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Language Change, New Millennium, and the Watershed in the Use of English

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Abstract

We all agree that language, like any living being, undergoes constant change and evolution to adapt to the needs of its users. Therefore, the English Language being a Lingua Franca is not an exception, and it keeps pace more than other languages in the world with cutting edge developments in all areas of human life with its primary function of effective communication in professional as well as ordinary real-life situations. The development of English as an International Language has become more noticeable since the beginning of globalization. Furthermore, it leads to the definition of *Global English(es)* and is even more vivid after digitalization in which its significant role and existential function are now unquestionable. Moreover, it is the best communication tool for global citizens, individuals equipped with 21st century skills uniting under one common goal of making the world a better place to live via sharing and exchanging knowledge and expertise, as well as collaborating and cooperating more than ever before, using this powerful weapon connecting us all - English. With this thematic literature review, based on synchronic and diachronic linguistics, the two authors reconstruct and highlight expeditious changes and turning points undergone by the English Language, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the conclusion, a summary of the key findings taken from the literature were given, and their significance were emphasised, as many changes in vocabulary are in order

(abbreviations, simultaneous conversations, new uses, new structures, popularised health communication), especially in how they reflect a new language need to express the dynamism of current global challenges.

Keywords: English, Globalization, Digitalization, COVID-19

Introduction

English as a Global Language

Change in languages over time seems to be an inevitable constant. All languages have undergone and, if not dead, are undergoing changes. As Ferdinand de Saussure (De Saussure, 1916, p.110) put it more than a century ago, “the linguistic river never stops flowing”. The English Language has been no exception and continues to be widely discussed from different areas or branches of linguistics, such as generative, historical, variationist or corpus linguistics. There is, however, much that still needs to be investigated.

With this paper, the two international authors, united under common research interests and professional goals, set out to highlight expeditious changes and turning points undergone by the English Language, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a diachronic study, changes in vocabulary and language functions will be taken into consideration. This is especially in how they reflect a new language need to express current global challenges.

We will start our diachronic and synchronic study by answering our first research question: What factors have led to changes in the English language? In the 1990s, Global English came of age. Already during the 1950s and 1960s, many countries had adopted English as a Lingua Franca and had begun to adapt it to reflect their emerging identities, thus giving rise to the so called “New Englishes”. More than other languages in the world, it keeps pace with cutting edge developments in all areas of human life, with its primary function of effective communication in both professional and ordinary real-life situations. The development of English as an International Language has become more noticeable since the beginning of globalization and even more vivid after digitalization, in which its significant role and existential function are unquestionable. This process has led to the development and recognition of a new umbrella term “Global Englishes” (Galloway & Numajiri, 2020), a dynamic and multifaceted orientation to language that recognises how users of the language are creative and adapt to different speakers and situations.

Moreover, the global language(s) is the best communication tool for global citizens, individuals equipped with 21st century skills uniting under one common goal of making the world a better place to live via sharing and exchanging knowledge and expertise, as well as collaborating and cooperating more than ever before using this powerful weapon connecting us all - English.

When dealing with the changes in English, an inevitable topic of any roundtable discussion in the 21st century, we cannot bypass the main reason for its dramatic change: the recent developments in the technological era, such as digitalization of products and services all around the world via English and the increasing pace of our lifestyle.

Starting from messaging, when using a special type of English for texting, which is a shared practice among all ages, common abbreviations are in use, such as CU soon, 4U, thus adapting to the new informal communication styles.

According to popular mythology, there is a widespread belief that abbreviations in text messages are modern inventions, but this is not so, as they were common in Victorian times and existed even in Latin. Being linguistically economical has been a constant tendency in communication. What is new is the medium used and the multiple possibilities it gives its users. For instance, Electronically Mediated Communication (EMC) is unlike speech in that it lacks simultaneous feedback (obligatory in face-to-face conversation) and permits multiple simultaneous conversations (impossible in normal conversational life). It is unlike writing in its use of hypertext links (optional and unusual in traditional writing), animated text (contrasted with the permanence of text on paper), and framing (alongside its associated techniques, such as cutting and pasting).

