Interface between Language and Technology: Destabilising Standards

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Abstract

Technology is today considered to be an enabler by most of us because of the ease with which we can do most of our work. But when it comes to academics and that too English language, it is technology which has caused the most serious damage as it has destabilising the established norms of the language. Keeping this as the focal point the paper has been broadly divided into three parts. The first one focuses on providing a brief background of the status of English before advancements in technology picked up pace. This is followed by a description of the technological changes that came up in the past couple of decades through the media, the internet, the mobile and computer gaming and influenced English, leading to a spurt in the number of users. This widespread use of language and language user has side lined the prescriptive grammar. English language users, especially in the second language and foreign language situation have become more careless, more carefree and more audacious. In a commercially governed world this has resulted into orthographical, syntactical and lexical innovations and code mixing to catch the attention of English readers, viewers, listeners and consumers. After citing the reasons for these distortions and innovations the paper concludes by suggesting the need to adapt according to the changing scenario and ensure sticking to standards along with being aware of the new standards created by technology. Suggestion has also been given about the future scope of study in this area.

Keywords: *technology, standards, language, destabilising, distortions, innovations, syntax, lexis, semantics, orthography*

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Introduction

Technology is the buzz word around in every discourse and domain today because it is considered to be an enabler. If we look around us, we find drastic changes taking place, not in one but in almost every field, completely changing and transforming it. The rapid progress that each and every field has witnessed especially in the past two decades has changed the face of the world and shrunken it into a global village. Computer which has today become synonymous with technology can act as an academic aid by offering a variety of interactive choices ranging from reading a story to sharpening of opinions and making suggestions, asking questions and getting responses, resulting in the acquisition of English from the context. But the word of caution is that it has to be introduced into our English language classroom very judiciously, keeping in view the reasons for this introduction and the manner in which it is going to affect the students' learning process and help them in being successful academically.. If used in the right direction it can sharpen students' understanding and allow more democratic participation.

Keeping the above-mentioned scenario in mind, the present paper focuses on the impact of technology on the English language. For this it has been segmented into three parts. The first part discusses in brief the status of English in the pre-technology phase, followed by an extensive discussion of the changes that have come up in the language due to interface with technology concluding with the repercussions of this interface and the future prospects of the language.

Status of English in pre-technology phase

English as a language in England began in a very crude form with no fixed standards. There were multiple variations in orthography and no specific rules in syntax. It started taking concrete shape once the English spread their colonies around the world. Ever since English started being taught in India, its status changed from a foreign language to a second language. In the initial years it was taught by the Christian missionaries but when it got established as the administrative language, its use and demand increased because it became a means of social advancement. It further got established with the opening of colleges and universities in cities. After independence, as per the initial plan, it was to be withdrawn gradually but because of inability to arrive upon a consensus about a common link language, it continued. Moreover, it also had a wider acceptability because of which it is popular even today in institutes of higher education, in the media and public and private sector in our country. During this time, standards were strictly conformed to and British English was followed; the American influence had not yet taken over because computers had not been invented. Rigidity in conforming to standards was such that learners made the best of effort to adhere to them though with little success. This was more so in terms of pronunciation. L1 continued to affect L2 learning. The focus was more on writing and reading skills. This went on for about five decades after independence until the invasion of computers.

Impact of social networking sites and the internet

In the early 90s when computers were introduced in India, there was a strong protest against their introduction in the work scenario because of apprehensions that they will seriously affect employment. But gradually they made their way in every field. These days the adoption of this advanced technology is significantly higher among young consumers who are heavily immersed in Web 2.0 technologies which include a variety of web sites and applications that allow anyone to create and share online information or material. It does not require any web design or publishing skills to participate, making it easier for people to publish, create or communicate their work to the world. There are a number of Web 2.0 applications including wikis, blogs, social networking (Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin etc), folksonomies, podcasting and content hosting services.

It is said that, social networking sites bring with them "narcissism, gossip, wasted time, 'friending,' hurt feelings, ruined reputations and sometimes unsavoury, even dangerous activities." (Boyd, 2008) Despite this they are littering the internet on a daily basis. We also have individual blogs coming up with the increase in the number of internet users who necessarily do not require any special expertise in writing. Even there is no need to write on a topic specifically. These blogs are today acting as personal diaries open for the public to read. As a result, today people are writing more like they speak and less like they used to write.

Technology has changed our lifestyle completely. It has made English evolve from a non-standard variety to a standard one by introducing the printing press and then shattering the same standards through the latest technological advancements and redefining standards. Letter writing has been substituted by messaging on the internet and other networking sites which has drastically altered our pattern of communication. Because of e-mail, connectivity has become faster. Now when one has to respond to innumerable mails on a daily basis in a limited time span with connectivity and time constraints, it becomes difficult to recheck and reread each mail before sending it across. It has brought with it new conventions and abbreviations, such as IMO (in my opinion), FWIW (for what it's worth), IIRC (if I remember correctly) and FYI (for your information), to name just a few. What is more important today is communicating the message. Mails from even native users would at time have serious syntactical and orthographical errors drastically altering the pattern of communication. Because of the vast information pool that the internet has become, the teacher's position has also got shaken because students' reliability is more on the internet than on the teacher.The mainstream digital communication is altering language use completely. There are plenty of people who are still interested in English. Most of them are from the pre-mobile and pre-computer era. For them rules are of utmost importance without which, according to them, the language would become very chaotic.

