

The Effect of Different Media on Language: From the Printing Press to Texting

On October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Thesis to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, he sparked a revolution in Christianity; unwittingly, he also sparked a revolution of language (Britannica, 2020). “Thanks to the printing press and the timely power of his message, Luther became the world’s first best-selling author” (Roos, 2019). According to Dr. Alder, a linguist at Brigham Young University, the use of the printing press to distribute German Bibles to the majority of people who couldn’t read Latin helped homogenize the German Language. Before Luther’s use of the press, German was composed of many local dialects. When people started to read printed material, they began to adapt to a single dialect, which is for the most part still in use today (Alder, 1999). This essay will show how different media, from the printing press to text messaging, have shaped language.

The research conducted contains both primary and secondary sources. Most of the research, especially that of the printing press, Martin Luther, and other historical data are secondary academic or popular sources. The primary research consists of polling forty of my peers; the poll contained questions about how they use language based on the medium of communication being used.

Grigor Bahhdadaryan, with expertise in English Language and Philology, argues that “Historically, technological advances tended to increase the social and economic phenomena to talk about thus requiring new words, new phrases or semantic expansion of old words and phrases” (Baghdasaryan, n.d). Trying to understand how technologies and media have shaped language is a massive undertaking, and even from the period between the inventions of the

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printing press and the internet, there have far more improvements and/or changes to communication than could be covered in this paper. To narrow the scope, this paper will focus on written language, including handwriting, printing, instant messaging, and forms of the internet.

Handwriting has a long history, but until more recent centuries, was mostly formal and used by the church, universities, and governments. The average person was rarely taught to read and write, which was usually a skill only known to scribes, and later to the wealthier, school-educated classes. Writing by hand persists today, and has not changed drastically through the years. On the other hand, the printing press made learning and literature available to the masses. It standardized languages across larger regions, bringing people groups together and creating political and social synergy (Durant, 1957). Though technically more advanced, the printing press is essentially the same in purpose and mode as it was at its inception. The typewriter, effectively, brought the printing press into the common marketplace and homes, and acted as a stepping stone towards the personal computer.

Broadly speaking, the increase in accessibility and natural human curiosity, coupled with a fondness for invention, led to looking for ways to funnel information into business, government, and homes. To be more specific, the precursor to the internet was a “web” of military and university computers, hosting shared data. “Its initial purpose was to link computers at Pentagon-funded research institutions over telephone lines...[Its] purpose was always more academic than military” (Featherly, 2016). In the past half century, the internet evolved from a primarily

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academic web (Web 1.0), to a virtual megastructure, known as Web 2.0. The internet is a hub of language connecting people across the world.

The internet can be used to communicate written language in many ways. Some of the media that facilitate the tendency for people to alter language forms are email, message boards, direct messages, social media, memes, and texting. The combination of uses, users, and data—all in massive quantities—has blurred the lines between types of written communication. Whereas it was once easy to differentiate between the language and media used by academia, government, and the church, media from the press to the internet now can and is used for the most formal to the most colloquial of written material.

The internet as we know it is composed of an overwhelming amount of information. In many cases, quality is exchanged for quantity. Social media, especially platforms like Twitter, are a prime example of this internet-inspired phenomena. In an article in *Psychology Today*, Dr. Jean Kim, a psychiatrist and clinical professor at George Washington University, maintains that “[before social media,] there were well-versed practitioners, writing in-depth, high-quality, long-form pieces with deep impact” (Kim, 2018). Because there is so much information to process, we generally have much shorter attention spans, moving from one piece of information to the next, usually only skimming the surface. In my primary research, I asked if users tend to truncate their language and use altogether different vocabulary when writing texts and using social media. Results showed that 88% of the participants use shortened, abbreviated, or modified English when texting, including “lol, tbh, omw, brb,” “omg, ngl, wyd, wdym, ok, yk, idk,” and many more;

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68% did not care as much about using proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation while texting compared to other forms of written language (Haun, 2021). More than half of the participants use some words exclusively while texting. Finally, over half answered that they have learned words from texting that they now also use in verbal communication.

Language is also shaped by the artificial or technological limits imposed by some social media platforms: Twitter limits tweets to 140 characters, forcing users to choose their wording carefully, and to condense their writing using abbreviations. Although it is not as much of a problem now as it was in the 2000's, when pay by text limits and flip phone keyboards forced users to abridge their messages as much as possible, both to save money and time typing (Jury, 2017).

The ability social media provides to combine images and text has created meme culture, along with language that can surround a meme: memes may use language that although grammatically incorrect, makes sense in the context of the meme. The Oxford Royale Academy contends that, "speakers learn to switch confidently and accurately between [meme language and normal language], borrowing words from one to the other as seems appropriate, to the lexical enhancement of both" (Oxford Royale Academy, 2021)

Depending on the context of the language required, people will actually decide to use one form of communication over another. In my poll, participants were asked which medium they would prefer to use while communicating with professors; with two options available, email or text, 80% of the students chose to use email instead of texting. When asked to elaborate, some of

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the students who chose email explained their choice by using words like “professional,” “formal,” and “respectful,” while others described texting as “too casual,” “informal,” “personal,” or “odd.” Some of the students who chose text cited the ease of using it over email, the speed of getting a reply as compared to email, and less pressure than an email. Not only do students choose certain media for specific types of communication, but a minority—30% of the responses—said that their language would not be as formal in a text message to a professor as it would in an email, although it should be noted that the remaining 70% would remain as formal (Haun, 2021).

Compared to the evolution of audio technology—where the phonograph was replaced by the record player, then records by tapes, tapes by cds, cds by ipods, and ipods by streaming—advancements in written language brought additions to technology rather than replacements. There is a surplus of media dedicated to the written word and this overflow corresponds to the history of writing which went from mainly formal—ecclesiastical and academic—with expensive means of production, to informal. In the same way that Martin Luther’s use of the printing press transformed the German language, subsequent inventions and uses of language have brought the written word to the masses, literally into the homes and hands of nearly every person on earth.

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