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Digitally Speaking: Multitasking and the Future of Digital Language for Academic Communication

Bosede Iyiade Edwards
School of Science, Osun State College of Education, Ilesa. Nigeria

Baharuddin A. Aris & Nurbiha A. Shukor
Department of Educational Science, Mathematics & Creative Multimedia, Technology,
Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Technological advancement including the emergence of social media has brought irreversible changes to the 21st century communications landscape. With opportunities for anytime-anywhere connectivity on different kinds of gadgets for real time sharing, there has been a strong and very noticeable effect on language use in social interactions. With the increased need for multitasking, the need for increased speed, especially in written communication, has resulted in the trend towards an emerging digital dialect using abbreviated words, figures as well as a combination of words from many languages. New digital vocabularies emerge daily and one wonders if this may end up on the pages of academic materials soon. This paper examines current trends in communicative languages in digital environments especially written communication in the age of media multitasking. The implication for education is discussed from the standpoint of language development. The need for multitasking is a major reason for the language shift being observed though there appears to be a distinction between structures for formal and social communication in spite of the shift. The possibility of a new language emerging in time still requires further studies as upcoming generations are likely to be more impatient than the current one.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication, CMC, multitasking, digital orality, language change, social transformation, academic communication

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the literatures for trends in current language use in digital environments, the implications for media multitasking and the current use of digital expressions to predict the future of language use for classroom and academic communications especially. The implications for the future of formal education are also discussed.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Multitasking and the Challenges of the 21ˢᵗ Century

Multitasking, the simultaneous engagement with multiple tasks (Kenyon, 2010), has become the order in the 21ˢᵗ century as a result of technological change and the seeming need for speed in all endeavor (Offer & Schneider, 2011). This has informed several inventions including the need to reach out faster (Wallis, 2006; Hembrooke & Gay, 2003). The communication landscape has experienced great influences from these changes as everything from gadgets, media and even language gets transformed and

Correspondence to: Baharuddin A. Aris (email: bba@utm.my)

today's watchword seems to have become strictly 'the faster, the better' (Hammer, 1990) despite the fact that not much evidence exists that speed and quality co-exists most of the times (Kessler & Bierly, 2002) except in some special cases as reported by Lamontagne & Fung (2004).

Though in some studies (Novotney & Callison-Burch, 2010; Lamontagne & Fung, 2004), speed and quality have been reported to go together, with everything going 'instant', speed seems to have become not only a measure of quality but seems to be getting more valued above it. A writer's reference to the CNN slogan 'Real News, Real Fast' coupled the continual effort by media service providers to bring real-time news (Seib, P. M. 2002; Gilboa, 2003) could be pointers to this situation. As things go speedy, the need to catch up with the 'rush' becomes quite important and as the world has indeed become a global village with the trend towards one digital culture, tradition and language (Tonkin & Reagan, 2003) more changes are to be witnessed in human interaction (Boniface & Fowler, 2002).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Writing has been a means of both formal and informal communication for many centuries. Several studies (Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland, 1993; Warschauer, 1996; Harklau, 2002) reported the relationship between writing and communication across disciplines. It became all the more important with the advent of schooling and classroom education (Gilbert, 1989; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Olson, 1996). Changes in language occasioned by social change and societal transformation has always been known though sudden large scale disruptions as is currently being experienced due to the advent of Web 2.0 and arrival of social media is a unique experience. With the progress that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has made into the classroom and the linguistics forms employed for such communications, the fear that the world might experience a linguistic ruin and that standard language might be brought to its knees have been expressed by language and linguistic stakeholders. The paper intends to examine the nature of current language use in CMC vis-à-vis changes at previous time and to see whether the fears of the conservatives are real and what might be the future effect of this on academic and classroom communication.

METHOD

The topic is examined through a review of related literature. The characteristics of language and the process of language evolution provide a background for an objective examination and evaluation of previous and current changes as possible predictors of what the human society might expect in the future and whether there is a real cause for alarm regarding academic communication in the future.

The Dynamism of Language

The dynamism of language is an important characteristic of language (Vachek, 1983). Spoken languages develop into written forms over time; many get documented while many others do not. Documented or written languages go by rules that guide expressions. These rules allow for reviews and they also change from time to time. There are several factors that results in changes on spoken or written language due to the changes of humans and society, not being the least (Coupland, 2010).

