

Digital Socialization: Exploring the Effects of Technology on Sociolinguistics

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Abstract

Contemporary research has considered how language and society might be interrelated based on recently available data and new statistical techniques. In the era of technology, this paper describes the dual effect of people on technology and vice versa. Furthermore, it discusses how this evolution reflects social reactions.

Introduction

Almost a century ago, Edward Sapir (1912) argued that language, human society and the environment are related. Sapir then predicted that these forces could eventually come to influence individuals. Language, then, is a multifaceted adaptive structure: it affects and is affected by the dynamics of an emerged speech community (Beckner et al., 2009). In the mid-twentieth century, Labov (1972) put forth the sociolinguistic concept of (community) in his analysis of the association between language and society. The notion aimed at positioning individuals within groups that share the same linguistic features. The (speech community) then was acknowledged as a geographical, homogeneous and stable group which shared the same history and language (ibid, 1972). The traditional idea of speech community has now developed and expanded into a sociolinguistic concept that embodies the numerous modern methods of communication, including the digital social networks which allow people to establish “virtual networks” (Tagg, 2015, p. 230).

Currently in the era of technology, human languages (English is discussed particularly in this paper) continue to be used but are presented through new online computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems which are commonly text-based. Researchers have proposed many terms to categorise that online language: “Netspeak” (Crystal, 2004, p. 17), referring to the use of abbreviations and emoticons; “written speech” referring to its non-standard nature (Herring, 2008, p. 2); and “Technologically Mediated Discourse” (TMD) (Herring, 2008, p. 1) for more general use, including all digital devices and which will be used in the current paper. Thus, since the beginning of the Internet evolution, researchers have split between categorizing TMD. They have been interested in both sides of the coin mentioned previously showing how TMD affects and is affected by speech community: One being that “the social and contextual factors shape online language use, much as they do offline language”

(Georgakopoulou, 2003a, p. 15); the other being “the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet” (Androutsopolous, 2006, p. 421).

This paper discusses how TMD affects and is affected by people, either as individuals or in groups, and how this linguistic evolution reflects social reactions. While linguistic studies of TMD tend to lose validity due to the rapid changes that make it difficult to keep up with it (Crystal, 2009), it is crucial to continuously document these changes in order to provide a timeline of the use of TMD over the years.

THE EFFECT OF TMD ON PEOPLE

The Language of TMD

Sociolinguists have been conflicted about many aspects of TMD since its introduction. One conflict concerns the debate regarding the lingua franca of TMD. Some researchers like Durham (2003), argued that English is the preferred lingua franca, as it seems to be the accepted language in multilingual and multicultural contexts, not only in face-to-face interactions but also in online communication. Thus, some researchers showed concerns about TMD creating a space for the ascent of the English language, which may endanger smaller languages (Dor, 2004; Mair, 2002; Nunberg, 2000). To break down that argument, the dominance of English on the Internet will be discussed, followed by how smaller languages are affected.

In 1999, a study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) discovered that 78% of websites in OECD countries were in English, and 96% of e-commerce sites were in English. This language dominance of English online had already caused resistance in some countries such as France, where a 1994 law mandated that all e-commerce websites had to be in French and prohibited the use of English words such as

(e-mail and start-up) (Warschauer et al., 2002). Androutsopoulos (2006) reported that, in terms of e-commerce, consumers are more attracted to websites in their local languages. Thus, global commercial companies may utilise this preference to form better relations with their audience. Androutsopoulos (2006) argued that English was dominant on the Internet in the 1990s, based on the existing users and websites then; in recent times, more websites in other languages have since been developed. Likewise, Wright (2004) demonstrated, through empirical research conducted in many countries including Italy, Japan and Ukraine, that an educated audience preferred using their native languages in TMD if available.

