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LIN 373: Language Variation and Change

The Effect of Social Media on English Variation

# Introduction

Language variation and change has been present for as long as people have been utilizing language to communicate. It adapts with the user to accommodate the situations and circumstances and over time that will cause change to occur. However, in 1983, the World Wide Web was invented, and human civilization has never been the same. Not only has the internet radically changed everyday lives, but it also has created: “...new communicative situations, new cultural models, new varieties of language and discourse, a new field of research, Netlinguistics… and a flurry of new terminology and phraseology”(Aguado de Cea 183). The Internet has created a space that encourages creative thinking and communication, new words and phrases will inevitably be created to accommodate that space, and the interaction of people from different backgrounds. Since then we have been able to see a radical change in our everyday lives. From “smart” devices to self-driving cars, there is the technology that exists today that people would have never been able to dream about. Nonetheless, there has been little to no research into how this drastic change and revolutionary invention has affected language and language variation. The world is more interconnected than ever as a result of social media. You can talk to someone thousands of miles away in real-time conversations. Social media is everywhere and is integrated into everyday life, from advertisements to our entertainment, it is almost impossible to escape. Especially due to the COVID-19 and everyone being at home under a stay-at-home order, people are heavily relying on social media to stay in contact with friends and family. People can connect through a shared language despite the geographical distance between the speakers. For example, English is a language that has native speakers all over the world. The differences between Australian English, British English, and American English are clear and evident in the vocabulary and accent of the respective speakers. However, there are even differences between the speakers within those overarching speaker groups. Native English speakers from Chicago, Illinois speak a lot differently than speakers from Dallas, Texas. I would like to propose a study that focuses on social media usage and the effect it has on the variation of English. I would first focus on American English and depending on the result, ideally I would like to see this study expand further to accommodate all native speakers of English from around the globe.

Language use varies amongst and within people, but none more than children and adolescents. This age group is still in the learning process of the language, the adolescents are seeming to finally have a grasp on the language and their preferred use of it. This is where variation in language use will occur between the parents and the children, due to incrementation. “This process is known as incrementation, where children, as they mature, move the linguistic system on a stage. They surpass the models of their parents and slightly older peers until they become the leaders of language change”(Holmes-Elliott 81). Incrementation shows that children will advance their parents and adapt to the new variant that is being used. It also demonstrates that there is an adolescent peak. The adolescent peak is when children use the variant but not as much as the adolescents who use it the most, and then the variant use decreases for the young adults. “Just as they use clothes or hairstyles, adolescents use different language styles to enact peer-group identity”(Barbu 2). The variant of language that adolescents use helps shape their identity. Roughly from the age of 13-16 adolescents are using the variant the most because they spend a lot of time around their peers and they have control and almost mastery of the language. Their language reflects the identity that they are creating for themselves. Adolescents are discovering who they are and whom they want to be, and language plays a primary role in that discovery process. This is also the prime period to acquire a dialect. Adolescents have control of the language as well as their voice and oral tract. There is the flexibility available to them to adapt and acquire the dialect, but they also have the structure of the language in a place where they can accurately use the variant in the appropriate places. We do not yet know the extent that the Internet plays into vernacular acquisition, which is why I would like to study this topic. The Internet has already profoundly changed life as we know it, but we have yet to grasp how it will affect our language use, which is a long-term impact that would have drastic implications for English use around the world.