The current age has witnessed many transformations in several sectors as a result of technological advancement (Mowshowitz, 2002). This phenomenon was described extensively by Meyrowitz (1985) in his discourse which highlights how happenings of the current age had been predicted long ago. He made reference to the predicted large-scale social change, tagged 'retribalization' and described several decades earlier by Marshall McLuhan, reiterating the great changes that the changing times have brought about and how the valued things of yesteryears no more holds such values.

He emphasized the fact that 'will of necessity' changes the way the world is viewed, the nature of interaction among people of different classes and consequently inform changes in the way communication, including writing, is done. Though his book was

written in the television era, he presented an accurate picture of future electronically-inspired trends in human behaviour and communication.

Multitasking and Digital Language Development

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. Digital discourses actually take place mostly in a multitasking setting and are usually just one of the things the individual is involved in at that point in time, hence, the need naturally arises for means by which the task is simplified, and made easier for users. In fact, according to Gross (2004) 'IM or Instant Messaging interaction, especially among young people, is often one of a number of tasks occurring at any one time. This multitasking, often including other social interactions as well as non-social activities intensifies the need for simple and less time-consuming writing'. This need is further heightened by the fact that digital communication, though in writing proceeds via 'speech-like' means, requiring immediate response especially during synchronous communications; this demands that lags and delays be avoided as much as possible, necessitating the use of short but meaningful sentences written in ways the other party can decipher (Androutsopoulos, 2006). This is part of what the digital expressions have provided a solution to. New ways of expression are being developed (Squires, 2010) and used extensively in online as well as offline communication especially in electronic media (Androutsopoulos, 2006). The pressure to multitask has necessitated the need for a faster means of expressing words and sentences in shorter forms using various methods.

Multitasking and Language Use: The Link

Multitasking, the simultaneous engagement with multiple tasks, has become the order in the 21st century as a result of technological change and the seeming need for speed in all endeavor. This has informed several inventions including the need to reach out faster. The communication landscape has experienced great influences from these changes as everything from gadgets, media and even language gets transformed. The faster the better seem to be the watchword in all human affairs today. Everything is going 'instant' and speed has become a measure of quality as how fast a thing is done seem to be getting more important than how good the thing is.

Language and Communication

According to the communicational view of language or the 'conduit metaphor' adopted by social psychologists, a language will be a collection of signs or symbols, including words as well as gestures, that helps humans to package their thoughts and feelings. From the 'linguistic relativity' perspective, language provides the source and foundation for all of a person's 'emotions, beliefs, perceptions, etc. and the means of transmitting them to others (Maynard & Peräkylä, 2006). Though views on language are diverse from various perspectives, there is no controversy as to the fact that it is not only a means of social contact, it is acquired also by the same means (Fitch, 2010) citing the ability of a squirrel monkey raised by a dumb mother to acquire the full range of sounds and gestures associated with its species in converse to a human requiring social inputs to acquire a full language.

Language involves the use of 'words and sentences' (Eifring & Theil, 2005). Linguistics describes the use of language for communication. It does not refer to just communication or information exchange, but has to do with 'linguistic communication'. Though many non-human species are capable of communication in various ways, language use is 'distinctively human' (Maynard & Peräkylä, 2006) and the dullest of humans will learn a language when in the right environment while the most intelligent non-human mammal will not (Fitch, 2010).

Language, Dialect and Grammar

Clear distinctions between languages and dialects can be sometimes difficult due to the original Greecian use of the word 'dialect' (Haugen, 1966). In describing what makes a language, Budani (2009) defined a language as the 'grammatical constructions of the socially dominant group'; and variations of it as dialects. He also identified other forms to include pidgin and creoles; both being forms developed from a combination of languages though pidgin is more a sort of trade/contact second language while creole is a primary or first language of the users. Grammar is a property of languages which is especially important in written forms of the

language. McWhorter (2000), on the other hand, refutes the superiority or 'correctness' of a language over a dialect. He posits that rather than one originating from the other, they actually develop alongside each other and that the selection of one or the other is a geo-political accident that has nothing to do with either. He further recommends that education should not be focused on undoing a child's previous language acquisition, but should help to add a new layer to it.