Despite the aforementioned discussion, researchers' arguments are limited in terms of geography and should not be generalised. Even though many arguments indicate that English is the lingua franca online, that does not mean that its presence prevents linguistic diversity online—in fact, online users are encouraged to mix between languages in written forms and use “minimal bilingualism” (Tagg, 2015, p. 139). Thus, codeswitching in TMD shows that Internet users do not maintain formal restrictions between languages like they do in face-to-face spoken conversations. Multilinguals therefore consider it a safe space for them to switch between languages if it achieves the targeted function (Tagg, 2015), supporting linguistic diversity in TMD. Although the number of English language users has decreased over the past, the use of English as a lingua franca on the Internet by non-native-English speakers has increased. Moreover, sociolinguists who study Internet multilingualism find a noticeable impact of English on other languages through, for example, borrowed terminology and common shortenings (Herring, 2008). Furthermore, a recent statistical search by Internet World Stats (2016) found that 67.8% of users around the world use English in their online work.

Consequently, Tagg (2015) suggests that the dominance of English language in TMD should not be seen as a problem because it facilitates the emergence of other languages into the English language, activates the role of multilingual Internet users and encourages them to switch actively and freely among languages for the sake of socialising. For those reasons, Leppänen and Peuronen (2012) provide an alternative viewpoint:

The focus is no longer on the measuring and surveying of the use of particular languages on the Internet, but on the specific multilingual practices of Internet users, the motivations behind their language choices and the functions and meanings these have for them in the specific Internet contexts in which they operate. (Leppänen and Peuronen, 2012, p. 389)

Additionally, ethnographers (e.g., Gumperz, 2001), sociolinguists (e.g., Labov, 1989) and linguistic anthropologists (e.g., Duranti, 2004) stress that Internet users, whether mono- or multicultural, enrich online contexts with their linguistic characteristics, beliefs and various backgrounds (Danet & Herring, 2003). Modern technologies have reduced the difficulties of generating and broadcasting various forms of content and have allowed many-to-many interaction and cooperation (Mac Uidhilin, 2013). TMD now represents the richest linguistic data of all written language corpora, including all libraries combined, and it is yet increasing rapidly (Crystal, 2009).

Regarding minority languages, both immigrants and regional linguistic minorities have viewed the Internet as a channel through which they can revive their culture, language or other traditions (Amant & Kelsey, 2012; Sheyholislami, 2011; Tagg, 2015). The Internet is considered both as a tool for language maintenance and an additional sphere in which the minority or heritage language can be used (Pauwels, 2016), supporting Kloss's theory (1966) about the very strong link between language and a group's identity which can be reinforced through the maintenance of the language. Furthermore, the Internet may support the maintenance of endangered and minority languages by providing a tool for their

documentation and literacy progression (Debski, 2004; Ouakrime, 2001; Sperlich, 2005; Warschauer, 2002). Moreover, the Internet allows smaller languages to expand their written language, and enables their compatibility progress to fit into the modern world of technology (cf. Warschauer, 2002). Barton and Lee (2012) stated that the Internet can strengthen social values for informal writing patterns that were formerly unevaluated. They argued that, in many cases, using a minority language online can make it more connected to local powerful languages (Tagg, 2015). As Mitra and Watts (2002) described:

The Internet, in particular, can be seen as a discursive space where traditionally marginalized groups, such as immigrants, have the opportunity to find a “place at the table”, express themselves, and engage in a dialogue with a global audience (ibid, 2002, p. 488).

On the other hand, Ouakrime (2001) argued that how well minority languages are maintained is reliant on how active the members of these small or endangered languages are in reviving their languages and how accessible they are to technology and the Internet (cf. Cunliffe, 2007). Pauwels (2016, p.173) stated that although the Internet creates a rich environment for “virtual heritage language”, it still needs the community’s commitment so that there can be wide use and spread of the language. However, she acknowledges that with the existence of the Internet, there is less of a chance for a language to die out (Pauwels, 2016). Nonetheless, the previously mentioned arguments are mere assumptions made from small-scale investigations. More research is needed to show how smaller language groups can take advantage of the Internet to strengthen both their languages and linguistic identities.

