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Social Networks as Practical Classrooms: A Study of Language Change and its Impact on ELT

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Abstract

Social Networks and Language Change are an important area of study in today's world. The present study discusses the user friendly nature of Social Networks and how it is of interest to teachers and researchers as it exemplifies the Communicative Approach to the teaching of a language. This study posits that social networks have not only changed the individuals' linguistic behaviour but also made it easy for him/her to acquire facility in a language in a relatively short span of time. The easy accessibility of these networks and their flexible language norms in diverse situations has initiated people into a language. In the context of India it has been seen that the fewer the language norms a person is asked to follow the better s/he conforms to the interaction norm in the virtual community at first and in the society subsequently. Ben Zimmer (2009.Web)) in his Virtual Thesaurus writes that language in the forums like Twitter and Facebook changed the word "friend into a transitive verb to describe the act of adding someone to an online list of acquaintances." and that there are a list of unverbs which are redefining the English word formation rules such as 'unfollow a post' or 'unlike an update'. Further the study explicates this phenomenon within a pragmatic framework which provides a set of rules governing conversation and the social use of language enabling a communicative approach to the teaching of language.

Keywords: *social networks, language change, communicative competence, grice's conversational maxims, language teaching*

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Introduction

Social Networking Web sites, such as Twitter, and Facebook, have become extremely popular among Internet users all over the world. This contemporary phenomenon has led to many innovations in language usage. Since these Web sites can be accessed easily, as they are free and interesting to users, they can be seen as new tools for learners of English in order to express themselves easily and in authentic ways. Undoubtedly their immense popularity is due to the easy accessibility and flexibility of interaction whereby users can view pictures of friends on Facebook and short messages on Twitter. Simultaneously, they are also a channel for quick interchanges and interactions through a language which has fewer rules governing it, thereby facilitating the process of language learning. As is evident, it is the lack of emphasis on using the language as a rule governed resource for communication that differentiates it from traditional modes of language acquisition resulting in an increasing number of non-English speakers making use of these tools to communicate in English.

The transformation of the English language due to its use in Social Networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter is of interest to teachers and researchers as it exemplifies the Communicative Approach to the teaching of a language. Social Networks have become a significant tool of language learning and consequently, an indirect tool for language teaching in the present day world.

This study discusses the user friendly nature of Social Networks and contends that Social Networks have not only changed people's linguistic behaviour but also made it easy for them to acquire the ability to be more conversant with the English language. Further it explicates this phenomenon within a pragmatic framework which provides a set of rules governing conversation and the social use of language enabling a communicative approach to the teaching of language. The goal of communicative approach in language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) refers to as "communicative competence." The social use of language and communicative competence are manifested through conversation and the rules that facilitate regular conversation were first theorized by Grice (1975, 1978), who proposed that conversation is governed by one overarching tenet which is the Cooperative Principle. According to this principle, a participant makes a "good faith" and effort to contribute to and collaborate on the conversation as it proceeds (Clark & Schaefer, 1987, 1989). Grice (1975, 1978) further suggested that this cooperation is augmented by a number of conversational maxims: quality (do not say things that are untrue), quantity (do not say more or less than is required), relevance (do not say things that are extraneous), and manner (be brief, be orderly and avoid obscurity and ambiguity). Thus, Grice's theory of Co-operative Principle provides a theoretical framework for systematically studying the effect of Social Networking sites on English language users.

Learning a language comprises acquiring both linguistic and communicative competence. Linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965) includes the correct use of a language (syntactically and semantically). Communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) involves being able to carry on conversations and using language in socially appropriate ways. Though initially the term 'communicative competence' was coined by Hymes as a concept in

opposition to ‘linguistic competence’, nowadays most scholars are of the opinion that linguistic competence encompasses communicative competence. Richards and Rodgers (2001) note that,

In Hymes’s view, a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use with respect to

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what it’s doing entails. (p. 159)

From the above quotation we can deduce that due to the easy accessibility of Social Networks and their flexible language norms they may be viewed as exemplifying Hymes’s theory of communicative competence wherein a speaker only needs to know what he or she requires in order to be communicatively competent in any speech community. Social Networks act as a communicative approach to teaching which in diverse situations has initiated people into the English language. In the context of India it has been seen that the fewer language norms one is asked to follow the better s/he conforms to the interaction norm in the virtual community at first and in society at large. This study posits that the use of abbreviations and neologisms etc., which is a common phenomenon in Social Networks, simplify language norms and facilitate communication. Consequently, the communicator and his/her communication is prioritized, which in turn contributes to the development of a method to teach the English language.