Grammatical impositions, gender pronouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs, spellings, articles, prepositions etc. are some of the issues that complicate language. Languages without much of these complications for example many East Asian languages (Chafe & Tannen, 1987) like Japanese and Malay are easier to relate with than those with those complications as we have in languages like the English language.

Artificial Language and Digital Language

Kirchhoff (2006) identified various language families. Many are indigenous languages spoken by groups of people in various areas. Many of the languages have a 'genealogy' or history that can be traced and this helps in their classification for example as one of the five main language families or other smaller units. The main language groups/families include 'Indo-European, Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, Sino-Tibetan and Austronesian'. Among the smaller family units is a group he referred to as "artificial" languages which includes languages that were either artificially designed like the Esperanto or the various pidgins or creoles which are used for 'communication between different linguistic communities'. Examples include the mixture of West African languages and French that produced the Haitian Creole and the Tok Pidgin used in Papua New Guinea which is formed from English and Austronesian languages.

Natural language could also be distinguished from artificial language in their application though they may use the same representations. For example *two* is English, while *2* is mathematics; the English words *if* and *go to* are logical operators in computing. According to de Saussure 'All natural languages are spoken' and it is also noteworthy that many of these natural spoken languages do not have any written form. This will seem to put the digital language in the group of 'artificial languages'. However, looking from the perspective of Soffer (2010), the digital language is a form of 'spoken' language despite the fact that it is written because 'chats' are actually 'oral' in nature and the influence of orality can be clearly seen from the form of word use, constructions, expressions (including oral exclamations, sighs, etc).

Language and Social Change

Trends in Language Transformation

One of the critical areas of communication that technology seems to have affected is the written language. Changes in society and economy are key factors that affect languages. These changes usually cause simplification in a language resulting in an 'easier version' of the language which over time may become an acceptable written form. The dynamism of language is a key characteristic of languages; it is an indicator of the survivability of a language and a function of how 'open' or 'closed' the language is. A conservative language easily becomes extinct because it does not 'relate' with other languages and hence, dies with the users. A language that is 'open' and borrows words from other languages is easily adopted by others and has great survival tendencies. Generally, for bi- or multilingual individuals, code-mixing and code-switching are common features of communication. These factors however have implications for the future of such languages as it relates to language transformation.

Eras of Orality

Studies in digital communication have been focused on patterns of discussion and the linguistic of communication in online environment as well as messaging services (Green, 2007; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 2010; Soffer & Eshet-Alkalai, 2009). Though these are quite different from each other, one being solely online and computer-mediated and the other mostly offline and non-computer mediated, yet, the similarities they share, according to Soffer (2010) is stronger than the differences that exist between them. In his work, he attempted a conceptualization of the oral features of current digital language with those of past eras to identify trends and features. Changes in both spoken as well as written languages have always been known (Krauss & Chiu,

1998). There had been times when there were no written forms of languages. Even when languages began to be written, several periods of critical changes have been witnessed (Coupland, 2010).

Four eras of orality were recognized by Soffer (2010) to include the period characterized by total absence of writing technology (Ong, 2012), identified as the era of primary orality. After this came the period of the earliest written materials in form of various types of manuscripts (Kumar, Sreekumar & Athvankar, 2009; Gangamma, Murthy & Singh, 2012), influenced tremendously by the oral culture; this is the residual-manuscript era and it forms the bridging era between the primary and the next era of print culture when print technology emerged (Clanchy, 1983) and much of the oral tradition piped down. The last of the previous eras came with the radio and television and is referred to as the era of secondary orality (Ong, 1982). Some experts (Gronbeck, Farrell & Soukup, 1991; Welch, 1993) classify the current era as a subset of this last era due to the strong influence of typography and written texts that are common to them, but Soffer (2010) disagrees and rather sees the radio-tv era as preceding the current era which he calls the era of 'digital orality', arguing that there are clear-cut differences in the nature and features involved with digital communication.