To wrap up, the language of TMD both the verbal and non-verbal cues indicates how people are influenced by the Internet nature, yet they also affect it by employing its facilities for a better communication.

THE EFFECT OF PEOPLE ON TMD

Stylistics

One of the aspects that attracts the attention of sociolinguists is “Virtual Conversation (Chat)” (Bonilla, 2003, p.635), i.e., writing as how one would speak. The most exceptional feature of this e-communication is “text oralisation, ... the sensation of the fact that users write what they would wish to be saying, and read what they would like to be hearing” (Yus, 2001, p. 88). It shows the importance of the visual and nonverbal merits in human communication, and how Internet users offset the absence of such circumstantial potentials in the Internet written interaction. Crystal (2009) reported that the most significant feature is the unnecessary immediate feedback like in face-to-face conversations. To justify its significance, Stevenson (2000, n.p.) suggested that phonological reproduction in TMD is what Internet users seek, rather than just reflecting spoken structures, and can be described as “a consequence of social anxiety to rebel over the usual spelling rules” (ibid, 2000: 39). However, there is no fear of the language use on the Internet ruining the language, because TMD is merely a linguistic evolution in terms of combining words with numbers, emoticons, and developing new terms, and does not affect grammatical forms (Crystal, 2009). It is crucial to stress Internet users’ creative abilities in substituting facial expressions, tone, voice, pitch and gestures in face-to-face interaction with emoticons which are widely used in TMD because it is argued by early researchers that text-based forms of computer mediated communication (henceforth CMC) lacks nonverbal cues such as facial expressions (Culnan & Marcus, 1987; Daft & Lengel, 1984; Kiesler, 1986; Rice & Love 1987). Nevertheless, more recent research argues that online users can use emoticons to express those missing clues (Thompson & Foulger, 1996; Walther 1992; Walther & D’Addario 2001). In line, Wang et al. (2014) investigated the impact of the emoticons used to show likes and dislikes on a person’s willingness to accept negative feedback. They argued that using emoticons significantly influenced both recipients’ intuited good intentions of the person providing feedback and

their own acceptance of negative feedback. Their findings suggest that employing certain emoticons in delivering specific negative feedback can minimize the threatening nature of negative feedback (Wang et al, 2014).

Politeness in TMD

Another sociolinguistic effect of people on TMD studied by researchers is politeness. Yus (2001) suggested that the most positive feature in TMD is that all speakers' participations can be read with clarity with no focus on aspects of politeness that are examined in traditional spoken conversations such as overlapping speech and turn-taking. Similarly, with respect to offline discourse etiquette, members of TMD are familiar with open netiquette norms like the regulation of the Internet, the responsibility of an individual in the Internet, copyright issues, issues of anonymity (Androutsopoulos, 2006; Graham, 2005, 2007, 2008; Preece, 2004), which, if not followed, may lead to impoliteness (Haugh, 2010). Therefore, there are norms specific to virtual communication like those used in face-to-face interactions (de Oliveria, 2007; Graham, 2007; Haugh, 2010; Stommel, 2008), even if they seem different (Locher, 2010). What is worth mentioning is that swear words are used to be categorised under impoliteness in both face-to-face and online interactions, but recently they have also been considered as a type of politeness both in offline and online interactions. To illustrate, swearing can be looked at as a common form of intentional impoliteness with offensive terms used to show superiority among anonymous Internet users. It can also be categorised as a politeness strategy as in enhancing solidarity, cultivating a sense of belonging to specific groups, showing praise and being humorous. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as an indicator of positive feelings, such as surprise and enjoyment, which may also implicitly provide positive evaluations (Dynel, 2012). Jay and colleagues (Jay, 1992; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008) argue that a person's sensitivity to swearing depends on specific social

