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Debut of Digital Media and Crossing of the Rubicon for the English Language



English

KEYWORDS:

Divyajyoti Singh YMCA University of Science & technology, Faridabad, Haryana

ABSTRACT

The debut of digital media could be termed as the 'Crossing of the Rubicon' moment for the English language. Language learning has become inextricably linked to World Wide Web interactions with the English language becoming irreversibly transformed. Social Networking sites like Twitter have changed the way language is expressed as loaded 'phrases' are preferred to meaningful sentences. As a corollary, digital media and e-publishing will determine the future of language more than the book publishing world. Grammar police is being condemned for being fallible as well as boring. Idiolect and poetic license is more important than ever. There is also the postcolonial sanction to 'englishes' as 'the empire writes back' and plurality and egalitarianism reigns rather than the purist idea of 'origins' and 'ur-texts'. The English dictionary is also growing and imbibing from diverse cultures everyday as the British soften their 'stiff upperlip', though only for the sake of keeping English alive, ticking and relevant. The experimental zeitgeist of the postmodern age is affecting all human communication and quirkier English with neologisms and portmanteau words is becoming a vogue. But how has language learning changed over the last two decades? For a learner whose native language is not English, there is the digital teacher whose accent correction potential is never exhausted- the language lab software dedicated to phonetics and spoken English serves the purpose. But even if the university does not provide the language lab facility, the smartphones come handy and help one pronounce the names of all exotic dishes and beverages on the menu in an enviable/ flawless accent for you have the audio suggestions to imitate at the press of the 'word'. It cannot be gainsaid that English has become more popular and accessible, though also more corrupt with the debut of the age of e-learning or e-English in the context of the current paper. The language in the contemporary world can survive only if it is circulated in and by media. With Amazon getting the unenviable distinction/dubious title of featuring as the most erring site when it comes to grammar, it seems plausible: that flaws, errors, exceptions to the grammatical rule will set the tone of language interactions in times to come.

Introduction

English remains the language that exudes influence on all the continents of the world; it is also the language used most in internet communication. But its very appearance is changing: new symbols being added to its alphabet, new phonetic usage impinging upon the British English pronunciation with the world cultures being hegemonized by America; new spellings being imposed with the Soft Wares like Microsoft dictating the American spelling and SMS making short-hand mandatory and now habitual and Twitter creating a subculture of witty takes within 140 character limit; new grammar with colloquial English, slang and solecism fascinating the users as advertising and entertainment use the language to their purpose. Twitter and Facebook have caused A real challenge is posed here to the still reigning language on the internet-English.

Tweets to Twitter Revolution

'The Medium is the Message' –this statement from Marshall McLuhan is no hyperbole [1]. Compare telephonic communication to the interaction that takes place on the internet. The message on telephone is certainly limited by the kind of channel. It facilitates transmission of sound but not the lively mix of audio-visuals and text message that digital media allows. It is not permanent unless recorded for future use. It is interpersonal and simultaneous copies are not generated for group, community or mass communication. Now, consider Twitter, the social networking site founded in March 2006 by Jack Dorsey wherein messages or Tweets have to be just 140 characters long. This demands Twitter community to use wit to express themselves in short, crisp language that also reads like news. According to Wikipedia, it has been described as the SMS of the internet. Though its use precedes the digital media, English has radically transformed to the needs of the new media. It is understood that Twitter's 140 character limit follows from SMS messages' 160 character precedent with 20 characters being reserved/spared for user name and rest for the message or content. Despite the narrow character limit, Twitter has a considerable following. It makes Twitter a chosen site for dissemination of information, for marshalling opinions and creating stirs with news and comments. The strength and reach of Social Networking sites can be estimated from the fact that Twitter Revolutions shook Moldova in 2009 and continue to wreck Ukraine starting in 2013; caused fall of dictators in Egypt (2011) and in Tunisia (2010) where it was also called 'Wikileaks Revolution' or 'Jasmine Revolution'; Iranian Election protests of 2009 are also referred to as 'Facebook Revolution' or 'Green Revolution'. The very demand for succinct statements or phrases has caused revolutions, literally. Possibly, because the medium makes it imperative to publish statements that have new-like quality: crisp, terse, pithy and concise. Information and opinion is exchanged at lightning speed creating a cascade effect [2]. Whether the digital world try to emulate the demands of English communication in real life scenarios and formal writing or whether English will get a new lease of life only in succumbing to the digital order, will yet be decided by Digital Media as internet use, digital communication and computer software becomes global imperatives.

The Script and Alphabet

That English has changed drastically, since the debut in the digital world is axiomatic but it is still astonishing to learn that the 'Word of the Year' is no word at all, but the 'Heart Emoji'[3] An 'emoji' is a digital image or icon that stands for an idea or emotion. Does that mean that the digital media has brought about a coup d'état of sorts in which conventional languages with their formal coded script have been deposed by and for something visual, virtual and purely engendered in digital media and electronic communication like emoticons?

