Communication, Political or Non-Political, on Social Media and Its Impact on English in India

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Abstract

Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate with one another. With the advent of smartphones with applications like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and so on, social media have registered phenomenal growth in providing multiple platforms for not only individual users but also for politicians and political organizations to share their messages, ideas and views with other users, who need not necessarily be your friends or acquaintances.

India with over a 100 million Facebook users – next only to the US, 33 million Twitterati and over 500 million WhatsApp users enjoys a huge network of people employing these social media tools for communication, be it interpersonal, socio-political or cultural. Apart from these, there are other social media tools such as YouTube, blogs and a few websites that have expanded the base of communication network.

When it comes to the language, in India due to its multilingual character, English has been quite instrumental in social media, as in any other walk of life. Insofar as my observation goes, around sixty percent of "non-political" communication and more than ninety percent of "political" communication take place in English. In this context, my paper would address the issues such as, how social media contributed to the naturalization of English in India and what and how are the new words being added to the English language? What is the role of people belonging different walks of life in contributing to the vocabulary? Do the limitations on the number of characters to be used or the length of the message hinder or refine users' ability to express themselves? Has the political use of English on social media, especially social networking and microblogging sites, enhanced the acceptability of the language in India? The paper traces how social media has made deep inroads into the Indian society as tools for communication as well as propaganda mechanism in the context of rising Asia.

Key words: Social Media, English in India, Twitter, Facebook, Political Communication

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Introduction

Social Media has revolutionized the way people communicate with one another. With the advent of smartphones with applications like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and so on, social media have registered phenomenal growth in providing multiple platforms for not only individual users but also for politicians and political organizations to share their messages, ideas and views with other users, who need not necessarily be their friends or acquaintances.

India with over a 100 million Facebook users – next only to the US, 33 million Twitterati and over 500 million WhatsApp users enjoys a huge network of people employing these social media tools for communication, be it interpersonal, socio-political or cultural. Apart from these, there are other social media tools such as YouTube, blogs and a few websites that have expanded the base of communication network.

When it comes to the language, in India due to its multilingual character, English has been quite instrumental in social media. Barring a few who communicate in local languages with their followers, most of the "non-political" and "political" communication takes place in English.

Providing Voice for the Voiceless

It is increasingly believed that communication has been modified and more democratized with the arrival of Social Media. It has been so radical and sensational as rightly pointed by Kietzman, et al. as "with the rise of Social Media, it appears that corporate communication has been democratized. The power has been taken from those in marketing and public relations by the individuals and communities that create, share, and consume blogs, tweets, Facebook entries,

movies, pictures, and so forth."(242) As a consequence, Social Media platforms are turned into a battleground where the communicator needs to be highly careful in order to avoid unnecessary controversies. For example, in 2009, then Minister of State for External Affairs, Shashi Tharoor's tweet on Economy class as "cattle class" has created massive furor in social media which ultimately cost him his ministry. Hence, it proved that for good or bad, Social Media has become immensely powerful and one must learn to live with it.

In this context, my paper would address the issues such as how social media contributed to the naturalization of English in India; what and how are the new words being added to the English language; what the role of people belonging to different walks of life in contributing to the vocabulary; the limitations on the number of characters to be used or the length of the message hinder or refine users' ability to express themselves; and the political use of English on social media, especially social networking and microblogging sites, enhanced the acceptability of the language in India. The paper traces how social media have made deep inroads into the Indian society as tools for communication as well as propaganda mechanism in the context of rising Asia.

Social Media and Features

Before going into the impact of Social Media on English language, I would attempt to define the Social Media and their salient features. We often tend to use and equate "Social Networking Sites (SNS)"with "Social Media", which includes most of the Networking Sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Hi5, LinkedIn, etc. However, we find striking differences between "Social Networking Sites" and"Social Media". Social Networking Sites are defined as "web based service that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded

system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." (Boyd and Ellison, 211) Social Networking Sites, precisely, serve as a platform to engage between groups and communities with common interests, tastes and concerns. These platforms in return build strong "closed" relationship among the community members through sharing and exchanging ideas, photos and visual content. The communication among the members is private and limited within the group unless the members wish to disseminate the information with the "public". Whereas in Social Media "…users communicate with other users in a social media setting. Many social media sites are designed primarily to facilitate conversations among individuals and groups. These conversations happen for all sorts of reasons. People tweet, blog, et cetera to meet new like-minded people…" (J. H. Kietzmann et al., 244). These communication channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Blogs and YouTube are seen as the most transparent, interactive and engaging means of communication where users participate, comment on and create content.

Twitter: Most Dynamic Social Media Platform

We find "Twitter, for instance, is centered around exchanging short messages that are mostly real-time status updates, so as to create an 'ambient awareness' of issues"(J. H. Kietzmann et al., 244). Twitter is the most dynamic communication platform among all the categories of Social Media that has impacted English language to a great extent. Most of the Social networking Sites that encourage two way communication rather than closed communication can be considered to be part of Social Media. In short, Social Media facilitate message transmission and disseminate information to a wider audience. Everyone gets the opportunity to create and share the content. On the other hand, Social Networking Sites are limited to group of people and communities that are not necessarily open to "public" that subsequently give them a sense of privacy. Hence I

consider Social Media is a broader term that accommodates both Social Networking Sites that share the information with the "public" and new forms such as Twitter and Blogs.