Another reason for language change can be ascribed to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), the most powerful tool of communication in different parts of the world, which is a common code for people with different language experiences. However, this common code is adapted to the local communicative needs of its speakers, as well as to their age, job, education level, region, and interests.

New words are acquired and adopted from different parts of the world and various semantic fields, i.e., ICT, business, medicine, and law. Due to speedy lifestyle, they are borrowed from different languages (sushi/cappuccino/curry/hummus) or created by reducing longer words (gym from gymnasium). Borrowing should not be considered to be strictly triggered by the speedy lifestyle, as it has always been a major means of enriching vocabulary, so as to meet the needs of the users. As a matter of fact, the number of loanwords is much larger now.

Apart from changing lexis, we also encounter a changing structure of the language, as it is now a more simplified and user-friendly tool for global citizens. This is the case of the word order, i.e., “I told him to not go”, instead of the British English “I told him not to go”. This is also the case of some grammar changes, i.e., the use of present continuous with stative verbs in South Asia (instead of present simple), such as “I am remembering what you

are saying”, or the use of subject before the verb in the imperative form, i.e., “You listen to me!”

Together with word order, new patterns of pronunciation are emerging, notably the use of several syllable-timed Englishes which is different from English that has been a stress-timed language.

It is well known that speakers whose first language can be described as syllable-timed often have problems recognising and then producing features of English such as contractions, main and secondary stress, and elision. This is the case of Italian, for instance, where every syllable takes up roughly the same amount of time. Nonetheless, it is the area of lexicon where the most distinctive developments lie.

English is also defined as a Global Language because it is spoken by people around the world even if with different uses.

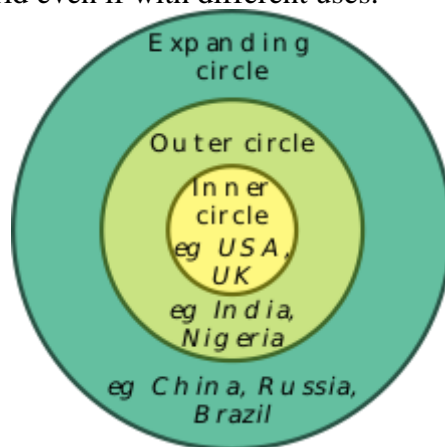


Figure 1. Braj Kachru's theory of the "3 circles"

To put it with Braj Kachru's theory of the "3 circles", L1 speakers belong to UK, Ireland, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and they are more than 350 million people; L2 speakers belong to India, Nigeria, South Africa, and are more than 430 million; English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers belong to the rest of the world (Kachru, 1985, p.12).

English is also referred to as the international language for academic literature and research, business, and higher education. A new language for specific purposes is now being practised: English for Academic Purposes, as many academic programmes are being delivered in English, both in presence and online, especially in the last two years.

Consequently, having a good command of English is needed to serve occupational and study purposes as a tool to share best practices and expertise.

For students engaged or willing to get involved in International Exchange programmes (i.e., Erasmus) and courses, English serves as the most common means of communication before and after enrolling for the

programme. It is therefore used among fellow students, administrative and teaching staff, as well as among invited visiting scholars. Nowadays, increasingly more universities are attracting foreign guest lecturers, visiting professors, and students from all over the world. English is their common working language outside their lecture halls, just as it is with their online resources, open access journals, and research reports. It also assists scholars in networking and socializing, especially in webinars, conferences, and seminars.

Even though there are certain fields that are not mentioned here, it seems that English plays a dominant role in all domains of knowledge and communication. The interesting trend in the twenty-first century is that some of the biggest economies such as China, Japan, Russia, France, and Brazil are focusing on English language after realizing its value at a global level.

Digitalization Internet Linguistics

Recently, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media have kept us informed about the recent developments in all areas of life, such as health communication, business, economy and education, via English. As declared by Crystal at the watershed of the new millennium, technology offers opportunities for linguistic research. According to Soria (2016), the relationship between language and the Internet is a growing area of policy interest and academic study. A few years later, Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro and Whelan (2020) stated that digitalization serves as a transformational process for society, applying universal technologies to connect even larger social spaces than ever.

