

# USING ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA: LEARNING PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The paper analyses the findings of a research involving three hundred students pursuing undergraduate courses in engineering. It has been found that the reasons for using social media among the students have been varied. Further, communicating over the social media and getting their ideas responded through likes, retweets, and shares validate their own notions of correctness regarding the usage of English language and masks their lack of awareness of the grammatical rules and contextual appropriateness of the same.

**Keywords:** Web-mediated communication, textese, social media.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Web-mediated communication, which is defined as a 'unique hybrid between speaking and writing' (Beauvois, 1997; Rost, 2002; Smith, Alvarez-Torres and Zhao, 2003) is a post-1990 communication phenomenon that uses devices and appropriated portals, compatible with Web 2.0 framework to initiate face to face, text-based, one to one, one to many modes of communication using word or text-based or video interfaces. Web-mediated communication primarily falls under two categories, namely, Synchronous Web Mediated Communication (s-WMC), and Asynchronous Web Mediated Communication (a-WMC). Synchronous Web Mediated Communication involves the real-time exchange of communication between the sender and the receiver and vice versa in the form of text messages, image-based messages and video calling or chatting. Asynchronous Web Mediated Communication, on the other hand, implies a *deferment* in the process of exchange of communication between the sender and the receiver and vice versa. The users of both the categories use appropriate communication strategies (CSs) to make the communication exchange meaningful and to minimize the gaps between the intended message and the conveyed message and to enhance self-expression and comprehension (Bou-Franch, 1994).

## **INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS AND LANGUAGE USE**

The central argument of the present study, i.e., the surveyed group apply communication strategies which are unique and masks their lack of grammatical knowledge of English is based on the framework of Interaction Hypothesis, which is a modification of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982, 1985). Krashen's Input Hypothesis emphasizes comprehensible input which results in making communication meaningful between the sender and the receiver. However, according to Krashen, for meaningful language acquisition, the users have to go beyond their current state of linguistic ability

(1982) which he presents as  $i+1$ . Thus, according to Krashen, L2 acquisition takes place when a user is capable of comprehending  $i+1$  input. However, Long (1983, 1996) while modifying the scope of Krashen's Input Hypothesis, has developed Interaction Hypothesis which provides ample scope for language acquisition through interaction and discourse restructuring (Gibson, 2004) involving repetitions, questioning, reconfirmation, reframing, etc. (Long, 1996). Such discourse restructurings or modified comprehensible input help in minimizing the gaps between the intended and conveyed messages.

The Interaction Hypothesis works both for language learning and interpersonal communication where the interpretation of meaning takes place (Ellis, 1999). The Web Mediated Communication being open and lax provides rich input for interpreting interaction among the users. As the tendency among the users is more inclined towards instantaneity, the encoders of the message *perceive* that the intended recipients or the decoders of the message are *aligned* with the purpose of the encoders with which the message has been encoded, and this results in a Preferred Reading (Hall, 1980) of the message and thus, the gap between encoding and decoding a message gets minimized or non-existent. For such preferred reading, the *alignment* is not only restricted to the intention and purpose of encoding a message, but also on the use of language in the medium. Considering the fact that the surveyed users have their *notions* of grammatical and stylistic correctness in the use of language, it has been found that if the exchange of communication takes place between two mutually *non-aligned* users, despite modified discourse restructuring, clarifications and re-questioning, a generally Oppositional Reading (Hall, 1980) takes place. On the other hand, it has been found that a Negotiated Reading (Hall, 1980) among the users take place when the decoder is well versed with the stated rules of the language as well as the encoder's *notion* of grammatical and stylistic correctness with which a message gets encoded.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: AN OVERVIEW

One of the major components of the new media is the social networking sites which are continually reshaping the nature of relationships and getting connected with the existing social networks offline. Some of the major websites that used Web 2.0 standards exclusively for social networking include Orkut (discontinued in the year 2015), Facebook, Google+, Friendster, Bebo, the academic networking site academia.edu, the professional networking site LinkedIn, which have been subsequently expanded with the launching of multimedia sharing site YouTube, the Photobucket sites like Instagram and Flickr, the microblogging sites like Twitter and Weibo, the interest-based networking site Pinterest, and the location-based networking sites like Google Latitude, Foursquare, etc. In the recent times, the launching of multimedia cum text-based networking sites like WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, etc. have been instrumental in converging the functionalities of many of these sites and hence, becoming more popular than the traditional SNSs. The 'always on' mode of internet connectivity and the trend of 'remaining connected' 24x7 have been responsible for making the SNSs becoming ubiquitous and integral to our lives.

