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Introduction

Created in 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, Reddit is a participatory and interactive online platform part of the phenomenon known as social media. Although its main language is English, the site supports a variety of other languages like Spanish, French, Korean, German and Ukrainian. The use of English is generally informal, although the site asserts its preference for proper grammar and spelling. With reference to David Crystal's seven features of speech and text (2006), this essay will show that the properties of Reddit such as its democratic voting system, bottom-posting comment system, support of multi-formats and open, socially-interactive community have given rise to new stylistic forms of communication such as memes and internet slang. It has expanded the expressive range of language—in this case, English—and has created a new visual form of the English language that attempts to emulate the nuances of speech.

What is Reddit?

'Reddit' originated from the sentence 'I already read it on Reddit' (Reddit 2014), and is also, coincidentally, the Latin word for 'render' which is in line with the site's democratic system of user-generated and user-approved content. Billing itself as the 'front page of the Internet' (Reddit 2014), Reddit is a place where users, or Redditors, foster original and non-original information and content in the form of a bulletin-style website structure. Redditors can post links to anything they deem noteworthy or interesting, usually with easily digestible content. These are then classified under 'subReddits' or categories dedicated to a range of interests from politics to cat videos to photoshopped images of birds with human arms. Then, the posts are 'upvoted' or 'downvoted' by fellow users so that only the most popular ones make it to the home page, allowing for greater proliferation of the material. However, it also means that links with uninteresting or less engaging titles are downvoted into oblivion. The

medium prides itself on this democratic system and thus does not have any editors who censor content, employing only moderators or administrators who ensure that nothing illegal is posted. Furthermore, Beth Sanderson and Miriam Rigby note that comments on posts, popular or unpopular, often spark intense debates and add details to the issue or topic being displayed (518-519).
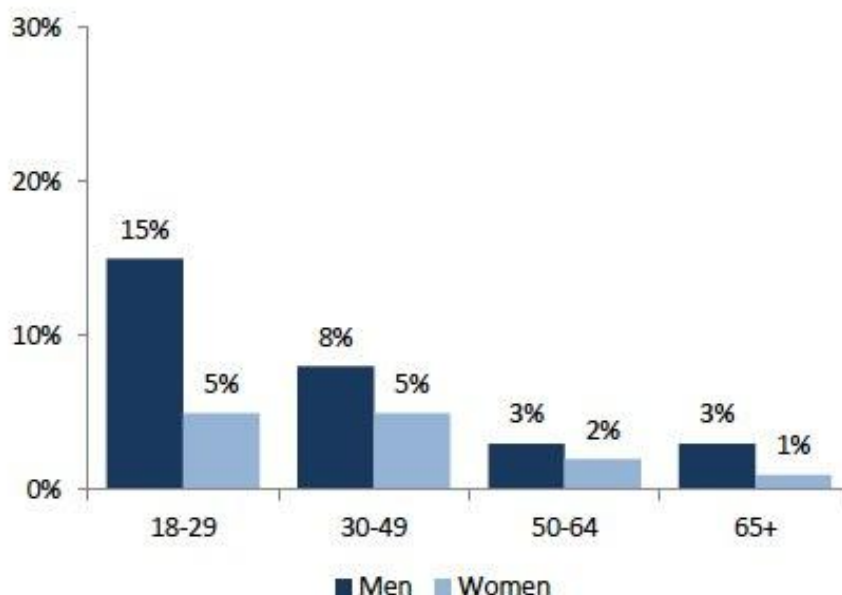
Reddit Statistics

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre's Internet and American Life Project in 2013, six percent of online adults in the United States use Reddit. According to Reddit itself, as of 11 September 2014, the previous month saw over 135 million unique visitors to the website hailing from 201 countries. The previous day saw more than 3 million redditors casting 21,784,646 votes (Reddit 2014).

Fig. 1.

Young males are especially likely to use reddit
% of internet users in each age/gender grouping who use reddit

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Spring Tracking Survey, April 17 – May 19, 2013. N=2,252 adults ages 18+. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones. The margin of error for results based on all internet users is +/- 2.5 percentage points.