Social Networking and Language Learning

One of the main concerns of this paper is to elucidate how using these Social Networking sites like Twitter and Facebook can transform the way users learn a language.

Twitter, which started in 2006, is described as a social networking and microblogging service that users like to use for short messages of 140 characters in length (Tweeternet, 2011). The short format is a unique way of communicating that has captivated the creative minds of millions of users and it is an interesting platform for Indian speakers to keep in touch with each other. Facebook started as an online network site designed for college students. This Web site has hundreds of millions of users and it is an enticing way for Indian students to form an online community.

Gorney, in her discussion about the effects of social networks and internet on language observes, “Things like email, texting, and Facebook have led to new words forming, new grammatical changes, and other modifications that are both subtle and noticeable.”(p.39)

Further, Plester, Wood, and Bell also underscore the positive effects of texting abbreviations on children:

Those with the higher spelling scores were more likely to adopt the casual youth code language for texting, which entails using non-conventional spellings that are related to pronunciation. Had the children not been aware of the boundary conditions for the two codes of language and used similar language in their formal English assessments, they were unlikely to have scored as highly in the KS2 English scores as most of these participants did. It may be that experience with texting raises awareness of the variety of language registers available to them (qtd in Gorney, p. 40).

Thus, we can say that the foregoing views regarding the positive and productive impact on language change effected by the use of Social networking sites, texting etc. discussed above, corroborate and substantiate the contention of this paper that change of language is actually leading to learning of language. Through these sites, which act as practical classrooms users learn the language in a social environment in several ways such as, by interacting with each other, viewing varied kinds of interactions and thereby understanding the nuances of language usage.

Social Networking Sites and Language Change:

The evolution of the English language in the Social Networking sites is not new and the evidence that the English language is changing due to them is a much studied topic. Increasingly we are turning nouns and adjectives into verbs- such as “to Google”, “to Tag” , “friending” etc. With the advent of faster and more varied communication channels via social media and social technologies, English has adapted incredibly well. Undoubtedly Indian speakers of English are creating and adopting new forms of the language, so much so that acronyms such as LOL (laugh out loud) and BFF (best friends forever) are becoming a part of the verbal repertoire of English speakers across the globe. Today, new variations on words and acronyms are posted via Twitter and Facebook and other microblogs, on popular blogs, through text messaging and more. Prior to the development of such social networking technologies, when print, television and radio were the only media for mass communication, evolution of words and how they are used took a long time. Undoubtedly, it may be well argued that unlike other languages, the English language can adapt very swiftly and easily. For instance the word *Gerrymander* evolved in 1812 and Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter in 1789 stating the idea of “verbing” was “awkward and abominable”. The reasons for this can be manifold; one among them being that English uses fewer inflections in comparison to other languages.

Analysis of Language in Social Networking Sites:

1. Social Networking sites and Word Change:

In English, we can use a number of prefixes with adjectives/verbs/nouns to form their opposites. The following prefixes give negative meaning to the original word. For example

some of these word sets are: legal-illegal, possible-impossible, kind- unkind etc. In most cases, these prefixes are not interchangeable, so we do not have ‘unlegal’ or ‘apossible’, for instance. Ben Zimmer (2009.Web) in his *Virtual Thesaurus* writes that language in forums like Twitter or Facebook changed the word “friend into a transitive verb to describe the act of adding someone to an online list of acquaintances.” and how there are a list of un-verbs which are redefining the English word formation rules such as ‘unfollow a post’ or ‘unlike an update’. Zimmer discusses about the prefix un- in detail but fails to give the reason for the wide usage and acceptance of such a practice. He also underscores the Twitter culture and its brand of tw- words like tweek and tweet etc.