Mass digitalization, for instance, has recently brought a new code to study, i.e., Netspeak. This led to an innovative scholarly field of research, “Internet Linguistics”, which contains the variations of electronic discourse and the expansion of ELF (Crystal, 2006).

According to Atef Odeh Abusa’aleek (2015), as it was forecasted, digitalization has given rise to a new language of communication, i.e., Electronic Discourse. This is a new variety of language that leads to significant variations in the written language structure. It is evident that the structure of this English is still undergoing a dramatic change both in vocabulary and in structure. However, a semi-speech is being created, thanks to electronic discourse, which merges the features of both speaking and writing even in its graphology (Abusa’aleek, 2015).

In his article, Graddol also supported the idea that electronic communication increased the rise of a new variety of language as well as that of new modes of communication. Electronic communication is considered as

an important linguistic means, especially in education and language acquisition (Graddol, 1997).

The Internet and ICT have also played a key role in language change and usage and have contributed to the appearance of this new language.

As mentioned above, e-discourse is characterized by a significant variation in the written language structure. It is also defined as ‘electronic language’ (Collot & Belmore, 1996), ‘Computer Mediated Communication’ (Herring, 1996), ‘Weblish’, ‘Internet language’, ‘cyberspeak’, ‘betling’ (Thurlow, 2001), ‘cyberlanguage’ (Macfadyen et al., 2004), ‘netspeak’ (Thurlow, 2001; Crystal, 2006), and ‘virtual language’ (Pop, 2008).

Referring to the study of Davis and Brewer (1997), the term “e-discourse” concentrates on the way individuals use the language to share and exchange ideas and views rather than on how they convey and deliver their messages. According to the same authors, e-discourse is defined as a form of interactive electronic communication in which a person, using a keyboard, writes a language. In addition, he refers to the term ‘electronic discourse’ as ‘writing that stands in place of voices’ (Davis & Brewer, 1997).

Many studies were conducted to investigate the features of Internet English. Tagliamonte and Denis examined the language of Instant Messaging (IM) by analyzing the corpus of thousands of IMs which revealed that IM is strongly rooted in the form of current language. They sum up that it is a distinctive new hybrid language which is characterized by a combination of formal and vernacular versions (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Thurlow and Brown conducted a sociolinguistics study entitled “Generation Txt?” by analyzing the corpus of 544 messages to investigate their linguistic structures and communicative roles. The results indicate that texting shows no corruption of language and is used only in developing skilled and creative ability (Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

Muniandy conducted a study to argue that e-discourse is becoming a new form of communication and indicated that it is made up of both verbal communication and script, with their unique characteristics of an innovative discourse with variety of English (Muniandy, 2002).

Features of E-discourse

Rapid development of e-communication has significantly influenced the nature of linguistic varieties. E-discourse is to a certain extent considered as an innovative variety of discourse due to its features. According to Lee, in Computer Mediated Communication, e-discourse allows users to communicate more easily as it creates a certain kind of semi-speech between speaking and writing. Therefore, it is very similar to face-to-face communication due to its interactive nature (Lee, 2009). As stated by Crystal, ‘E-discourse as a way of information exchange is “*unusual compared to face-*

to-face interaction”, but it must be considered as conversation in a broad sense (Crystal, 2003, p.433).

Other authors, i.e., Lee (2002) and Toyoda and Harrison (2002), noticed the presence of abbreviations (i.e., TTYL (Talk to you later), BFN (Bye for now), Wlc (Welcome), etc.), unconventional punctuation, misspelling, clippings, orthographic reduction, shortenings, ellipsis (especially deletion of pronouns), as well as the use of upper case as the main features of e-discourse due to spontaneity.

As noted by Abrams (2003), e-discourse differs from speech in its written script, which greatly relies on reading and writing skills, and this requires the user to spend more time to comprehend input and output.