According to Figure 1, Reddit's demographics are mainly young men and women between the ages of 18-29, with males taking up a large percentage of the Reddit population. As a result, the stories and links that garner greater popularity deal with topics that would interest that age group, as seen in a study conducted by Ben S. Wasike. He found that 'entertainment was the most common issue-specific frame in articles posted on Reddit (22.5%)' (Wasike 64), with science and technology, entertainment, and lifestyle ranking in succession.

Reddit compared with Speech and Text

With respect to the following table, Reddit arguably displays more text-like than speech-like qualities. This is attributed to its properties as an online medium which communicates information via words, images and videos in the form of links and comments.

Speech	Text
Time bound*	**Space bound**
Spontaneous*	**Contrived**
Face to face	**Visually decontextualized**
Loosely structured	**Elaborately structured**
Socially interactive	**Factually communicative**
Immediately revisable	**Repeatedly revisable**
Prosodically rich*	**Graphically rich**

Table 1: Summary of the seven features of speech and text (Crystal 28-30)

Reddit posts are space bound as posts take up a specific amount of space on a page. The front page of Reddit features the most upvoted posts which changes constantly. Hence, they are also time bound as a link posted today may be replaced by a more popular link tomorrow. This also highlights the constant relevance of content on Reddit which updates itself as new events unfold in the world.

In spoken language, the speaker can revise their words as someone is listening, so as to clear up misunderstandings or to simply check a word or phrase. Text is repeatedly

revisable for books can undergo editing revisions, drafts and so on. However, once something is typed and posted on Reddit, it cannot be edited, so any spelling or grammar mistakes are permanently on display. Revisions can be done by reposting— either by the original poster or a fellow Redditor—although the original piece will still be seen.

The ability to comment on posts reflects speech-like characteristics. One comment thread can hold many sub-conversations as users can comment on the post itself or reply to another user's comment. This is reflective of face-to-face, spontaneous speech in which a mass of people can hold a conversation about one topic but have side conversations with specific persons at the same time. This also highlights the socially interactive aspect of Reddit which is further exemplified by the subReddit 'Ask Me Anything', commonly abbreviated to 'AMA'. Users start a discussion thread wherein fellow Redditors can pose them questions and reply to their answers. It has been used by celebrities like Madonna and political figures like Barack Obama to connect with the masses more effectively.

Language on Reddit is largely loosely structured because of the largely informal usage of English through jargon, obscenity and slang. User 'fozz31' commented,

'I downvoted, I'm the grammar, spelling and caps lock police.

FEAR TEH PO PO WE GOAN TAZE YOU MO'FUGGA!' (Reddit 2011)

The deliberate misspelling of words like 'the' and 'gonna' showcases the informality of English used on the website. The switch from coventional english to slang and the use of capital letters for emphasis also shows how Reddit has allowed for a more expressive use of language that mimics speech.

However, Reddit language can also be elaborately structured due to abbreviations or acronyms that are used for convenience rather than as words to be spoken aloud. For example, a lengthy passage would be summarized into a sentence using 'TL;DR' which is short for 'Too Long; Didn't Read'. 'FTFY' is an acronym for 'Fixed That For You', in which users repost another's comments that contain spelling or informational errors.

Furthermore, while informal language is used through Reddit, there are more serious subReddits which utilize the medium to communicate with like-minded individuals or to simply inform readers about certain issues. The subReddit 'r/science', for example, uses Reddit to inform readers of improvements and developments in the scientific world. For example, this is a recent headline:

> 'Protein secrets of Ebola virus: Deeper understanding of the molecular biology of the virus could be critical in developing vaccines or antiviral drugs to treat or prevent Ebola hemorrhagic fever. Now, a team has obtained the crystal structure of a key protein involved in Ebola virus replication' (user 'mubukugrappa' 2014).

Scientific jargon exists, but the headline is still useful for the layperson. Reddit's ability to contain both informal and formal language evidently shows its varied use of English to communicate.