Ever since Old English, the un- prefix has come in two basic flavors. It can be used like the word “not” to negate adjectives (unkind, uncertain, unfair) and the occasional noun (unreason, unrest, unemployment). Or it can attach to a verb to indicate the reversal of an action (unbend, unfasten, unmask)...Facebook, for instance, allows you to register approval for a posted message in a very concrete way, by clicking a thumbs-up like button. Toggling off the button results in unliking your previously liked item. Note that this is different from disliking something, since unliking simply returns you to a neutral state. This kind of instant reversibility is now an inescapable facet of our digitized life — like it or un-. (‘The Age of Un-doing’, 2009.Web)

In this paper we look at the wide use of the prefix ‘un-’ in conjunction with established spelling rules of English and attempt at an explanation. We can study un- prefixes on three dimensions, namely their etymology (origin), semantics (meaning) and morphology (what words can the prefixes be used with, and how productive they are).

Etymology

The prefix un-, is a prefix native to English. Traditionally the rule for using prefixes is that origin of the prefix determines its roots (see Lehrer and references therein). It is attached to negative adjectives, such as unfriendly, unhappy, unfair, and so on. According to English word formation rules un- is a highly productive prefix. Hanić explains about productivity of un- ,

The prefix UN- is the most productive English prefix for two reasons: a. it does not involve so much lexicalization² as other prefixes (Quirk et al. 1985), and b. it is deeply rooted in the linguistic consciousness of English people (Zandvoort 1960) as it is a native prefix. (2009, p.156)

Consequently, it can also be attached to certain Latinate words resulting in the formation of words such as unable, unsympathetic, unconscious, unreasonable etc. It also forms adjectives with present and past participles, producing words like unfeeling, undecided, unjustified, etc.

Semantics

Even though we may say that the usage of the un-prefix generally conveys a “negative, opposite” meaning, there are in fact subtle differences of meaning between different usages. Dixon (1991) describes this behaviour of un- as, “indicates an opposite quality with an

adjective, but a reverse action with a verb (p.6).” Hanić further writes about multiple meanings of un- ,

The prefix UN- is extremely versatile and very rich regarding its meanings... It forms nouns with the meaning ‘lack of,’ ‘non- X,’ and ‘not having proper characteristics of X’ (unbelief, unkindness, untruth). Nouns prefixed by UN- and related to adjectives are usually backformations: uninvolvement...It is very productive with verbs and besides reversal it has other meanings as well: ‘depriving of’: unarm, uncharm; ‘to release, to free from’: untie, unscrew, unburden; ‘degrading’: unbalance, unfrock. Verbs with prefix UN- do not mean ‘not’ (as in unfasten, unzip, etc); they denote reversal or deprivation and this is called reversative meaning. It forms privative verbs with the meaning of removal e.g. unleash (2009, p.157).

Thus it is clear that etymologically as well as semantically the prefix un- is a very productive negating prefix in English.

Morphology

As discussed above, what words can go along with a certain prefix has a lot to do with the etymology of that prefix. Morphologically too the native prefix un- is probably the most productive of all mentioned above. Since the Renaissance, many words of Latin, French or Greek origins have formed their negative forms with un-, giving adjectives like unconscious, unconditional, unfortunate, unsympathetic, and so forth. This also explains those pairs which use different prefixes in the nominal and the adjectival counterparts, like inability / unable, inequality / unequal, injustice / unjust, and instability / unstable. In each of these pairs, the noun existed in Latin and was simply borrowed into English, whereas the negative adjective was later formed by attaching the prefix un- to the existing adjectival form.

The foregoing discussion on the productivity of un- prefix and its three step study provides a possible reason for its present success in Social Networking sites wherein it enables the learner of English to communicate in the language easily and adds uniformity to the rule governing the formation of negatives in English.

Social Networking Site, Chat Language and Change:

Facebook chat example:

A: You doin tonight

B: Nothing!!!!!!U?

A: Just probs work

B: Funnn!!!!!!!

B: why don't you just not do your work and come out

B: Alsooo we need to sort out summer

A: Ahhh I know what are we gonna do!! We should probs go to like a travel agents or something theres no way we'll get everything all organised and get the cheapest deal etc by just looking ourselves.

B: Idnoo but we need to get it sorted.

A: Hmm I just want to avoid goin somewhere that EVERYONE goes to though..