In this paper, due to methodological constraints, I consider only key Social Media tools such as Facebook and Twitter and its impact on English in India. The reason for choosing these two Social Media platforms are for obvious reasons. Facebook, despite losing subscribers in the West, is exponentially growing in numbers and performing extremely well in third world countries like India, Brazil and other African and Asian countries. Facebook penetrated so much into the Indian market that it has "amassed 92 million users which is now the 2nd highest after the US…" (http://www.dazeinfo.com/2014/01/07/facebook-inc-fb-india-demographic-users-2014/).

Apart from regular communication, "74% of marketers believe that Facebook is important for their lead generation strategy" (http://blog.digitalinsights.in/social-media-facts-and-statistics-2013/0560387.html). On the other hand, Twitter too is witnessing huge growth among the English-educated across age groups in India. These two platforms are rapidly influencing and

reshaping the communication strategies and dissemination of information by various groups of individuals for assorted communicative needs.

Scholars like Noam Chomsky have expressed their serious reservations about the language that is deployed in the Social Media. He said in one of his interviews: "My grandchildren, that's all they do. I mean, of course they talk to people, but an awful lot of their communication is extremely rapid, very shallow communication. Text messaging, Twitter, that sort of thing" (http://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/the-secret-of-noam-a-chomsky-interview.htm).This observation prompts us to think of communication strategies of individuals, political leaders who have enormous following in the Social Media and communities who also communicate with their closed groups. It is proved that this "shallow communication" is extremely influential in shaping and re-shaping opinions, ideas and arguments in the Social Media, especially communication by political leaders and the parties.

Hence, while analyzing structural changes in the English language, various tweets by political leaders and their followers will be demonstrated. With this background of dynamic nature of political and non-political communication, it is interesting to observe linguistic and communicative changes facilitated by Social Media.

Shashi Tharoor @ShashiTharoor · Jun 5
Indian liberals shd understand we can only win on the quality of our arguments,not the intensity of our anger.Our virtue isn't self-evident.
↩ ⇄ 539 ★ 419 •••

Shashi Tharoor @ShashiTharoor · Jun 5
I stand by every 1of my criticisms of @narendramodi in the past just as I appreciate his words in the present. Will watch his future actions

Structural Changes in Grammar and Syntax

Communication on social media, especially on microblogging sites like Twitter, is not just about expressing our ideas but it is also about precision and compactness in our messages. Such a demand for compactness has prompted inventiveness in the use of English language in India. Moreover, social media comprise mostly written communication where the absence of nonverbal cues leads users to become self-focused and resistant to influence, disinhibited, belligerent, and affectively negative (Joseph B. Walther: 446). In that attempt of impertinence and audacity in putting forth one's views, it's the language and its structure that bears the impact. Often, grammatical rules get flouted; sentences get shortened; spellings are written such a way that they make sense only in the context. Taken out of the context, it is very difficult to make out the actual word.

For instance, let us have a look at the following extract.

Mahesh Kumar
1 hr ·

F@ace of d people z lyk MiRr0r ,dat reflect so many thInG ab0uT thEm ,der z no need 2 s@y wht i m ....😐

Like · Comment · Share

Share

Manish Baranwal
September 28, 2013 ·

The wonderful SA trip gonna b at itz end....
njoyed lyf lyk nvr before...
had bful moments to cherish with n few gud SA'n frnds co-operated lyk nything....it ws pleasure to be wid them...vl miss u oll....
thnx a lot fr being ma part here....
bbye SA....
nw on ma way back to india.... — at City Lodge Airport Hotel Johannesburg.

Nope dear,i m not da 1 ur think i m but even then v can be gr8 frnds.

Murad Ali
stop transfer of Adilabad district coleector
Yesterday at 7:49 pm · Like

Sakrap Pramod
Plzzzzzzzz stop transfer cltr
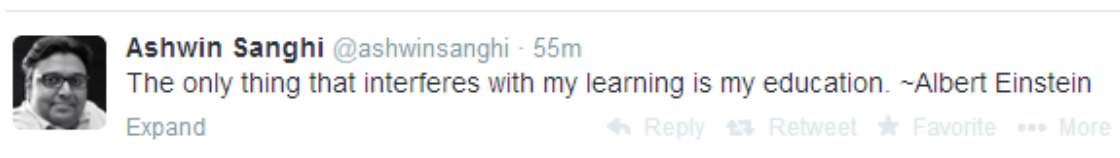Yesterday at 8:19 pm · Like

Aithe Akhil
stop the collectr to transfr....ledante malli adilabad bacwrd distc ga ne mgulutundi..plz....meru real leader aithe plz..adilabad ni devlop hesevallani trnsfr cheyyakandi sir jeeeeeee...plzzzzzzzzzzzz

If a purist grammarian were to consider this sentence, he/she would outright reject it as nonsensical. However, let's deconstruct the sentence for understanding's sake: the user, Mahesh Kumar, used a symbol (@ which resembles 'a') instead of the letter 'a'; the letter 'd' has replaced the definite article 'the'; similarly 'z' has replaced the verb 'is'; the spelling of like has been written as 'lyk', following the phonetic proximity between the word 'like' and the letter 'y' and similar is the case with der, which replaces the adverb 'there'. This reflects the general tendency of social media users in manipulating the language to put across their message in the way they feel comfortable.