Impact of mobile

Even sms from mobile phones is a distortion gifted to us by technology. Whats app and BBM have in turn blocked creativity altogether because users can now pay to get customised

messages on various occasions which they can conveniently forward to their friends on their birthdays, anniversaries, festivals and various other occasions.

Short mail service (sms) initially came into prominence in order to economise on letters and words that were charged. Later on the use continued due to laziness, convenience and speed which resulted into typing errors. Another reason for this practice in the initial years was due to the old mobiles which had multiple letters set to each key. Pressing the same key multiple times to scroll through to each letter was time consuming. It was because of this that acronyms like IDK (I don't know), TTYL (Talk to you later), LOL (Laugh out loud), FYI (For your introduction) etc became substitutes for commonly used sentences, making messaging easier for the user. This use as pointed earlier has also now got percolated to e-mails and correspondence on social networking sites as well.

Impact of computer games

Another major influence of technology comes up through video and computer games which have very peculiar names. *Leetspeak* is one such obscure game in which numbers symbolize letters. Gradually, computer hackers and geeks applied it to more robust set on computers. The game has its own set of language rules and vocabulary. It was used early on to evade text filters when hackers discussed illegal activities. The whole mindset coincides with the computer gamers who also use the term *leet* to boast about their abilities.

In conjunction with hackers and computers is competitive online computer gaming. Due to the settings of video gaming on a computer, the communication between people is only available through text. A plethora of terminology was coined due to this. Words such as "*pwn*" and "rage quitting" are common examples used often within the gaming community now. Words coined throughout the gaming are usually used in a deriding manner.

Pwn originated from the word "own" and later evolved into the word *pwned* (from "owned") due to human error as the letter "o" is in close proximity with letter "p" on a qwerty keyboard. The prevalence of the number of typos that occurred during gaming sessions created this new found acceptance for the word *pwn*. The word "owned" which is now *pwned* has taken complete dominance over it. This reflects how technology has taken over English.

The phrase "All your base are belong to us" is an example of the term Engrish, which derives from the word "English" and the replacement of the letter "l" with the letter "r" due to the absence of the former (letter "l") in Japanese. Native Japanese struggle pronouncing this letter and words with letter "l" sound like letter "r" instead. "All your base are belong to us," or *AYBABTU*, at one point became very popular. It originated from a Japanese video game titled Zero Wing that was poorly translated into English. It caught on due to its awkward structuring coupled with the comedy when read aloud. This term spread further when a large number of people took the term and edited it into various pictures on a computer in comic form.

Lexical innovations

Technological era due to the advent of computers has been the most dynamic and fast changing period for English language. The focus has shifted to using short and concise words. Portmanteau words like "ginormous" (gigantic + enormous), "confuzzled" (confused + puzzled) etc have been popularised by social networking sites as they save time and space. *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* 2010 edition has also accepted frequently used words on networking sites like "staycation" (a money saving holiday at home), "chessball" (some or something lacking taste or originality), "frenemy" (a person with whom one is friendly despite a fundamental dislike)," bossnappings" (to oppose sacking or pay cuts). Some of the acronyms like OMG (oh my god), LOL (laughing out loud), TMI (too much information), FYI (for your information), BFF (best friends forever), OOS (out of style) etc have also been accepted.

Code mixing

The other distortion coming up is the audacity of code mixing in regular day today conversation by the younger generation while talking to friends. This infection mainly comes up due to TV and print ads, Hindi soap operas and also songs in Hindi movies. The copy writers of ads do this quite tactfully as they have to ensure mass appeal, especially for the younger lot. It is due to these influences that standards are constantly being challenged by the youth today. Even in answer scripts, we very commonly come across symbols like c̲ for "with" & for "and" and a lot more. The trend is picking up in India but it has already got established and accepted in Oxford University where such symbols in answer scripts have been officially accepted.

The trend of using the social media is on the rise both globally and locally by politicians, social workers, world leaders and of course the youth. The politicians and the actors have a huge fan following on twitter. These fans do not need any formal qualification or understanding of English to comment or express their views on these sites. As a result, accuracy and conforming to code does not hold any relevance for them. This does not stop here. The penetration of the internet in India has yet to see the boom. Out of 137 million users of the internet in India, 102 million are below the age of 35. Most of them feel that there is no need to abide by standards when the broken, fractured English is gaining acceptance.

Syntactical distortions

This new growth of language is destabilizing the very pillar of traditional and formal English, especially the syntax. It is believed that "Over time, texting habits can damage a student's ability to construct a full sentence or describe an object or situation fully. Texting throws punctuation and spelling to the wind." (Wright, 2011) There is no denying the fact that

technology has had the biggest impact on the way we write. But the positive side to this is that users are now linguistically creative and they adopt the language to suit diverse settings. Rather it is a new language in evolution as those using abbreviations like LOL (laugh out loud) and BRB (be right back) must have developed a sensitivity for communicating ideas. The youngsters use acronyms and abbreviations to save time and for some it is a matter of fashion.