The first detailed definition of the Social Networking Sites was given by Wellman when he termed the SNSs as:

'...when a computer network connects people, it is a social network. Just as a computer network is a set of machines connected by a set of cables, a social network is a set of people (organizations or other social entities) connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships.' (Wellman, 1997)

Wellman, thus, situates the existing structure of electronic community network as a social network with the addition of the CMC playing a significant role in constructing 'socially meaningful relationships.' The role of CMC is significant in making these networks a meaningful extension of the offline social networks. A similar view is echoed by Androutsopolos who also posits the presence of the social networks which received a tremendous boost post Web 2.0 and the resultant communication practices as it helped in fulfilling the four functions of the social networking sites, viz., organization, interaction, self-presentation, and spectacle

(Androutsopolos, 2010). Boyd and Ellison further expand the scope of the definition of the social networking sites by incorporating the similarities and differences that go into making new *networks* online along with the existing ones.

Social network profiles are 'sewn together into a large web' (Boyd, 2007) which gets expanded with the addition of friends and followers. With connected profiles, space is created where the users 'gather publically through mediated technology' (Boyd, 2007). Terming these spaces as 'mediating publics,' Boyd describes these as 'another social space' where a user 'make sense of the social norms that regulate society, let people learn to express themselves and learn from the reactions of others, and let people make certain acts or expressions "real" by having witnesses acknowledge them' (Boyd 2007). Thus, according to Boyd and others like Arendt, social networking sites are an extension of the social networks offline. Like the offline social networks, a user by being on the social networking sites perform the same functions as s/he would otherwise do in case of the former, which include forming groups, aligning to communities, sharing ideas, posting comments and show his/her social life by uploading memories of a particular occasion or an event. Similarly, as in the case of the offline networks, language plays a vital role in the process of communication online where a user adopts different strategies according to the context of his operation to make himself comprehensible to the intended receiver.

Social networking sites started gaining ground from the early part of the 2000s with Orkut and Facebook leading the way. Facebook, which started from the Harvard University dorm in 2004 was initially intended to be a networking site exclusively for the Harvard University students or those having a harvard.edu email domain. Subsequently, it was released for the other institutions, and later, anyone with a valid email ID can create a profile, connect with others and start building a network. With the introduction of the mobile app and mobile number-based login, it has been They have defined social networking sites as such websites which:

'...support the maintenance of the pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities. Some sites cater to diverse audiences, while others attract people based on a common language or shared racial, sexual, religious or nationality-based identities.' (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

Further, these websites allow the users to

'...(i) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

Thus, despite having various reasons for being in the social network, it is the desire to re-present online primarily for public consumption by creating a profile that is generally acceptable has been the most potent one. The desire to be seen, heard, 'liked' and followed helps in validating one's online identity and it is also interpreted as a wider acceptance of their behavior including the language, they use online. The desire to create a profile by parameters given above along with the ability to follow the networks formed by others online (depending on mutual accessibility) also plays a significant role in innovating or *playing with* the existing rules of language deliberately or adopting newer strategies for communicating altogether.

Further, there is a notion of 'power' at play as far as granting access to a user's profile, groups or community pages are concerned. The power stems from an increased number of followers and friends on a person's profile is an indicator of his offline popularity, greater online visibility of his posts, updates and videos, a wider reach of his views. This gives him/her with a cushion and substantive liberty to experiment with the rules and styles of language that bear the propensity to go viral on the net and adds up positively to his image. Having a semi-public or a private profile with full access to it is given to a chosen few based on analogous positions (that may be both offline as well successful in creating a massive subscriber base that has crossed one billionth mark globally.