In fact, '404' (Error Not Found, an HTTP status code) [3] and 'hashtag' [3] (a common metadata label used on social network sites which makes it easy for users to find theme-specific content) featuring in 2013 have questionably gained premium position among words. But this trend that has started in 2013 seems to continue and indicate some future in which the virtual world has made an indelible mark on the real world.

To the language learners with little exposure to digital media, there has been what may be perceived as a surreptitious movement from the Alphabet to 'AlphaBit' [3], though the expansion of the English alphabet and assimilation of emoticons was not clandestine as far as digital world is concerned. This assimilation of the digital rivals will ensure that English does not lose the turf. Though, it may be that in keeping with the speed of changes, it may transform to an extent that it becomes unfamiliar to its original users.

Emergent Trends and New Lexicons

Burlesque, parody and satire infiltrate the content and stylistic witticism engendered in 'poetic license' invites appreciation rather than criticism. Spoofs and radical takes on language and literature pervade the on-line content. Brevity is the soul of wit and the zeitgeist of the millennial generation. People aim to convey more in less time and fewer words. Wisecracks have shot-up in number. So, this is the age of neologisms like 'infosphere' and 'noosphere' and portmanteau words like 'edutainment' and 'infomercials'. The contemporary writers/ readers/users register protest against all kinds of conventions and norms. The mood is rebellious and individualistic and it permeates digital communication as well as real dialogue and conversation. In fact, this generation seems to value spontaneity over studied rhetoric and idiolect, personal and definitely individualistic use of words, phrases and images over grammatical use.

English Lessons beyond Classrooms

Technology has changed the contemporary classroom to an astonishing extent. It has liberated the classroom from its spatial confines and has buoyed up lecture hall communication to lend a vibrant sensory experience through interactive devices. An agreeable atmosphere can be created for an enhanced sensory appeal through simulations and virtual reality to help scholars experience knowledge than just receive it. Smart classes and language labs are not just commercial ventures and image-building exercises; they phenomenally transform and enhance teaching if used imaginatively. How knowledge is unraveled is as important as its content! The archetypal roles of a teacher as a guide, mentor, inspiration and example has perennial value, but technology will be an asset in this mission to educate and encourage independent thinking. New gadgets and gizmos could be powerful tools in a teacher's crusade against ignorance. Of course, all speculations relating to dispensability of teacher are tenuous, in fact it seems that ideally a teacher's role can be completed by technology, but cannot be substituted by it. A teacher will never be obsolete but a media-savvy teacher is definitely progressive and more equipped than a media-illiterate teacher; she is future-oriented and position at the vanguard of change as teachers should be. She has the fingers on the nerve of a generation that finds a niche in virtual reality and alcove in digital media. Since, textbook learning is slower and language is easier learnt in an atmosphere where interaction is assisted by digital equipment as well as natural exposure. The sentences can be played/replayed with the audio aiding the learning process; videos are even more enriching and thus, the media provides for a stirring learning experience [4]. However, internet availability is an issue and hardware provision is mandatory. No wonder, that governments today are pushing for language lab softwares and driving the need for smart classes to facilitate language teaching. Of course, with 3G revolution and mobile telephony, reading and learning 'on-the-go' is no more sci-fi theme.

Print versus E-Books

Most dictionaries have released an on-line version. But they come with a complimentary CD –ROM even you buy a print dictionary.

Looking up the word 'savant' on the Merriam –Webster Dictionary (with 30 day Free Trial) installed in a Sony VAIO PC session is revealing, but looking up the word on internet on the on-line version of the same dictionary yields a wealth of information[5]. Apart from the lexical meanings, the pronunciation, related words like 'idiot savant', there are field and age-specific descriptions of the word as 'for medical ethics' and for 'kids', the French origins, the rhyming words, there are synonyms like 'sage', 'scholar' and 'pundit' . Besides, there are suggested digressions like 'ask the editor' for nuances/ usage of words, including whether 'irregardless' is a word or a video lecture on competing stories behind the most widely understood word 'okay' and with it all, there are 74 comments of readers. That you do not have to turn the pages and just clicks on words and icons unravel the meanings and play the audio out for the learner.

Fiction may not be best read on digital media but if dictionaries and encyclopedias are concerned, the digital media is by far the better choice. Print has its dedicated clientele that is wary of switching over to digital media as there is something in the feel of paper that is lacking in the digital avatara. And though, Kindle reported a steep decline in its sales figures, it is still too early to predict the passing of the age of e-books and the return of the print.

The Empire Writes Back in English: POCO English (es)

Today, from 'pundit' to 'sloka' (Merriam Webster Dictionary) to 'guru' to 'mantra' but the content is not limited by language; dialect and slang too have registered a presence in Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary that refers to 'ghagra' and even 'yaar'[6]. It is, in fact ironic, that in their English conversations, Indians will use the 'native' words only after due adoption by the West. So, the indigenous word has to come to them from a circuitous route to be acceptable. This wounded but nevertheless fast route is provided by the digital media. In the 'Top Trending words', the third listed word is 'Thugs'- taken from Hindi/Sanskrit [3]. Earlier, this word may have been imported by 'sahibs' or reserved for use for 'native' conmen but now the word has gained a wider application being dissociated from the geographical location in the Far East.