B: Yehthat'strueee. Anyway I need to go but are you gonna come out later?

A: what times your lesson finish??Ive got a free so you could just come whenever

B: yehh it finishes at 7. Do you think X would be bothered if I went to yours?

B: no...

A: ha whatever I will just bbm me when youre ready

Twitter twit examples:

12h **Amitabh Bachchan**¹ @SrBachchan

T 864 - New book to me " What Money Can't Buy".. opening line .."There are some things money can't buy, but these days, not many." ..hmmm !

15 Aug **Amitabh Bachchan** @SrBachchan

T 837 - Celebrity indulgence seeks appreciative response... ostracized if you do not, and demands for greater attention if you do...SWIOSTD

15 Aug **Amitabh Bachchan** @SrBachchan

T 837 - WHAT ??? Ashok Mehta no more ? Shocked beyond words ! A master and a Guru DOP ..kind considerate lovable attributes .. Prayers !!

9 Sep **Amitabh Bachchan** @SrBachchan

T 862 - Been with the son ..enough reason to keep away from TwFmXt ... but back now to reassure all that this platform shall remain alive !

21 Aug **Amitabh Bachchan** @SrBachchan

T 843 - Good night dear ones ..been at my Blog and posting pictures which did not happen .. Arrgghh ..but tomorrow is another day .. GWTW

5 Jul **Genelia D'souza**² @geneliad

Jst watched BolBacchan, super film,enjoyedevry bit of it@juniorbachchan ,ajaydevgan n d entire cast r jst 2good n rohitshetty take a bow

Analysis

The language change that was observed in these Social Networks reinforced the view that regular users of these sites did not pay much attention to ‘linguistic competence’. Rather, they followed the Maxims of Conversation propounded by Grice which may be seen as an example of Hymes’s ‘communicative competence’. Accordingly we can also claim that language learning that takes place through these sites follows the Communicative Approach which underscores the processes of communication rather than the mastery of language rules.

Thurlow (2001) and Shortis (2001) provide us with a relatively comprehensive observational data. Shortis’ typological analysis of internet language discusses the following broad categories: (1) shortenings, contractions and G-clippings and other clippings, (2) acronyms and initialisms, (3) letter/number homophones, (4) ‘misspellings’ and typos, (5) non-conventional spellings, and (6) accent stylizations. To this list Thurlow adds a range of onomatopoeic, exclamatory spellings (e.g. haha!, arrrgh!, WOOHOO!, t’ra, Tee Hee, Oioisavaloy!, yeah, yep, yay!, rahh, ahhh, mchwa!, eh?, and woh!) and a couple of other typographical-cum-linguistic devices for adding prosodic impact (e.g. quick quick, wakeywakey, wotcha, and yawn...). Thurlow also questions the reason behind usage of capitalization by participants in the survey. Following Shortis’ and Thurlow’s categories now the paper analyzes the foregoing examples from Facebook and Twitter respectively.

In the present language example from Facebook chat, ‘Youdoin tonight?’ the auxiliary verb, ‘are’ is omitted and ‘doin’ is an instance of G-Clipping (Shortis, 2001). However as the participants are conducting a conversation, they each follow the conversation rule of initiation with a question, despite the incomplete structure. The question could also be said to follow the Maxim of Manner, by being brief and direct, as the other person follows the Maxim of Quality and responds with ‘Nothing’, but also adds a contingent response ‘U?’ for smooth running of the conversation. This is followed by a Contraction/ Shortening of the adverb of degree, probably, in ‘Just probs work’ and a non-standard structure as normally, ‘probably’ would come before ‘just’ in more formal, written texts. Though the structure of the construction is of non-standard English, the information given is clear and sufficient for the recipient which is in accordance with the Maxim of Quantity. The exclamatory element, ‘Ahh’ in ‘Ahhh I know what are we gonna do!!’ is used to allow the speaker to retain their turn in the conversation and accent stylization word gonna in this sentence is used to emphasize the participants’ panic and frustration, as he/she doesn’t know what to do. There is also a lack of punctuation in the sentence, so that there are no commas separating the two clauses, but even with this non-standard grammar the interaction follows the conversation rule of non-verbal feedback and Grices’s Maxim of Relevance providing required verbal and non-verbal response. The filler, ‘Hmm’ in ‘Hmm I just want to avoid goin somewhere that EVERYONE goes to though..’ is used to allow the participant to retain their turn in the conversation, as well as indicate to the other participant that they are in the process of thinking and have something further to say. The word everyone is typed in capital letters, the prosodic effect (Thurlow, 2003) used to emphasize the point that the participant doesn’t want to go to a common holiday place and it conforms to the conversation rule of using indirectives (Searle, 1975) and Maxim of Quantity, which states that one should provide needed information not