## INSTANT MESSAGING AND TEXTESE

Short Messaging Service (SMS), also known as text-based messaging and Web-based messaging services like WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, Video Calling apps like Skype and Viber have been instrumental in making communication faster, instantaneous and economical regarding expression. The keyboards and the keypads of the devices are designed to facilitate this mode of instant communication. While linguists like David Crystal attributes the emergence and popularity of textese to the emphasis on ‘the notion of [contextual] appropriateness’ (Crystal, 2010) over grammatical correctness and states that the users who possess better orthographic skills and a sound knowledge of grammatical rules are usually the best texters (Crystal, 2010). On the other hand, Mphahlele and Mashamite (2005) have shown negative effects of textese on acquiring language proficiency particularly in the case of English as L2. Given the non-standard style of language that is used in these mediums, along with logograms, emoticons, emojis, meeps, pusheens and abbreviations, it has been found that the respondents tend to use the same for the formal modes of oral and written modes of communication as well. Given the lack of proper knowledge of grammar and style, it has been found in the current study that the respondents cannot make a distinction between the formal and informal modes of communication and hence, they invariably resort to the informal medium for communicating in either mode.

Goldstuck (2006) argues that text and instant messaging are the outcomes of the online chat rooms which were made handy by making those downloadable to the devices and facilitating the users to communicate using the appropriate keys, resulting in the development of a ‘new, dynamic English slang’ (Goldstuck, 2006). The problem with the surveyed students as found in the research is that while they are extremely fluent in the use of the new slang in both oral and on/off-screen writings, their use of the same in the more formal modes of discourse indicates their lack of judgment in making a distinction between the formal and informal modes of communication. Further, it has been found that this medium has come handy for them to mask their lack of knowledge of rules of grammar and orthography. Thurlow and Brown (2003) classify this non-standard typography and orthography into the following categories:

- (a) G clippings (deleting the end \_g in a word) like ‘*selectin*,’ ‘*goin*,’ ‘*doin nuthin*,’ etc.
- (b) Shortenings like ‘*ext*’ (extra), ‘*aft*’ (after), ‘*vocabs*’ (vocabulary), ‘*imp*’ (important), ‘*max*’ (maximum), etc.
- (c) Contractions (deletions of middle letters) like ‘*nxt*’ (next), ‘*cnnct*’ (connect), ‘*commn.*’ (communication), ‘*info*’ (information), etc.
- (d) Acronyms and Initialisms (formed from the initial letters of various words) like LOL, ROFL, ASAP, DIY, PFA, etc.
- (e) Number homophones like ‘*b4*’ (before), ‘*gr8*’ (great), ‘*CUL8R*’ (See you later), etc.
- (f) Letter Homophones like ‘*U*’ for You, ‘*M*’ for am, ‘*C*’ for see, etc.
- (g) Non-conventional or Invented spellings like ‘*nites/nytes*’ for Nights, ‘*thru*’ for through, ‘*iz*’ for is, etc.

Research findings on textese and literary abilities of the users have been divided with one school of thought finding the impact positive, while the other school finds it has a detrimental effect on the use of language. The research conducted on finding the relationship between textese and literacy broadly falls under three different strands, viz., the frequency of text messaging and its impact on developing literacy abilities, the changes to the structure of the message with the increase in the frequency of text messaging, and analyzing the structural



changes and their subsequent impact on literacy abilities. The same parameters of research could be equally applied to the other forms of electronic messaging, which in the recent times, has managed to dominate the messaging space globally. The relationship between frequency and literacy has been found to be a mixed one with researchers like Plester et al. (2008) terming it as negative and Drouin (2011) and Rosen et al. (2010) finding it positive. On the other hand, researchers like Kemp (2010), finds both as independent and completely unrelated. Such differences in findings can be attributed to the differences in sampling sizes, the composition of the respondents, their linguistic and cultural background, and several other factors.

To study the structural changes and text messaging, two seminal studies stand out. Ling and Baron (2007), Thurlow and Brown (2003) conducted a study of the structural features of text messages and their impact on literacy by analyzing 544 actual text messages of the undergraduate respondents of the United Kingdom whose L1 is English. According to their research, only 19% of the textism occurred in their formal written discourse, with accent stylizations being used frequently, and emoticons and letter homophones are extremely rare. Moreover, because of the respondents' knowledge of the rules of grammar of English language, it has been found in the said research that they can make a distinction between the formal and informal mediums of the English language and hence, can use it in an appropriate context manner. Another study was conducted by Ling and Baron (2007) in the United States in which they analyzed around 200 text messages among the native users of English language and found the rare overlap of the textisms on the formal modes of oral and written discourse.