and cultural variables like the user's social class, job and circumstantial variables like genre and connection with the interlocutor, depending on whether it causes more or less face threat. Therefore, in specific communities of practice or among social groups such as teenagers, cursing is a form of common politeness and it may be considered abusive only to a person not belonging to the group. On the other hand, there might be persons who are not used to cursing, hence they find it impolite (Dynel, 2012). For a better understanding of online antisocial behaviour and impoliteness, it is important to consider what is normal according to particular online groups and how that group's members place themselves and are placed by their groups (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Graham, 2007; Luzon, 2011; Nishimura, 2010). In general, TMD is frequently full of impoliteness (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Graham, 2007, 2008; Nishimura, 2008, 2010;), which is more critical and powerful than in oral interactions (Graham, 2008) and is sometimes seen as a norm (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010). In addition, Smith (1999) and Danet (2001) argue that anonymity is the main reason for the richness of aggressive insults in TMD. Even though some sites require commenters to register their information, users might input fake information to preserve their actual identities (Dynel, 2012). Jay and Janschewitz (2008) suggest that relaxed environments permit more aggressive words than formal ones do, and solidarity in an e-community of practice is enabled by anonymity, which assures online equality (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010). For example, nicknames are frequently gender-unbiased and Internet users stay anonymous in terms of gender (Yates, 1997). This allows females to swear on an equal basis with males, opposing the traditional belief that "good girls do not swear", a view well-established in the literature on gender studies (Dynel, 2012, p. 39).

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Smith et al. (1997) considers politeness as a common means which reveals gender differences in CMC. Through which females are more likely to thank, apologize and irritated by violations of politeness. Another way in which aggression is gendered was observed in

some of Herring's (1995, 1999) early studies, when she found that—in both academic and personal blogs—men possessed confrontational attitudes towards women's initiations about specific cultural beliefs, for example, men felt that women should not speak out at public events and would silence them and to maintain men's dominance. She also discovered the strategic patterns men undertook to do so: by not responding, changing the topic, or adopting women's ideas as their own. Moreover, she noticed women's tactical patterns to encounter men's efforts to dominate including having determination to persist and a regularity of focus, representing a feminine style of using language. This study signifies the successful linguistic styles of online users and how both men and women challenge each other, and raises questions about why people behave in hostile ways online. According to Herring (1995), it is most likely due to the same reasons that provoke aggressive face-to-face interaction. For example, research has consistently found that males are competitive and more argumentative by engaging in conflict, commanding, and taking opposing stands; whereas females tend to be collaborative and try to avoid conflict. Females, therefore, are more agreeing, supporting, and making suggestions rather than commands (Maltz &orker, 1982; Tannen, 1994).

More recent researchers suggest that online aggression is sometimes both unintended (Luzon, 2011) or intended (Page, 2014) to maintain group solidarity by rejecting intruders. Recent work has categorised antisocial attitudes on different sites (Haugh, 2010 on e-mail; Luzón, 2011 on academic blogs; Pihlaja, 2011 on YouTube).

SOCIAL REACTIONS

Identity Formation

Since the 1990s, the Internet has been celebrated as a liberating space in which users could abandon and adopt identities at will (Tagg, 2015). The ability to “[wear] online masks” (Tagg, 2015, p.60) enriches the relaxed atmosphere of many Internet characteristics

(Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Danet et al., 1997; Deumert, 2014). It was also widely assumed that anonymity would contribute to the “democratising effect” (Tagg, 2015, p. 60) of the Internet, where social differences such as gender and race would not be considered and participants could interact equally (Graddol & Swann, 1989). Sherry Turkle (1995) supported that point view:

You don't have to worry about the slot other people put you in as much. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see are your words (Turkle, 1995, p.184).

On the other hand, few studies on TMD are based on quantitative procedures (cf. Yates, 1996), and even fewer make a clear link to language variation (cf. Paolillo, 2001). This can be related to the fact that anonymity in TMD increases problems about reliable information (Herring, 2001). The freedom anonymity provides in TMD helps its users to create and develop identities. Some researchers such as Danet (1998) assumed that participants adopt different identities than their real ones. Therefore, participants have multiple resources to co-actively build their own distinguishable personalities (Baym, 1998). The combination of words and images people use in their personal homepages reflect the multiple sides that they see themselves as (Chandler, 1999; Miller & Arnold, 2001).