# Previous Research

Since the Internet has recently become commonplace and integrated into our lives, it is too soon for there to be research with full emphasis on social media. The social media platforms, as we know them today, started to launch after 2004, with Facebook pioneering social media. Even then, college-age students are the first generation to grow up with the Internet. We have yet to see what an effect that will have. [. In an observation that was published in The Economist, English is becoming the catalyst to form a pidgin language on the internet. For example, “Singlish (from Singapore) is more like a real creole, an established dialect of English that is difficult for non-Singaporeans to follow”(The Economist 2). Singlish had its system of grammar and vocabulary that non-Singaporeans cannot follow. This is not the only example of how English is changing on the Internet. With each: “...successive waves of users, each more comfortable in their internet skins than the last, have developed a more playful and meaningful internet language, using fast evolving forms of typography, emojis and memes”(Luu 1). The Internet has completely changed how people talk on the internet, it has formed a new language and typography up to English users. The Internet has also shown to be a collaborative space, not only to work on projects as it is usually expected, but for new vocabulary definitions. “...textual collaboration is particularly salient in the case of social media, in which chains of meaning are collectively negotiated by users”(Schubert 338). Over the Internet, users are defining and redefining what the different vernacular phrases and words mean and how they are intended to be used. However, it is not a conversation, the definition is defined throughout use and interaction with the word or phrase. However, even though there has not been much research into the impact of social media, there have been studies about the role of media in language variation. In a study done about television and the linguistic variation impact in Glasgow and south London, it was found that engagement in the show was the biggest factor in whether linguistic variation occurred. “So we might expect kids who hang out together, or who express similar stylistic preferences in their personal appearance, also to share a passion for watching EastEnders, and as a corollary, also to show more innovative linguistic variation”(Stuart-Smith et al. 529). I expect engagement to also be a factor that affects social media and it’s perpetration into everyday conversation and life. Students who are more active on social media are more likely to have the social media colloquialisms with their friends because they have the same interests and are more likely to have seen the vernacular phrase or word used on the internet.

# Methodology

This proposed study would be longitudinal. It would take place in different regions of the United States and follow children as they grow up while evaluating their language use and change over the years. I would have two groups of tested speakers, one group that lives in the New York City area and the other group who lives in Southern California. These two areas are geographically distinct, roughly two thousand miles from each other, so it is unlikely that there would be language diffusion due to proximity. As well as that, these areas consist of high population numbers, so obtaining an adequate amount of eligible subjects would be easier. All the subjects would be native American English speakers, so as to remove any influence of any other English accents. As well as they must have lived in the United States, and ideally the particular region they are being studied in, for their entire life. These restrictions will ensure that their change in language use is as a result of the adolescent peak and the Internet, rather than acquiring the dialect of the region or utilizing the influence of previous dialects they had acquired throughout the years. At the beginning of the study, the subjects would be starting middle school, roughly aged eleven or twelve. I would start with this age because from personal experience I have seen that this is usually the age that children begin to get cell phones of their own. They have a new sense of independence in middle school as they are expected to participate in more extracurriculars of their own choice so many parents decide that it is time for the child to have a cell phone in order to contact them. Cell phones, at this age, naturally come with the territory of social media. These cell phones open the door to social media and interacting with their peers and family over the internet. Even though children today are being exposed to technology at earlier ages, I want to focus on when children’s language use is still moldable, taking into account the adolescent peak, and if their social media use affected their language use. Eleven to twelve years old is just before the adolescent peak is believed to begin so it will provide a baseline for the child’s speech before social media and the adolescent peak is introduced. Also, the youngest age group that is commonly on social media is eleven and twelve-year-olds, it seems to be rarer to see children younger than that on social media. To select the speakers I would find participants who are willing to participate, and I would send a questionnaire to find out more about their background, their parent’s occupation, education level, and if there are any siblings in the household. When selecting the participants of the study, I would also get permission to run their tweets and Facebook posts through a program to detect trending phrases and word patterns which I would find because I would run the program through trending tweets and Facebook posts. I would have a program that would find the correlations between the Twitter and Facebook accounts and the most used phrases across the platforms. Then I would select subjects to get as diverse of a speaker group as I can. I would strive for five subjects from each region, with a beginning sample group of ten speakers. This is an initial study so I would test the hypothesis on a small group and if the evidence shows examples of language leveling then I would continue the study with a larger sample group from different geographic regions to see if the hypothesis and evidence found still prove true. After I select the students, I would then follow the student’s speech throughout the years with monthly evaluations. This study would be mainly focusing on vocabulary usage so I would inspect their Twitter and Facebook accounts, rather than Instagram and Snapchat, to see how they are interacting with their peers virtually, as well as have a casual interview lasting roughly an hour with the subject and one of their friends to see if the vocabulary use is transitioning into their speech. In order to see if the vocabulary is used in everyday speech, it needs to be a casual setting otherwise the students will be conscious of the vocabulary we are using. This also applies to their social media use because of the ‘parents over shoulder’ phenomenon. “...pos ‘parents over shoulder’ based on the image of parents attempting to look over their teenagers’ shoulders to see what they were typing on their computers or phones”(Tagliamonte 28). The Internet and social media allow a level of anonymity and casualness in the user. Children and adolescents tend to not use that level of casual speech with their parents because of the power dynamic that is inherently in place, which is why in order to avoid the correction of vocabulary in the subjects we need to avoid this sensation. Twitter and Facebook will be the primary virtual platforms of analysis because they are text-based social media platforms as opposed to Instagram and Snapchat which are primary photography based, as well as the language and vernacular use on those platforms tend to be more formal rather than casual where Twitter and Facebook posts seem to almost be intended as diary entries shared with your friends and family. It would be analyzing colloquialisms from the Internet and whether they are becoming present in spoken conversations in different regions. Examples that I have seen in the present day of colloquialisms integrating into everyday conversations are ‘and that's on periodt’, ‘big mood’, ‘ghosting’, and ‘DM’ to list a few. I cannot use those examples as the variables to look for because the variants on the internet change frequently so when, if I get the chance, the study would begin there would be a new set of Internet vernacular words and phrases to study. I would continue observing the subject’s vocabulary usage until they are graduating high school, roughly seventeen to eighteen years old. High school-aged students have a better grasp of language than middle school students, as well as they are more active on social media than eleven and twelve-year-olds. Also, after the student graduates from high school their chosen path, either pursuing a career or continuing onto higher education, is not something that we can predict when they are in middle school and it could affect their vernacular use due to their resulting socioeconomic level.