The research conducted on children and young adults to determine the relationship between textese and literacy abilities have shown extremely positive in case of children and moderate to negative in the case of young adults (Coe and Oakhill, 2011; Kemp and Bushnell, 2011; Plester et al, 2008, 2009; Wood et al 2011). The most problematic areas were found to be the use of non-standard spellings, missing capitalizations other punctuational errors. On the use of predictive texting, the researchers have found a positive co-relationship between texting and literacy. This argument supports Crystal's view that the frequent texters subsequently develop better orthographic skills.

## REASONS FOR BEING ON THE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

The study was conducted among three hundred students pursuing undergraduate courses in engineering in Arunachal Pradesh. The respondents have provided unique reasons for being on the social networking sites apart from the usual ones. The major reasons include:

### *(i) Greater visibility and popularity*

The most cited reasons for the users for being on the social networking sites are visibility and popularity. 73% of the surveyed respondents (219 students) have stated these two as the primary reasons for having a profile on the social network. Visibility comes from the likes and the shares their updates receive which depends on the number of friends and followers they have. This group of users remains in the 'always on' mode, i.e., they keep logged in to the SNSs 24x7 and seamlessly transfer from one device to another. Further, it has been found that all the users who are on the SNSs for the sake of greater visibility and popularity, use the mobile app for these sites which help them in posting updates in the real-time and with the help of the predictive text feature, they commit minimum spelling errors.

*(ii) Sharing and gathering information*

While a majority of the respondents post their updates, share links and upload photographs so that it generates maximum likes and invite more friends and followers to his/her profile, some users use social networking sites for sharing and gathering information. The nature of the information ranges from something mundane to serious. 6% of the total respondents (18 students) have stated that their presence in the social networking sites is primarily to gather and share information which is generally instant and often related to their daily activities, starting from sharing class notes and informing others about the examination schedules, assignments, etc. The most preferred site for these students is Facebook, or they are more active in WhatsApp group activities. Upon analyzing their Facebook profiles, it has been found that instead of their timeline, they are more active on the respective pages created for a particular class, branch or hostel and they use the platform more as a bulletin or information board rather than posting updates which are personal or individual. Their activity on the social networking sites is that of an observer rather than an active communicator. None of these respondents have Twitter handles.

*(iii) Learning and knowledge sharing*

A few of the respondents (11% = 33 students) use Facebook and Twitter exclusively for learning and knowledge sharing. With the Facebook's introduction of the trending news feature, the users find it convenient to read the latest news and share the same. Further, this category of users has been found to subscribe pages that offer content on science and technology, English language, travel blogs, and culture blogs.

The users share the content by resorting to cross-posting the links on Twitter and Facebook simultaneously. Similarly, the non-personal photographs which are uploaded on Instagram are cross-posted on Facebook and Twitter simultaneously. The reason for using the social networking sites for learning and knowledge sharing is because of the curated content and availability of the diverse material on a single portal. However, it has been found from studying their timelines that the users primarily resort to direct and instant sharing of the content on their timelines instead of adding their observations or comments about the content. The reasons for the same is due to their inability in articulating their understanding or posers in structured and grammatically correct English.

*(iv) Promoting ideas and networking*

As all the respondents are students of engineering, there is a natural tendency in them to dabble and design apps, software, robots, and engineering models. While some such ventures become successful commercially, the others remain developing only. 6% of the respondents (18 students) are found to be actively using Facebook and Twitter to promote ideas and business ventures, to network with fellow developers and collaborators, and market their creation for investments and technical support. For example, a music app, Cisum has been indigenously developed and extensively promoted through Facebook and Twitter. YouTube is extensively used for promoting engineering designs and robots developed by the users with the URLs cross-posted over the social networking sites and electronic messaging apps like WhatsApp, etc.

*(v) Other reasons*

Other reasons for being on the social network sites include chatting and sharing AV files, to follow the events happening in their friends' lives, scheduling events, extending invitations, using it as a birthday or anniversary calendar, and creating closed groups.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

Following are the findings and observations of the analysis:

(i) 91% (273 students) find problems with correct use of the prepositions in English. The major issues are in the use of the preposition like *upon, in, of, for, on, from, about* and *at*. The students who have committed these errors are not confined to a particular age group or linguistic community but has been observed across all the respondents belonging to all the categories irrespective of their L1s and medium of instruction at the feeder levels. The same is found with the application of the rules about the use of articles in speaking and writing of English.