As stated by Crystal (2008), *“texting has evolved as a twenty-first-century phenomenon – as a highly distinctive graphic style, full of abbreviations and deviant uses of language, used by a young generation that does not care about standards. There is a widely voiced concern that the practice is fostering a decline in literacy. And some even think it is harming language as a whole ‘Text messages are destroying our language’ (p. 7,8).*

To sum it up, communication via electronic media has greatly facilitated the rise of a new variety of language that is e-discourse, and it has created a new form and language function, especially that of expressiveness which indeed makes it distinctive. A common appearance of its most frequent linguistic patterns consists of shortening, clippings and contractions, unconventional spellings, word-letter replacement, word-digits replacement, word combination, initials and emoticons which more than ever replace our face-to-face communication during the pandemic and is still ongoing.

Health Communication and its Popularization

E-discourse is also used for the presentation of medical knowledge which is understood as scientists having regular interaction - direct or mediated - with the public. Nowadays, the need for scientific culture is claimed as a social right, and popularization has become a routine social activity that has led to the creation of several stable genres with structures and styles. Following on Calsamiglia and Van Dijk’s research (Calsamiglia and Van Dijk, 2004), non-specialized users can construct lay versions of specialized knowledge and integrate this with their existing one through popularization. As Moirand states, the popularization discourse is the ‘meeting point’ for scientists and the above-mentioned non-specialists in that it is made up of many recommendations that constitute a prototypical component of science popularization texts, having an informative purpose (the sharing of information being the basis of people’s survival itself), as well as an instructive-pedagogical intention, thus leading to changes from one rhetorical situation and genre to another (Moirand, 1997).

Moreover, advances in life sciences mean that patients want to learn about their illnesses to be able to manage them properly.

This is the case of medical weblogs, where practitioners effectively share knowledge and inform, e.g., through detailed explanations of terms, the use of humour and irony, or narratives of professional and personal experience (Sokol, 2018).

This is also the case of the appearance of many “TV doctors” who are currently popularizing science on the national TVs in short scheduled slots to explain the latest updates and give recommendations on one of the causes of language change over the last two years: the coronavirus pandemic.

This rise in “mediacy” (Baldry & Thibault, 2006) is reshaping health communication, thus tending to produce “dynamic equivalents” (Nida, 1964) of medical texts, characterised by frequent recourse to explanation strategies, such as the one included in Calsamiglia and Van Dijk’s model, i.e., denomination, definition, reformulation or paraphrase, analogy or association, generalisation, or exemplification (Calsamiglia & Van Dijk, 2004).

The *new* words and meanings or use provide excellent material in which specialized vocabulary and scientific accuracy are integrated into a discourse that is complex but characterised by accessibility and clarity. The difference is just in terms of *genres*. In fact, the new media meet people’s communicative needs by means of socially-produced textual forms forged in time as the most suitable for an action that is rhetorically effective and recognisable by recipients.

The Language of the Pandemic

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 20, 2020, English has, more than ever, become a fundamental means of medical and everyday communication over the world, especially with terms conveying *new meanings* penetrating Global English such as *lockdown*, *curfew*, *quarantine*, *etc.*

The pandemic has also brought about an enrichment in the lay people’s use of vocabulary as the New Media open up the possibility to familiarize with many obscure medical terms in the watershed of everyday speech.

Based on the article published by Roger J. Kreuz (2020), the way COVID-19 has changed English has been clearly exemplified and justified. The author reports that in April 2020, for the first time in 20 years, the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary issued a quarterly update, announcing recently used terms and meanings as new entries in the English Language. This is the case of phrases such as “social distancing”, already in use in the 1950s, even if with a different connotation, as well as the case of the adjective “positive” that now conveys a negative connotation.

As for the language of quarantine, we mostly consider terms linked with social distancing and isolation, which already existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, but which became more common during the year 2020.

This group of words, including terms and phrases such as *self-isolate* and *shelter in place*, have also taken on new meanings. Formerly, ‘sheltering’ referred to seeking safety in hazardous conditions. Lately, during the pandemic, it has acquired the meaning of ‘prolonged period of self-isolation’.