Soffer (2010) also observes a similarity in the textual forms of the current era and those of the mediaeval/manuscript era; textual structures are 'loose' in both cases and the reader/receiver is saddled with the responsibility of making meaning out of the pieced text parts. He believes this is due mainly to a common reason: the challenges of writing in both eras which include the physical exertion involved with writing in the manuscript age and that of writing 'with' a miniature keyboard in the current age. The need for speed with asynchronous communication as required in chats, SMS, IMs is also a factor coupled with the challenge of multitasking while engaged with any of these aforementioned digital communication modes as well as the contraints including limitations on number of letters as for a 1-page SMS (Herring & Zelenkauskaite, 2009).

The Current Era

The fears of the conservatives do not seem unfounded afterall. An examination of digital conversation including chats, IMs and SMSs reveals a general trend towards the use of 'abbreviations, uncorrected typing errors, the absence of initial capitalization, and the avoidance of full stops … use of multiple punctuation, eccentric spelling, capital letters, and comic-book style imitation of sounds' (Darics, 2013; Baron, 2004; Herring & Zelenkauskaite, 2009; Soffer, 2010). Some of the manner in which words are constructed include replacing a word with a one-letter phonetic sound that typifies it, e.g the=d, you=u, see=c, why=y, said=z, etc; in other cases, a digit can replace its phonic value (Durscheid & Stark, 2011) or added to the phonetic sound as in 4=for, b4=before, gr8-great, 2=to, etc. In others, acronyms are formed from the first letters of every word especially in commonly used phrases as we have in hbd=happy birth day, llnp=long life and prosperity, mhr=many happy returns, etc. Words are also constructed in sound-like forms that resembles spoken words, e.g. oops!, ughhhrrrr!, ooooch!. There are a number of other forms depending on the creativity of the users (af Hård Segerstad, 2005). The general characteristic however is that, unlike in normal/regular language use, there are no laws, boundaries, principles, etc. that is binding on the users. Bi- and multi-linguals are also found to employ code-mixing as well as code-switching with respect to the concerned languages. The use a mixture of variants (dialects) within the same language is also observed (Durscheid & Stark, 2011) It seems the freedom to be in terms of language use is in no other situation more experienced than with the digital language.

Digital Concerns in Language Use

At the advent of every era, there is always the fear expressed by the conservative custodians of tradition. A change in the status quo has always been a challenge to the group who believe the new can only corrupt the old, be misused, misunderstood or cause outright damage. The emergence of various forms of technology has always been accompanied by this (Soffer, 2010), it is therefore to be expected that the same feelings (Thurlow & Brown, 2003) will trail the onset of the new forms of digital communication typified by SMSs, IMs, online chats, etc. and no thanks to media sensationalism on the destruction that 'online lingo' is doing to language and how digital language will soon bring English to its knees (Baron, 2009).

Reports, warnings, and admonitions were rife on the negative influence this may have on humans and the society ranging from isolation and social disconnections (Wallis, 2010; Gross, 2004) and a fear of linguistic ruin (Drouin & Davis, 2009) or fact that it is an inferior form of communication compared to face-to-face communication (Ramirez *et al.*, 2007; Walther, 1996). The

influence on language, writing style, grammar, punctuation and spelling were also emphasized (Taglimonte and Denis, 2008; Thurlow and Bell, 2009).

These advocates are concerned basically about changes to language that these new phenomena can cause. They seem to forget that language and social change are interwoven (Krauss & Chiu, 1998) and no language has always been in its current form but got transformed to its present state due to changes over the centuries. These advocates unfortunately equate damage to change. The former being negative, and the latter, is inevitable in all aspects of human life. The advent of computer technology and automation was greeted with apprehension based on the fear that it may render man 'useless' and the imminence of global unemployment as never witnessed before was predicted. It is however to be seen the number of employments that computer-related jobs have brought about.

Implications of Current Trends in Language Use for the Future of Communication

Languages get continuously transformed. Some centuries back, it would have been not just been normal but expected of a learned person to say 'thou art an honourable man'. If such expressions are used today, it is either in a joking manner or the speaker is probably alluding to a quotation from some time in the past. Veen (2009) made reference to the admonition of Lord Chesterfield to his son saying "orthography … is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life." In the days when those words were spoken, language use in terms of orthography was all-important in the society. However, today, anyone will consider such admonition almost ridiculous. Languages-spoken or written-undergo changes from time to time; some old expressions are dropped and new ones are invented or adopted.