(ii) The orthographic errors of the students who are most active on the social networking sites and other online activities have reduced. This is because when they compose anything on the screen, software like MS Office or Web-based or browser-based extensions like Grammarly or Whitesmoke detects such errors and highlight the same with squiggles with different colour codes. The same is possible in the mobile mode of communication when the predictive text option remains active. Such extensions, software, and programs either auto-correct the errors or pops up options which are to be selected by the users. It has been found that the students generally opt for the first option that pops up *mechanically* without considering the structure or the rule. When asked about the reasons for such selections, there hasn't been any logic for such a choice, and they haven't been able to explain the cause of the error in the structure either.

(iii) 8% respondents (24 students) who have a better knowledge of the rules about grammar and style tinker with the same online, particularly in orthography and sentence construction. However, upon analysing their samples of academic writing in answer scripts and assignment papers, it has been found that such innovations in the informal mode are invariably used in the formal modes of communication as well. This is also evident in their oral mode of communication during formal presentations. For instance, it is common for a student to compose a message or a post thus:

*"Lyfmayn't offr a choice btwng d n bad. @ tyms, we nd 2 gv up d 'gud' 4 gttng d very 'best'...! heyall, choose wisely* □ [1]

Such expressions are acceptable in the informal mode of communication in the text messages or social networking sites, but the students are found to be using the same in the formal modes of writing as in examinations and assignments.

(iv) The use of punctuations is another problematic area which has been directly impacted by the communication patterns used online. The punctuation marks are replaced by winkeys, smileys, and hashtags, ellipses, and dots in the casual mode, but it has been found that the students are using the same interchangeably in both the formal and informal modes of writing. This is evident in the example given in [1] above or as in the sentence [2] below:

*u shouldn't hv dn ds 2 me □ i din't do wrong 2 u...stll I fnd u funny. Lol :-)* [2]

(v) An easy structure of writing facilitated by the social networking sites or text messaging systems make the writing of the users *relaxed* regarding the rule. It has been found that the students deviate from the structure, both intentionally (those who are aware of the rules) and unintentionally (those who are not aware of any such rule) while composing a message online and the same gets reflected in their formal modes of speaking and writing.

For example, *The boy (S) constructed a strong wall (O).* [3]

In the study, it has been observed that while composing online, the sentence has been structured in some ways such as

*A strong wall the boy construct.* [4] or

*The strong wall construct/constructs boy.* [5]

The prepositions are markedly absent in sentences [4] and [5] and the sentences are not composed in accordance with the grammatically acceptable SVO pattern for English.

The verb forms in both the sentences are incorrect as well. As there are no proper curation and checks for such erroneous communication in the online mode and coupled with their lack of knowledge which makes the students opt for the web suggestions, whatever they write is considered as *correct* by themselves and as a result, they are found to consider them as fluent in English as a language of communication. The moment their errors get flagged, they become anxious, and as a result, their performance gets impacted. Errors are also evident in the use of the plural forms of nouns and verbs.

(vi) 95% of the students (285 students) rely on Google or Bing tools for translation of languages. The translation ranges from words to sentences to whole paragraphs. The purpose of translation is to communicate in the online mode as well as for the assignments. At times, the students copy and paste entire sections in the online portals for checking the grammatical correctness as well and on the basis of the suggestions provided, they rewrite and submit the same for evaluation.

## CONCLUSION

However, as the students use the results generated by these translation tools devoid of any understanding or knowledge of rules, they fail to make a distinction between the correct and incorrect modes of writing and language use. Further, as these translation tools do not have the option for translating the dialects spoken in the northeast (barring Assamese and Bengali) to English, the students input the statements or words in Hindi for getting the same translated into English. It is imperative that the input language has to be grammatically correct to generate a grammatically correct output in the target language. But Hindi used in northeast India is a creolized form of it and more of a colloquial nature than conforming to its grammatically correct form of it. As a result, the input language is usually incorrect resulting in an incorrect output in English, which because of the lack of their knowledge in English, gets accepted as the correct form and is used accordingly. Further, as it is not possible to identify the contextually appropriate meaning with the help of the translation tools and the students use the results the way it gets generated, the distinction between the formal and informal modes of communication gets blurred with the latter overlapping the former in more ways than one.

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