more or less than required. Capital letters are used as the participant has no verbal means of emphasis, so variation in the type of text, such as italic or capitals, is the only way possible to place emphasis on particular words. Misspellings and typos in the chat message by B: 'Yeh that's trueee. Anyway I need to go but are you gonna come out later?' – The interjection, 'Yeh,' along with, 'trueee,' the non-standard spelling and the repetition of the letter 'e' at the end could be done to retain the participants turn or to allow them a brief moment to think. The use of the discourse marker, 'Anyway,' follows the Maxim of Manner wherein one is orderly in his/her speech to divert the conversation away from one topic and to focus it on another, also allowing the participant to control the conversation. The interrogative sentence, 'what times your lesson finish??' uses non-standard grammar, not beginning with a capital letter and repeating the question mark at the end implies that it is spontaneous speech sending clear message that the question is the relevant part of the construction following Maxim of Relevance. The participant also uses Non-Conventional Spelling (Shortis, 2001) 'times' , a plural incorrectly as a conjunction; 'times' does not mean something more than once, it is a contraction for, 'time does', the participant does not use an apostrophe, again showing that this text is more about the question asked than the rule of grammar. Though the final sentence in the chat message, 'ha whatever I will just bbm me when youre ready' is devoid of any punctuation, there being no commas to separate the clauses or a full stop, but it follows the conversation Maxim of Relevance and Manner as the acronym,' bbm,' standing for Blackberry messenger, shows that the participants have a shared knowledge which makes the conversation understandable and free flowing. The use of the Non-Conventional Spelling 'youre' also makes the text much more informal, showing that although it is a written text, it is actually closer to a spontaneous, spoken conversation, than a planned piece of writing. In case of Twitter messages too we see the same categories and conversation rules being used like Contractions -'Jst' for 'just', 'n' for 'and', 'd' for 'the'and Misspellings and Typos- 'evry' for every and Initialisms –TwFmXt (Tweet family texting), SWIOSTD (So what is one supposed to do), Capitalization and Fillers as attention seeking devices.

These examples of flexible language interaction in the virtual community could act as an effective approach of Communicative Language Teaching to those who required a more innovative approach to learning, one in which the Conversation Maxims would receive priority. The adoption and implementation of this as a communicative approach will also result in providing support to those students who reside in remote parts of the world and lack formal English language teaching in their countries.

Till date most of the studies on Social Networking sites have focused on linguistic variations in the virtual communities, and few have touched upon the question as to how these sites are facilitating language learning and language change. In fact, social networking sites have created a paradox in the study of language development; although intuitively one would expect sites like Facebook and Twitter to be an important factor contributing to the dynamics of language change and language learning, very little work has been done in this area in order to demonstrate their effect. The present study demonstrated the manner in which Social Networking sites offer users not only novel environments but flexible, innovative and less rule bound language for interaction with others. The analysis established that although Social

Networking sites provide an unrestricted platform for interaction in a language which unabashedly breaks most of the English language norms, the users do follow Grice's Cooperative Principle and this is what makes interactions on these sites possible. Further, it elucidated and analyzed the wide usage of the 'un-prefix' (due to its high productivity) in these Networking sites which is bringing about a change in the English language and some kind of uniformity as well thereby facilitating the Communicative approach of language teaching at the level of communication by involving the users in various language activities. These may gain wider approval in the future, giving these Social Networks the status of practical classrooms. Thus it is evident that with flexible language norms in various situations these sites initiate non- native users of English into the language, thereby providing them with alternative language learning environments.

Note: 1. Amitabh Bachchan @SrBachchan<<http://twitter.com/SrBachchan>>

2. GeneliaD'souza @geneliad<<http://twitter.com/geneliad>>

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