As remarked earlier in the paper, the contemporary world witnesses a shift from 'Eurocentric' (See Ashcroft) world view to an America-centred one. At a manifest level, in social arena and interactions, English accent is challenged by the popularity of American accent and mannerism. The pretensions of an anglophile or deracinated native have given way to the attitude of an Americanized person bred on cyberculture. Simultaneously and, quite ironically, though stress on acquisition of foreign accent – BRP or NAmE, especially due to the rise of outsourcing, emigration and fledging of BPOs.

It is noted in the Introduction to The Empire Writes Back [7]that though Britain is relegated to a minor position in international affairs, the literary canon is still identified as 'the body of British texts which all too frequently still acts as a touchstone of taste and value'[7]. It is asserted that the English literary canon helps maintain the 'cultural hegemony' of the West in the erstwhile colonies, even after independence from the Empire. This assertion of supremacy is extended in functional use of language 'thorough RS-English (Received Standard English), which asserts the English of south-east England as a universal norm, the weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the post-colonial world' [7].However, there is a slight change in the scenario with universities waking up to the value of indigenous literature. A conscious attempt to bring provincial literature to mainstream via translations is visible, so is inclusion of national and regional writers in English as well as native languages. The syllabi have been revised and especially, literary research focused on Indian writing or modern national writing seems to be galvanizing scholars.

It has been observed that 'control over language' is a defining 'feature of imperial oppression'[7].This is quite true in the Indian context, where the British imperial policy steadily rooted out strong languages like Hindi and Urdu and regional languages to establish mastery. This trend, however, is being challenged now with Hindi registering its presence on internet and words from this 'native' language being assimilated in the imperial language of yore.

If language is used to hegemonize, it can be equally well used to subvert the order, such is the assertion of critics analyzing protest literature in English language. However, resistance and protest continues to be difficult even today. There is a movement now from English to World englishes with a recognition of independent status of the latter as affirmed in The Empire Writes Back. This is a corollary to the general literary and critical drift from unity and grand texts to plurality and difference. Added to this, since post-structuralist criticism, is a dismissive critical pose towards importance of 'origins' and of value of 'categories' and 'hierarchies' suggesting that world 'englishes' are equal peers of British English. However, the new 'englishes' in reality perhaps still grapple with the issue of imperial origins; it is almost natural. However, the point remains that none of these other forms of

English will be referred to using a capital 'E'. Ashcroft et al observe that despite the emergent trends, English 'sets itself apart from all other 'lesser' variants- that it continues to have a 'special status' [7].

Furthermore, in postcolonial literary practices, there is a simultaneous emphasis on the use 'untranslatable' words from the native or regional languages. It is remarkable, however, that while the Oxford Dictionary has adopted many Indian and Hindi words, the Indians are giving up on their language. But how much sporadic use of native words challenge the clout of the language of the empire, English and language of neo-imperialism American English, is a debatable issue.

Besides, there are words in Hindi/Sanskrit that are translatable and yet they have been adopted by English readily. Some of them were adopted when the empire was running for the fascination with the exotic and to refer to things that are associated with the region including the word 'sahib'. But the list of 'native' words making their entry in the English dictionary is getting lengthier.

Challenge of Americentrism

From colonialism to neo-imperialism; from Common Wealth cultures dominated by Britain to asymmetries of a global world hegemonized by American culture. It is not just the capital market and economies but the whole intellectual atmosphere that is piloted by America. The Digital media has lead to a decisive shift from Eurocentrism to Americentrism. Typing 'honour' on the computer screen would immediately offer a correction to 'honor' favouring the American spelling over the British. A red line would undercut the word 'favour' as well. Thus, the new standard is being set and dictated by Software giants and American capital market. But it is not the spellings merely; pronunciation too is undergoing a decisive shift towards North American accent from the British Received Pronunciation as the norm. It will be 'skedule' instead of 'schedule', if the word is spelled as 'schedule'.

Prophesying/Professing English

It could be safely prophesied that English will not be so easily dethroned by its rivals or lookalikes. Its resilience is fostered by its spirit of assimilation with regards to linguistic counterparts around the globe, its popularity and adaptability to digital media. Of course, it calls the shots in global communication but it may still 'turn the (digital) tables' in its favour as this surprising news line from The Los Angeles Times [8]suggests: 'Twitter thinking about doing away with 140-character limit'. How will it change the way 'Twitterati' use language? Will it' turn back the tide' and make Social Networking Site users or Bloggers verbose or stickler to grammatical rules? Latest surveys have revealed that 'the millennial' are not a homogenous group and that they are not hooked on to Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp- as privacy is a concern. The contemporary period and generation that inhabit it, seem to elude all definitions and challenge all interpretations.

Conclusion: Evolution of the English Language

As digital media is defined by flux, it is certain that if English evolves in consonance with the digital media, it will remain vital and relevant in both the real and virtual worlds. Although, Queen's English, Standard English, BBC English or Oxford English may lose out in the end to a plethora of competing digital versions and usages- there are chances that as a steady ally of digital media in spread of internet literacy, English will come out a winner..

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