This type of written chats reflects how Internet users build their virtual identities and interact successfully because of their ability to form a background that closes the face-to-face communication gap. Furthermore, Crystal (2004) states that virtual worlds are considered to be imaginary environments which Internet users can access to participate in fictional social interaction. The ability to explore fantasy worlds allows them to create or reveal new identities they have not realised. The possibility of anonymity in TMD supports the image of that imagined world and helps its users to feel safe and liberated even if they know that they

can be traced easily (Herring, 2002).

Glocalization

Another dynamic aspect that should be raised is the term “glocalization”, which was initially presented by Robertson (1995, p.32) to describe “the universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal”. This concept has later been reviewed by Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou (2004) to negotiate the relationship between the global networks and the local identities emerging online with the local adopting features of the global by employing strategies to maintain its identity (ibid, 2004). Similarly, Androutsopoulos argued that minor groups create “dual identities” (2006, p.428) that can be sensed in their TMD which supports them to form special social identities attached to these minority virtual worlds.

Besides creating identities, Internet users can create their own communities through consistent interaction with specific online groups that share their interests (Tagg, 2015). For that reason, several studies have explored special ways of online communication, including (e-mail, Tsiplakou, 2009; instant messaging, Fung & Carter, 2007; SMS Duemert & Masinyana, 2008; Morel et al., 2012) and found that Internet users construct intimate relationships creatively by focusing on histories and common languages common. They attract each other’s attention by using “the language that shares semiotic– the study of signs and symbols–features to create online identities” (Tagg, 2015, p. 134). However, some researchers (e.g., Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Blommaert & Backus, 2012) suggest that the focus should be switched from community-based patterns to individual linguistic repertoires to explore the reasons that cause members to switch among groups, adopt or discard shared languages and feel a sense of belonging to certain groups. Building an online identity is a

collaborative procedure among users involving how each likes to behave and be seen by others as well (Tagg, 2015). Thus, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argued that identity should not be considered as a fixed character in someone's personality, rather, it is formed through the individual's emergence into social interactions. Tagg (2015) therefore suggests that the online space provides its users with dynamic techniques to help them reconfigure their real identities and to present themselves differently online.

Creating Identities on Online Communities

Burgess (2006, p. 5) posits that users of TMD users have a "vernacular creativity" in how they create an online persona, producing an innovative, humorous tone online through mixing lexis, syntax and punctuation, described by Jones (2012) as a development of a person as well as a language. According to Lewin-Jones (2015), this creativity (specifically on Facebook) is implemented to construct identity and form "self-presentational and social goals" (Thimm, 2008, p.343). This concept supports Goffman's (1969) image of language users as theatre performers where tone can be heard, yet in online language, users show that tone by the conversational uses (Herring, 2007). The use of humour in creating online personas also allows social relations that can be caused by online humour such as establishing and supporting friendship (Thurlow & Brown, 2003) and retaining social networks (Pennington & Hall, 2014). The use of self-criticism either physically or psychologically as a type of online humour shows users' openness to their recipients which may not be possible in face-to-face communication (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). Likewise, Georgakopoulou (2011) found that self-criticism in online humour is a positive way for users to represent themselves. Online humorous methods can be performed by many means such as unanticipated swapping between tones (Georgakopoulou, 2011) or sarcasm. The latter is considered an innovative linguistic feature according to (Carter & McCarthy, 2004) but needs

the addressees to differentiate between the actual meaning and the ironic attitude. Thus, Baron (2008) indicates that online users' humorous creativity demonstrates their ability to affect the world they belong to instead of only being affected by it.