The English language for example has gone through several stages of change to arrive where it is today. Development and incorporation of acronyms for example is not something new, words like ASAP or RSVP have been known even before now. The arrival of a few more of such shortened forms should be nothing too strange. Misspellings or the omission of punctuations are other practices that seem to have come with the use of digital expressions; however, it is to be noted that languages are continually evolving and lexical changes are not out of the ordinary. The dynamism of language is an important property of language itself. Linguistics rules change all the time and the current changes and imminent ones are much more fundamental than just issues of spellings or punctuations but that of attitude (Baron, 2009). The seriousness of linguistic rules and its enforcement may gradually be losing its hold in schools as attitude shifts from an obsessive concern with rules and laws to what seems more important-communicating, in which situation, acceptance and tolerance becomes more vital. The implication of this, borrowing the words of Baron (2009) is that over time, we will arrive at a point where 'school is no longer necessarily a place to instill a sense that linguistic rules (or even linguistic consistency) matter'. Media language scholars actually favour the creativity engendered by digital lexicons over the 'damage' seen by those concerned with the 'downfall' of language.

The Future of Digital Language

The lexicon is the most dynamic aspect of a language; cultural, economic and societal changes cause the addition of new words and distinctions (Eifring & Theil, 2005). This causes changes such as the simplification of the names of common and important items; for example, television is now TV and electronic mail is simply email and there's no mistaken ASAP for anything other than 'as soon as possible'. Because the digital language is an 'elite language' in the sense that it is used mostly among the educated, it borrows a lot from many languages especially the English language (Durscheid & Stark, 2011). Several forms of abbreviations used in online chats, sms, etc. are already becoming generally acceptable forms of expressions. *Tankiu/tk/thx* for thank you, *wlcm* for welcome, *gud* for good, *gr8* for great, *k* for ok, *llnp* for long life and prosperity, *hbd* for happy birth day, *btw* for by the way, *u* for you, *z* for said and *c* for see have all become acceptable forms of expression in online communications as well as on sms.

Veen (2005) describes the key factors that drive changes in the education system. He identifies economy, society as well as technology acting interdependently or in parallel as critical. Socio-cultural changes have brought about such great differences in the characteristics of past generations and the same should be expected in the current and future generations. The transforming roles of technological gadgets and media have culminated in changing Homo Sapiens to Homo Zappiens (HZ), a techno-focused

and media-centric generation of individuals whose lives are directed and influenced heavily by technology and gadgets. Several differences identified between these two groups are as presented in Table 1.

Veen (2005) sees changing economies as a factor that results in irreversible changes and requires nations to rise up to the challenge. He opines that the education system is designed to produce individuals empowered by their training to provide the man-power needs that will drive the economy. In essence, when economies change, the education system must of necessity change to meet up with the needs occasioned by the change in economy. The fact that current classrooms seems not to be answering to changes in current global economies is seen as due to the fact that the current classrooms were designed over a century and half ago to meet the needs of the industrial economy occasioned by the industrial evolution. However, current socio-cultural coupled with economic changes has resulted in a service oriented economies whose needs can no longer be met by an education system inherited from a different era. Veen (2005) thus advocates for a complete redesigning of the education system at all levels to reveal the undeniable changes brought by current social-cultural and socio-economic changes. In his words 'the 'chalk and talk' lectures, whole classroom teaching, standardized curricula and examinations, and age-based groups still being the mainstream organizational structures, are inadequate for today's needs'.

Technology is the last factor and seems the strongest of the factors with respect to the current era. Four stages of successive changes in educational technology use are identified as including Computer-Based Training (CBT), Online Learning, Learning on Demand (LoD) and a future stage he named the Learning Mall, a time when 'any desired or required learning object can be obtained online'. These four stages spans three eras covering the immediate past (1980s) to the future (2040). The eras include those of substitution, creative destruction and transformation. He further reports that these changes have began to inform drastic restructuring of current classrooms in developing nations with schools in the US, UK and over 20 in the Netherlands already running experimental programmes and another 40 under construction in the Netherlands. All these schools are implementing or experimenting with these new approaches and reporting positive results. Four key changes identified include changes in length of class periods, class sizes, subject themes and class compositions as shown in Table 1.