Orthographical distortions

Computer tool like spell-check which seems to be very convenient and handy has ruined the orthographic knowledge of the tech-savvy users. It will not be an exaggeration to say that even English teachers themselves have fallen prey to it. Graeme Paton (2012) has come up with a stark revelation that "Around a third of people in Britain are unable to accurately spell words such as 'definitely,' 'separate,' 'necessary' …" If that is the state of affairs in the native land, things can be far worse in a non-native country like India. Frequent typing on the computer and lack of writing practice has made students unlearn orthographic and syntactic rules. Learning which was once a lifelong process and search for knowledge has been replaced by net search and net surf, resulting into complete blockage of critical and analytical thinking.

On a daily basis new software are being introduced in the market that are making the learners lazy and more technology reliant. This easy access to technology has given rise to plagiarism. It is because of this that at times we find a mix of American and British orthography which the plagiarists fail to detect. So wherever technology has made inroads, the ruin is bound to occur.

Even standard English dailies have got infected by technology, and why should they not be when they can economise on space and also catch the attention of the readers. One such headline clarifies the point:

 "R'bore tiger numbering over, reserve has 22 cubs." (Times News Network, 2013)

Positive side of distortions

But there is no denying the fact that distortion also has a positive side. It leads to creativity. We frequently come across writers experimenting and innovating, deriving new words out of the existing class, changing a noun to a verb and vice versa. The following title to an article in *Time* (2012) magazine establishes the point:

"The Revolution will be Puppetized."

Here the noun "puppet" has been used as a verb which is entirely the user's creation.

From this it is clear that technology is making the world change very fast and bringing about drastic changes in English, the most common medium of communication around the world.

Reasons for distortions

Multi-tasking is a common characteristic of the digital natives. This makes it impending for the multi-tasker to go in for acronyms and short forms. Even in Thailand, where 63.9 per cent users of English use the language to communicate with friends from other countries, 52.4 per cent "... use a different type of English when social networking …" (Baker, 2012) and there was a widespread view that such computer-mediated communication made English easier. Another student said, "... it's very easy, don't have grammar ... when I type grammar it's too complex." (*ibid*) Some other students explained how they picked up such language, "... we practice on the internet, we learn from friend ... we find it easy so we do it ...it's better, it's easier, it's shorter." (*ibid*) Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is changing English. Autonomous learners are making their own decisions about the type of English language to use in an online social environment without being affected or guided by linguistic norms. And the interesting part is that such changes do not present a language problem for them however when they write an essay or an extended piece of prose, they misspel very common words because frequent use of abbreviations has distorted that ability. These types of issues have now become even more prevalent within a Mobile Assisted Language Use (MALU) where access is more instant, constant and does not even require logging in to a networked computer. The impact upon English driven by mobile phone users is quite shocking for advocates of standards.

The way we write our text messages is now so widely accepted that it has infiltrated mainstream advertising, newspapers and even some magazines.

As Kukulsha-Hulme (2009, p. 161) notes, "we are living in interesting times, in which teachers and learners must try to work together to understand how portable, wireless technologies may best be used for learning."

Because of the small screen of mobile phones, text messaging was always short and gradually with its ever expanding use and users it became even shorter. Users now reduce the length of words and phrases so that the meaning remains intact.

Access to the internet these days is quite easy because of smart phones. It may be days and weeks and months at a stretch that users of English may have ever jotted down a single sentence because they have completely become dependent on technology for the smallest of work. This is how the rock solid foundation of ESL learners has got shaken and destabilised.

"Only 12% of mobile users never use their phone for texting (and virtually half of these people are over 65)." (Parry, 2010) So it is the younger generation which technology is influencing the most. "70% of 15-24 years olds say they 'could not live' without their mobile phone." (*ibid*)

Conclusion

The paper has finally delved into how technology has distorted standards and established new norms which are dynamic, facilitating the users to break and bend the language for their own convenience. Which other language is so liberal and flexible? I believe, none. It is English which has over the centuries changed, is still changing and will continue to change. It would not be surprising if because of these changes, it comes up with an even new name. The need is to strike a balance between technology and language.

Finally it can be said that today English is not just getting affected by the users but also majorly by technology. This interface is on the one hand ensuring the use of English and at the same time also affecting the growth of the language seriously. If there is no regulation, the language would become chaotic and incomprehensible and the standards destablised. So we need to prepare our students somewhat on the Thailand model of learning to switch codes within the code as and when required and be cautious not to get infected by the distortions that technology is bringing about in the language because the acceptance that has been given by Oxford University regarding the use of words and spellings may never be given by any university in an ESL country like ours.

For further research, work can be done on issues of reading in English in an online environment and also the problems that come our way in a Mobile Assisted Language Use (MALU) environment.

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