On Reddit, the prosodically rich qualities of speech are translated into text by altering the visual features of words to indicate emotion and tone. For example, in "telling a joke to a friend, we might flail our arms or modulate our voices, adding animation for humour" (The Economist 2012), but visual language can express the nuances of speech as well. Consider the following comments from the 'r/aww/' subReddit in which both users modify text to reduce its distance with speech and adds tone and volume to an otherwise toneless and silent medium:

[–]SoonerDude22

And I hope that you feel the same way too°°°

[–]WumboJumbo

I'M GOIN CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY THINKIN ABOUT YOU LATELYYYYY

Superscripting the vowel 'o' in 'too' visually drags the word as in speech. Capital letters indicate loudness and the extra letters 'y' similarly reflect the way speech is loosely structured. In "telling a joke to a friend, we might flail our arms or modulate our voices,

adding animation for humour" (The Economist 2012), but visual language through altering words effectively achieve similar results.

This quality of visually modified language is taken further by the creation of memes and macro images. Reddit's ability to support a variety of media, from images to gifs to videos and plain text coupled with the socially interactive aspect of the community has birthed new stylistic forms of text which have changed the way English is typed and used. The creation of memes like 'Ermahgerd', a 'rhotacized pronunciation of "Oh my god"' (Know Your Meme 2012) is an example of this phenomenon that has affected the way English is used online. 'Ermahgerd' features an image of a girl with 'phonetically written captions [...] meant to sound like a speech impediment caused by the use of an orthodontic retainer' (Know Your Meme 2012). A title on the subReddit 'r/Ermahgerd' reads, 'Ermagerd Jerz Herndz Ernd Chrerstmahs!' (Reddit 2013)—which translates as 'Oh my god jazz hands and Christmas!'—links to an image of a tacky-looking American family in Christmas jumpers. The prosody of speech that distinguishes it from silent text has become satirized on Reddit, showing the evolution of the English language. It has also led to the creation of an 'Ermahgerd Translator' in which anything typed in English is simultaneously translated into text that must be read phonetically to make sense.

Reddit's Effects on Society

As content is constantly and quickly updated on Reddit, it has become a frontline source of information and research by mainstream news outlets for breaking news on virtually anything. 'Reddit Live' encourages users to 'follow live events as they happen' (Reddit 2014), which includes events like the Ferguson Riots of 2014 and General Elections. According to a survey done by Cision and the George Washington University, '[o]ver half of the journalists surveyed saw social media sites to be important for reporting and news production' (Wasike 65).

However, since Reddit allows users to post anything they want, unreliable and unfiltered information becomes a major problem and can adversely impact situations and lives if mishandled. Jay Caspian Kang of The New York Times states in his article

'Should Reddit Be Blamed for the Spreading of a Smear?' that '[b]reaking-news reporting has always been chaotic, and it's more so now because the overall volume of misinformation, loosed by millions on Reddit and Twitter, has ballooned out of control' (5). Referring to the wrongful accusation of missing student Sunil Tripathi as the 2013 Boston Marathon Bomber on Reddit, Kang reveals the dark side of Reddit's proliferation of information. The misinformation led to mass speculation on the identity of the bomber, false information which was then picked up by news outlets and other online social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

However, there are positive effects of Reddit as well such as encouraging information literacy. Sanderson and Rigby note that Redditors' interest in 'general topics of information on laws and ethics, open society, and the like goes beyond just linking and upvoting stories and posts on these topics; the Reddit community also practices the tenets of these ideals' (520), citing the subReddit '/r/scholar' as an example. To what extent this is true has yet to be proven.

<u>Conclusion</u>

As Reddit is an open community in which nothing is edited, only moderated, content is extremely varied and constantly changing. It is a site for discussion on any topic that suits the user. This social aspect of Reddit thus affects the way language is used to generate meaning and reflect attitudes, styles and opinions. Headlines must be attention-grabbing and interesting to avoid being downvoted. The creation of memes and other stylistic changes to English words has changed and is continually changing the way people communicate online.

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