Obviously, drastic changes have and are still taking place in the education system; the role of teachers, learner characteristics, instructional delivery modes, learning styles, learning environments, etc. are all key factors in education and all are experiencing the current transformation taking place as a result of economic, social and technological changes being experienced globally; there is at the moment no obvious special resistance that classroom language possess that will prevent it from being affected by these same changes. Years back, nobody faxes or emails anything but today we all do; networking was a purely physical phenomenon decades back but today, we Facebook, we tweet and chat with one another, even with students; we share materials and post assignments and announcements. There is nothing to indicate that in the near future the digital language will not find its way into the classroom. Veen (2005) identifies Homo Sapiens as separating learning and playing whereas with Homo Zappiens, learning is done while playing; 'serious' traditional boundaries are being shifted and as time goes on, may probably altogether disappear. With the current spate of multitasking among students and even teachers, the digital language will continue to break language protocols, laws and rules and give the 'freedom' required by current learners for the individualized learning involving 'self-direction, challenge and immersion' that is being advocated in this age.

The Future of Academic Communication

Considering the forgoing, formal classroom communication is not likely to remain the same. Current rules are getting relaxed and as time goes on, the trend in lexical change may assume a greater dimension than currently being observed. Veen (2009) counsels that rather than despair that language is 'going to hell in a handcart', we should see the bigger picture. Bearing in mind that languages have always gone through various cycles in the past just like 'music or politics', current changes should not be seen as anything extraordinary. Instead of viewing only from the perspective of damage, it is important to see from the creativity and other perspectives as well. Language is basically a means to an end which is communication; if the fundamental goal is achieved, the real job has been done. It is important for stakeholders, especially educators, instructors, school managers as well as other stakeholders including parents be aware that these changes are inevitable and receive them with an open-mindedness that can enable the derivation of the inherent benefits.

With regards to academic communication or language for pedagogy, it is important to note the importance of classroom communication to teaching and learning. Teacher-student interaction has been found to influence classroom atmosphere and the

condition of the learning environment; it is important therefore that the motivational influences of current language issues should not be overlooked.

There will always remain room for 'rules' set by individual institutions or concerned bodies on what become acceptable or unacceptable. Certain 'subjects' were extremely important in academic communities in the past; today, not many give a second thought to them. A good example is handwriting; it was a critical subject in schools in the past that is considered as critical as any other core subject, but today, with the advent of word-processing, the few schools that still teach handwriting probably do for personal reasons, not for any great importance attached to it in academic circles.

CONCLUSION

Multitasking is becoming a normal part of human life especially among the young. The emergence of social media and increased and improved internet connectivity on most gadgets increases the pressure to do more within a specified time. It is thus not uncommon to see individuals attending to many tasks at the same time. Computing and answering a call on a mobile phone, instant messaging a number of individuals simultaneously while engaged in a face-to-face conversation are becoming regular sights. Students are also becoming engaged in these multitasking activities in school and in the classroom. This phenomenon has resulted in the emergence of an online 'language' that is becoming acceptable generally for digital communication. Using a lot of shortened forms, abbreviations, figures in place of words as well as a mixture of languages, the digital/online 'lingo' is fast developing into a new dialect or possibly language that may change the linguistic landscape in unexpected manners. There are however reports that the choice of chat language actually varies based on the relationship between individuals (Paolillo, 2001) and teachers probably need not get apprehensive about their 'safety' when 'chatting' with their students. Unconscious incorporation of these expressions in academic writings might already be a part of academic communication though.

Considering the dynamism of language and the changes that has been recorded in language development and use over the centuries, the fear of those who think online expressions may be bringing language down to its knees may not be unfounded afterall. However, such changes are nothing new and are to be expected since social, economic and technological changes have been known to drive cultural and languages changes. Schools are however still empowered to insist on acceptable forms of expressions or language use for academic purposes and each institution can make its own policies in spite of these changes.

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