



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF THE INTERNET

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Abstract

The emergence of the Internet has brought about unprecedented changes in communication. New social activities and relations on the Internet resulted in the creation of a new form of culture - the Internet or cyber culture. The very nature of the Internet as a global medium affects both language in general and individual languages. Contemporary sociological, cultural and communication theories are exploring the nature and far-reaching effects of these social changes and processes. In this paper, we present some of the features of the language and culture of the Internet, with special emphasis on anonymity of communication, linguistic creativity and linguistic norms. We also discuss the changes that have occurred in the Serbian language under the influence of English as the dominant language of the Internet communication. Intensive Anglicization of Serbian has led to the development of a new language variety named *Angloserbian*. It is a variety used by urban members of the younger generation who are growing up with the electronic media and are modeling their language on cultural and language norms of these media.

Key Words: *Internet language, Internet linguistics, anonymity of communication, linguistic creativity, linguistic norms, Angloserbian*

1. INTRODUCTION

Neologisms, but also disrespect of the conventional linguistic rules on spelling and punctuation are rapidly spreading among the Internet users. Participants in computer-mediated communication simultaneously acquire and create rules of language use. Their willingness to adapt their language to new communication situations on the Internet presents the basis of linguistic revolution (Prnjat, 2008, p. 49–50). In his book *The Language Revolution* (2004, p. 1) David Crystal writes that the year 2000 marked the end of a decade in which linguistic revolution took place. He also emphasizes that dramatic linguistic changes do not happen very often. Throughout the history of mankind changes that had far-reaching consequences for the greater number of languages, and especially the type of global changes that affect all languages, were very rare. The emergence of new



media such as newspapers, telephone and television also led to linguistic change, but the impact of the Internet can certainly be described as revolutionary.

Language of the Internet

What makes the language of the Internet linguistically unique is its combination of written and spoken language characteristics. At one end of the language continuum, there is the language of the web whose functions (e.g. database sites, publishing or advertising sites) are not different from that of the traditional written language. Examples of all kinds of written language can be found on the web in the same form in which they are seen in the traditional language, with minimal stylistic changes that adapt them to the Internet as an electronic medium. However, some of the web sites resemble more the interaction usually present in speech: interactive communication that provides opportunities to send and receive messages or to participate in discussions. On the other end of the continuum, the language that occurs in other Internet situations – IM groups, virtual worlds and social networks, demonstrates some of the basic features of speech: communication is transient and, in most situations, requires immediate response.

Naomi Baron uses a metaphor to describe this new form of language and names it a “linguistic centaur – half speech, half writing” (2001, p. 248). In her book *Alphabet to Email: How Written English Evolved and Where It's Heading* (2001) she argues that a large number of texts found on the web can be described as “hypertext compositions”, whose characteristics are quite different from the traditional texts: they are transient, changeable and do not have a linear, hierarchical structure (Ibid. p. 158–159). For the type of interaction that occurs in IM groups, virtual worlds and social networks, Baron writes that they resemble “Venice at the time of carnival” (Ibid. p. 160) since participants in communication can voluntarily join or leave the communication at any time, behaving extremely eccentric because their true identity is hidden.

2. ANONYMITY OF COMMUNICATION

Anonymity of communication i.e. disguise of real identity, is an important factor that affects creativity of the participants in the Internet communication. Chat groups, virtual worlds and social networks show the highest level of “carnival masking” because they provide most opportunities for concealing identity. Nicknames and pseudonyms are commonly used. Moreover, the absence of non-verbal cues allows participants to act in new ways and explore hidden aspects of their personality, especially in virtual worlds and social networks when they develop a fictional persona.

Participants in communication pay special attention to the jargon of their interlocutors, the nuances in meaning, the use of jargon expressions, etc. This shows that the Internet users are aware of the fact that cyberspace is potentially dangerous and deceptive world and that various forms of



misbehavior such as mischief and fraud exist. The choice of language forms indicates whether someone is a member of a particular group or is an intruder. For example, when an adult joins a group of teenagers, linguistic differences that exist between generations, especially the use of slang, indicate very clearly that this person does not belong to the group. The same can be seen in situations where men join women's groups, and vice versa.

In his book *Language and Culture* (2005, p. 210), Ranko Bugarski states that the essence of jargon and the main reason for its existence is the need of members of a social group to affirm their identity and confirm their affiliation to a given group. Jargon is marked by specific language features, primarily lexical and phraseological, and exceptionally grammatical and phonological.

This is the reason why there are so many manuals containing guidelines, rules and regulations related to computer-mediated communication and the uses of language. They are of prescriptive and proscriptive character. However, it must be borne in mind that they represent partial and biased views of participants in the Internet communication. Members of certain groups may despise jargon of other groups.

3. LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY AND LINGUISTIC NORM

The question of why participants in computer-mediated communication show a high degree of linguistic creativity is considered by Brenda Danet in her book *Cyberpl@y: communicating online* (2001, p. 180). She writes that there are five basic factors that affect creativity: (1) characteristics of the computer-mediated communication (transience, brevity and interactivity); (2) unconstrained creative energy of the participants; (3) nature of cyberspace, as a new social 'Wild West'; (4) impact of the hacker culture, and (5) concealment of identity.

Famous hacker online dictionary *Jargon File* defines a hacker as a person who enjoys intellectual challenge of overcoming the restrictions. Hackers like to play with words and symbols. Also, they refuse to comply with the established and generally accepted language norms. Many researchers believe (Baron, 2001; Crystal, 2001; Danet, 2001) that in the nineties and eighties of the twentieth century, the culture of cyberspace was a huge, undiscovered space without any cultural and legal norms and that hackers were computer cowboys and digital explorers (Danet, 2001, p. 30). However, in the late nineties, the first forms of social organization in cyberspace began to emerge introducing rules for interaction regulation and penalties for violation of these rules.



Over time, the language of the Internet has developed new stylistic norms that have nothing to do with the hacking beginnings and that do not support playful and esoteric style. Baron (1998, p. 1) argues that the language of cyberspace evolved this way because of the ideological shifts that had occurred in relation to written English, and not because of the way modern computer technology functions. She cites the example of the United States, where all kinds of written language, not just the one that occurs in computer-mediated communication, tend to be less formal. This is because of the changes that had occurred in the American educational system in the last hundred years. Namely, in the context of primary and secondary education system, the old curriculum, which provided for the teaching of grammar, spelling and literature, was replaced by a new one that involved “creative writing”. The centre of attention was the process, not the product, with an emphasis on what the author himself/herself wants to say, and not on an objective argument. (Baron, 2003, p. 88). This made the new generation of speakers of American English less worried about the language rules and their application, whether it be spelling, grammar or punctuation. It can be said for the other dialects of English, too. Baron names this phenomenon “linguistic whateverism” (Baron, 2002, p. 5).

Also, it is important to note that in the second half of the 20th century, varieties of English that reflect the multicultural diversity of the American society were introduced in the curricula at all levels of the US education system. However, this process of multiculturalization of the English language inevitably leads to changes in the understanding of what is linguistically correct and acceptable and what is not (Ibid. p. 6).

4. ANGLOSERBIAN – A NEW VARIETY OF THE SERBIAN LANGUAGE

Sociolinguistic research has shown that participants in communication who are in constant contact with each other are more likely to use common linguistic forms. Therefore, the advance of social networking has enhanced the influence of English on all other languages, including Serbian.

Intensive Anglicization of the Serbian language has led to the development of a new language variety – Angloserbian, which Serbian linguists identify as a random and arbitrary mixture of forms borrowed from English, which are usually poorly adapted to the system of the Serbian language. There are no established spelling, grammar or pronunciation forms and sometimes not even established meanings. (Vasić et al., 2001, p. 7). These unjustified and unnecessary language innovations in Serbian developed under the influence of the norms of English. Tvrтко Prčić (2005, p. 35-37) provides an exhaustive sociolinguistic analysis of Angloserbian, in which “pseudonorms” and “negligent functional style” prevail. It is a language variety of urban somewhat bilingual members of the younger generation who are growing up with electronic media and who are modeling their language on cultural and language norms of these media (Ibid., p. 57).



One of the examples of this negative impact of English onto Serbian, is the verb *porukovati* (to send and receive messages) that recently appeared in the Serbian language. It was coined according to the norms of the English language and modeled after domesticated anglicisms such as *lajkovati* (to like) and *hejtovati* (to hate) (Prnjat, 2013, p. 133–135).

Also, the emergence of a large number of newly created anglicisms such as *tvit*, *tviteraš*, *tviterašica*, *tviteraški*, *lajk*, *lajkovati*, *nelajkovati*, *lajker*, *lajkerka*, *frendovati*, *anfrendovati*, etc. indicates a very strong influence of the English language that has progressed with the development of social networks (Ibid.). The use of so many anglicisms indicate the wish of Serbian speakers to belong to, in their view, a linguistically and culturally superior group. Moreover, the influence of English is noticeable in professional genre, too. For example, a high number of vocational anglicisms such as *brendiranje turističke destinacije* (branding of a tourist destination), *spa i velnes centar* (spa and wellness centre), *fitnes centar* (fitness centre), *ol inkluziv* (all-inclusive), *last minute* or *first minute* and many more are present in the language of tourism.

CONCLUSION

Specific graphological, grammatical and semantic features of the Internet language highlight the fact that participants in computer-mediated communication are eager to adapt their language to the technological characteristics of the Internet as a global medium. Modern technological advances have made English a language with the widest presence in all fields of life. English affects cultural and behaviour patterns of members of other linguistic communities that are in touch with it. The influence of English on the Serbian language has led to the emergence of a new linguistic variety – Angloserbian, which is characterized by excessive use of anglicisms and unnecessary imitation of the language norms of English.

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