Similarly, a new gesture known as ‘elbow bump’ was even recorded back in 1981, but only in 2020 did it acquire the meaning of a safe way of greeting another person. Other new meanings can be found in words and expressions in the semantic field of the pandemic, i.e., ‘social distancing’, ‘remote work’, ‘remote schooling’, ‘having a virtual drink’, and ‘going to a zoom party’.

Within the inner circle of speakers of English, diatopic variations also emerge in COVID-19 lexis, e.g., *to self-isolate* (British English) that becomes *self-quarantine* in American English, though not yet included in OED due to its limited frequency of use.

Another list of COVID-19 lexical items on OED’s watch list includes blended words such as *maskne*, an acne outbreak caused by wearing facial coverings, *quarantini*, a cocktail drunk during isolation, *quaran-teaching*, teaching during isolation, *quarantee*, a guarantee made by the government, *quarantinager*, a teenager in isolation.

Other blendings also include *covidiot* – someone ignoring public safety recommendations, *doomscrolling* – the act of spending an excessive amount of screen time devoted to the absorption of dystopian news, and the German term *hamsterkauf* – meaning panic buying.

The California State University Fullerton linguist and professor of English, Stephen J. Mexal, stated that the new coronavirus indeed has upended our daily lives and routines so much that even the English language has been forced to change and adapt (Kreuz, 2020). The same author added that “pandemic” was named as the Word of the Year for 2020 by Merriam-Webster. In addition, new phrases such as “flatten the curve”, “shelter in place”, “contact tracing”, “Personal Protection Equipment-PPE”, and in particular “coronavirus” were included in the dictionary and entered our collective consciousness.

Moreover, he stated that the pandemic also inspired new words and expressions such as “the before times”, “coronacut”, and “coronials” as well as “new normal” in American English. Moreover, words like “COVID-19” and “coronavirus” were more commonly shortened into “COVID” (Kreuz, 2020).

As languages change in tandem with recent developments around the globe, it is probable that after decades the above-mentioned phrases will not even raise doubts as these will already be labelled as a ‘new now’.

Conclusion

Views of English language change are contested, as it keeps evolving, involving phonetic, lexical, grammatical and semantic levels, but the question remains of the possibility to distinguish good and bad changes (Aitchison, 2011) in this so-called “future of English” (Crystal’s lecture, 2015), a situation where, as this language becomes more widely used around the world, no longer only in the former colonial territories, an increasing amount of social and cultural baggage is being introduced into it.

As a matter of fact, in the context of English teaching and learning, what we need is a deeper cultural awareness, and it is the role of the teacher to expose the students to different varieties of English, spoken and written, formal and informal. Teachers should also be able to make the students aware of appropriate and inappropriate English, so as to know how to use the language contexts. Ultimately, language differs between one generation and another, and varieties of English that exist in the world today prove that English will continue to evolve. It is the nature of human language, and thus cannot simply be judged as decay. Colloquial and invented terms used by youngsters or media, social dialects caused by nativisation, and initialisms boosted by textism, perhaps, display that English has deviated from its pure and standard forms.

According to Nielsen (2020), “English is no longer the language of the English”. Language change in the world has created a variety of communities living with their own identity, culture, values, and ideas. English has developed in order to meet the demands of the modern world and is now more widely scattered as well as more widely spoken and written than any other language has ever been. Today, it is used by at least 750 million people and barely half of them speak it as a mother tongue. Some estimates have put that figure closer to 1 billion.

Such diversity is a major theme running through the main studies in English language. English “is not a bunch of arbitrary linguistic forms applied to a cultural reality that can be found outside of language” (Nielsen, 2020), rather it is the vehicle through which culture is manifested. The English language has changed and will continue changing. There are varieties developing. There are differences arising. These differences are the result of the pressure exerted by the culture of the people who use these developing varieties.

A new millennium started only 22 years ago, but the watershed in the use of English is now clear. EMC (Electronically Mediated Communication)

is playing a fundamental role in making the English language global, as well as in contributing actively to the production of new, common knowledge and opinions on science, health, and society in general.

To put it as Kirkpatrick (2007, p.53), “rather than worrying about variation and change, we should rejoice in the cultural and linguistic diversity they represent”.

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