# Expected Results

From this study, I expect to see similar vernacular use between the two areas over time. As I have seen from my own life, people have a way of adapting social media terms into their everyday speech. I remember incidences where I would take vocabulary that I had seen used on the internet and I would start to jokingly use it in everyday conversations with my friends until eventually, it became an unconscious part of my vernacular. Through social media, people are able to connect to people regardless of geographic distance. Due to trending or common interest pages, people can find each other and connect. This is an easy way for vernacular to potentially transfer between people. Especially since as children grow up and get closer to high school and college-age, they are using social media more and more, they will inevitably come in contact with other regional vernaculars.

# Conclusion

Technology and social media are increasingly becoming irreplaceable aspects of everyday life. Especially with the younger demographic, it seems as though everyone who grew up with technology and social media is constantly on some platform. Social media is a way to connect with our peers, giving out your social media handle is seen as an extension of your life, it would be as common as finding someone’s home phone number in a phone book. Especially given the current circumstances and the global pandemic that we are experiencing right now, social media is proving essential to interact with friends, family, and peers. It is undeniable that social media is going to have a lasting impression on society and cultures. That is why it is imperative we understand how social media is affecting us. There have been plenty of studies on how social media affects people psychologically, but the linguistic change that could occur would have drastic implications because it would affect generations of speakers. From personal experience, I have seen how social media has found its way into my vernacular use. Social media provides a medium of connection and a somewhat secret language that defines a generation and social group. It would be especially interesting to see how this generation that is growing up in the age of social media, children today do not and will not know a world without the Internet and social media, my peers know briefly the world without social media. If these platforms are able to have such an impact on people who have lived without it, who knows the implications it will have on children who that is all they know. I believe that in order to understand how this change in society and humanity is affecting our language, we need to study it from the people who are now growing up with the Internet and do not know any different. It could give scientists and linguists a better perspective on the long term effects and the future of language variation and change.

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