Besides, punctuations and certain symbols are also manipulated to serve different communicative purposes than they usually do. Hash #, which is usually used with telephone numbers or addresses, comes to represent the title of a topic under debate, i.e #BraveSonofIndia, the topic about the injustice meted out to the families of martyred soldiers, #YUDH, a movie being promoted on Twitter. At @ on Twitter represents the holder of the account, be it an individual or an organization. The mathematical symbol ~ refers to the speaker of a quote as in the following extract:

Ashwin Sanghi @ashwinsanghi · 55m
The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education. ~Albert Einstein
Expand   ↩ Reply ⇄ Retweet ★ Favorite ••• More

Coming to punctuations, people often digress, in their usage, from the standard, prescribed rules. In standard written English, a colon is used to separate the speaker from his quote or before a clause or phrase that gives more information about the main clause. Now look at these extracts:

Firstpost is an online journalistic website and it has inventively used colon to represent an event in the first post and the title of a burning issue in the second post, both of which are phrases in structure but the main subjects about which something is being said. This is a common practice on the microblogging site Twitter.

Even sentences undergo tangible changes; they become sharp and crisp. Users take away certain words which can be avoided without changing the sense of the sentence.
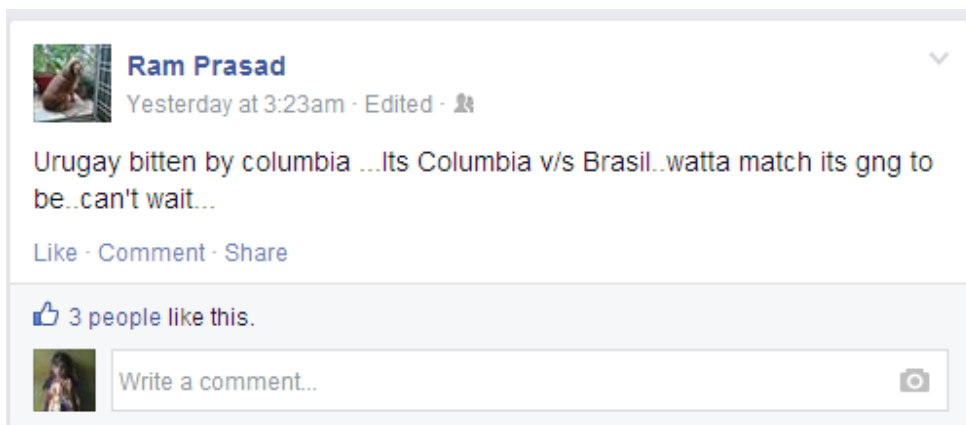
In formal written English, this sentence would read: "Uruguay was beaten by Columbia. It is now Columbia versus Brazil. What a match that is going to be! I can't wait to watch." The sentence as it was posted on Facebook timeline of the user has, apart from spelling errors, done

away with the helping verbs (was & is), subjects (It, that & I) and adverb (now). Even though these constituents have been avoided, we can still make out what the message is.

Changing Spelling Conventions

The above extract has also contained one more feature of language use on social media. This feature has to do with spellings. The verb 'going' in the extract has been spelt as 'gng'. A careful look at the new spelling reveals the fact that vowels have been removed and still we are able to figure out the word.

Likewise, it is very common on social media that 'should' is spelt as 'shd'; 'and' as just 'n'; 'the' as just 'd'; about as 'abt' and so on. However, this phenomenon is not just confined to non-functional words such as auxiliary verbs, articles or prepositions: it applies even to functional words such as nouns and verbs. Thus, the noun 'group' is spelt as 'grp'; years as 'yrs'; 'members' as 'mbrs'; you as just 'u'; 'former' as 'fmr' and so on.

The other way spellings occur on social media includes shortening of the words. For example, 'university' is spelt as 'univ'; 'yesterday' as 'yest' and so on.

Conclusion

This study of English language in India in the background of its use on social media is essential as such application of the language on a scale at which it is now being adopted will have a telling effect on the acceptability of the language. In a recent political development in India, when the India Home Ministry asked its civil servants to post their messages in Hindi – the de facto national language of India, but constitutionally the First Official Language of India, there was a huge furor, especially from Tamil Nadu, of which antipathy for Hindi is well-known. The Chief

Minister of that state even went to the extent of advocating the use of English, a language of foreign origin though it enjoys the constitutional status of Second Official Language, rather than Hindi, which at least has its origins in India itself. Interestingly, no one has objected to such explicit advocation of a foreign language as if a foreign language is more acceptable than an Indian language.