linked to al-Qaeda, has used Twitter to tweet about a hostage siege, mocking the Kenyan military and President (Bello & DiBlasio, 2013). This may pose a serious problem to society as cases of individuals using Twitter for criminal activity has been on the rise.

3. Comparison of language used on Twitter to speech and text

Over the years, there has been much debate over the classification of CMD, and early attempts to classify the language used in CMD had a tendency to overgeneralize and seemed too keen to force the language into one single category (Herring, 2007). However, it became clear that language used in CMD is too complex to be strictly categorized into a single model. In this section, I will compare the properties of the language used on twitter to both speech and text, according to David Crystal's seven features that were highlighted in *Language and the Internet* (Crystal, 2006). The seven features can be found in Table 1 below.

Firstly, much like text, the language used on Twitter is space-bound as it is static and indirect – users' tweets can be read by an unknown audience, unlike speech, which is dynamic and usually direct between a speaker and a known addressee. Secondly, with regard to spontaneity, the language used on Twitter is again more similar to text, as it is more contrived than spontaneous; there is a lag between the time a tweet is posted and when another user reads it; and there is careful organization and compact expressions are used due to the character limit on tweets. On the other hand, for speech, there is no lag between the production and reception, and it is hard to plan complex constructions. Thirdly, communication on Twitter is visually decontextualized much like text, whereby there is no immediate

feedback. Speech, however, is face-to-face and has immediate feedback. Next, Twitter language is loosely structured like speech, with contractions and informal vocabulary, which is not characteristic of text. As mentioned earlier, Twitter is used both for maintaining social relationships and communicating ideas and information. In this sense, it portrays features of both speech and text. Similar to text, tweets can be repeatedly revisable – errors can be withdrawn through revisions, while spoken errors cannot be withdrawn. Lastly, tweets are more like text, which is graphically rich, with spatial organization. This is contrastive to speech, which is prosodically rich as it involves variation in intonation, tempo, rhythm, pauses, and tone of voice. In summary, tweets are more similar to text than speech, but they portray some features of speech as well, due to the purpose and structure of tweets.

Speech	Text
Time bound	Space bound*
Spontaneous	Contrived*
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized*
Loosely structured*	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive*	Factually communicative*
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable*
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich*

* - indicates the features that Twitter language portray

Table 1: Summary of features of Speech and Text (Crystal, 2006)

4. Conclusion

As technology continues to progress, we become more and more connected to the rest of the world through social networking sites such as Twitter, and these mediums of communication affect the language that we use, perhaps for the sake of accelerating the communication process (think abbreviations), or for exclusivity in social groups. Although the language used on Twitter shows much similarity to text, it has adopted some features of speech due to its informality and restrictions. Such mediums also change the way we

communicate and who we communicate with, by providing connections to anyone, anywhere in the world, thus creating greater ease of communication and increased convenience for people to keep in touch with one another. Yet, we should beware of persons using these sites for nefarious activities, as the same advantages apply to them, aiding them in their abominable causes. All in all, these new mediums of communication has changed the way we see and use language, and benefited us greatly.

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