Discussions about identity in TMD studies have highlighted the creative ability of its users to construct what may be missing in their offline world. Yet, some important processes are still undiscovered, for example, how people launch member identities in an online community and how they adopt roles within the group (Baym, 1998, 2000; Cherny, 1999; Donath, 1999). However, some researchers argue that e-communities lack stability, long-term commitment and social liability, which make them incomparable to real-world society (cf. Jones, 1995a, 1998; Stegbauer, 2001). Others suggest that e-communities should be classified in their own terms and not to be compared to the real world (Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 2000).

Gender in TMD

Research on the relationship between language and social identity in TMD was initiated by Herring's studies on language and gender (1993, 2000, 2003) in order to shed light on any gender differences inspected in TMD. Herring frequently reported systematic differences between males and females in discourse patterns (Panyametheekul & Herring, 2003). For example, males write more and lengthier messages, receive more replies, use stronger assertions, have more disputes, are less polite and do not use (we). The female style is more supportive and agreeing, they use (we) and express personal feelings. In addition, there are some synchronous differences between their TMD styles: males use more aggressive terms and vulgarities than females, who use more neutral verbs, emoticons and laughter. Furthermore, Herring's continuous research (1993, 2000, 2003) signposted through discourse analysis that gender differences were obviously highlighted, for instance that males

write in similar styles to their conversations in offline settings such as the usage of rhetorical questions and challenging more than supporting others (Tagg, 2015). Thus, Herring suggested that these findings about gender irregularities and male dominance contradict the common view of Internet democracy—mentioned in section 2.2— (Herring, 2000, 2003; Panyametheekul & Herring, 2003).

However, some scholars have different opinions. For example, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) found that sites which are run by both males and females represent more similarities than differences and that young male bloggers use more emoticons than females, while the females did not demonstrate collaboration or use softer language. Hence, researchers (e.g., Rodino, 1997) who believes that gender is a performance rather than a fixed feature influencing language challenged Herring's assumptions. His analysis suggests that considering gender as a dichotomy disregards the diversity of gender constructions in CMC. Thus, gender-as-performance can support the dualistic gender system if CMC is posited to empower the re/construction of gender.

Other researchers highlighted the importance of contextualising language and identity studies in technological development as well as intergenerational and intercultural differences (de Oliveira, 2003; Georgakopoulou, 1997a, 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Although Herring and Paolillo (2006) considered males and females as two groups and studied the linguistic characteristics that have been assumed to differ due to gender, their findings suggest that these characteristics are more related to the genre of weblog writing than gender. One explanation is that these genres are themselves gendered: the characters relate to a genre's requirements more than to the actual gender of its author. For example, they found that gender differences in grammatical word frequency could not be detected when they controlled for blog genre – personal diary vs. 'filter' blogs commenting on external events to

the blogger – although females produce more of the former and males more of the latter genre.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper sheds light on the sociolinguistic changes in the era of digital technology. Ultimately, there are similarities between online and off line languages, for example, having English language as the lingua franca for both. However, language use on the Internet language has been found to enhance linguistic diversities as well as minority groups' languages. However, the notion of the speech community, as presented by Labov (1972), fits better in the digital realm. This is because the speech community has developed into social networks and communities of practice expressing the same concept, and reflects a broader relation between individuals and more diverse communities than those within the same geographical and linguistic connections. Additionally, the most significant feature of TMD is the anonymity of online interaction which enables some advantages like freedom of expression but also intentional aggression. Nonetheless, sociolinguists find TMD a useful and rich tool to facilitate their understanding of how people socialise through innovative linguistic methods.

TMD has been found to be a helpful means that reflects individuals' novel ways of emerging in communities, negotiating their identities, and presenting themselves in a free space regardless of time and geographical boundaries. Furthermore, researchers find the Internet to be a productive linguistic source that enables them to study and track sociolinguistic changes on a wide scale. Finally, TMD has transformed the traditional structures and hence it has significant sociolinguistic effects on individuals and societies.

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