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IMPACT OF MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKING ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Since culture and language have always been equated, both are affiliated not only at the communication level but also with the intellectual elite. It would be axiomatic to say that learning English as a second language is a mean of acquiring cross- cultural consciousness. The role of English language today has become so important that it would not be an exaggeration to say that the command of the language is almost as important as obtaining a second stage in literacy. Therefore it is a matter of grave concern to watch the de-authentication and gross permutation that English language has been undergoing in the field of mass culture, especially that of social networking. Today the language is fast becoming variously actualized with local adaptations and non-conformity to the authenticated forms. Under these new paradigms English threatens to become the language of the 'other'; thus putting its international role in danger. My aim here is to discuss the impact of social and cultural changes on English language in both the communication and literary fields.

Keywords: Language, Communication, Permutations, Pop Culture, Media, Commoditisation.

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We as humans, have always an advantage over our co-living beings in the aspect of possessing the most important tool called Language. Culture which comprises the consciousness of a race at a given time is always in keeping with the phenomenon of language or the changing idiom of that time. Upon this, always depends what is called 'fine living'. The components of a culture therefore, play a significant role in enabling a language to gain its status, no matter what the prominent issues might be, be they political, economic or scientific.

English as a *lingua franca* or the International Language has a historical background of significance which expresses how the language has paved its way into gaining a scientific recognition of becoming a world language especially in the field of academic writing. The academia, from different nationalities is left with almost no choice but to publish in the globally accepted English Language in order to gain an international recognition.

Since WWII, following the military supremacy of English speaking nations, English language became the official and co-official language of as many as 53 countries, and even now it continues to be spoken extensively in countries where it has no official status.

In his significant work *The Future of English* (1997) David Graddol¹ classifies English speakers into three types: those who speak it as a first language (around 375 million); those who speak it as an additional or second language (again 375 million) and those who learn it as a foreign language (about 750 million). The major domains of English Language identified by David Graddol are as follows:

1. English as working language of international organisation and conferences.
2. Scientific publications.
3. International banking, economic affairs and trade.
4. Advertising for global brands.
5. Audio-visual cultural products as films, TV and popular music.
6. International Tourism.
7. Tertiary or university education.
8. International safety (airline and maritime travels).
9. International Law.
10. As a relay language in interpretation and translation.
11. Technology transfer.
12. Internet communication.

In his groundbreaking work entitled *Culture and Society 1780-1950* Raymond Williams points out that 'culture' is no longer a term in keeping with "a very small minority" as viewed by Matthew Arnold or F.R. Leavis earlier; but has gradually acquired a new and important meaning. Previously it meant something like 'training and nurturing'. Later its meaning expanded to denote first, a general state of mind associated with the idea of perfection and then from the general intellectual condition of society to arts taken as a whole, and finally as "a whole way of life, material intellectual and spiritual." The ever expanding notion of culture, Williams points out, is essentially a response to political and social developments, signified by altered meanings, democracy, art, class and industry (Williams 13)². Culture therefore, presently denotes a reaction to a general change in conditions of our common life, which also includes the ever continuing change in the way English Language is used in the present times.

With the advent of an immensely powerful mass media and large scale organisations, there have emerged quite a few set of changes which have directly or indirectly impacted English Language. A related development is that of 'mass culture' or the 'popular culture' (which is actually a euphemism for low brow sub-culture) content to limiting itself at familial or individual levels of working class. Popular culture depict things like gossip magazines, current bestsellers, sports and TV and Radio programmes that appeal to very simple and basic human needs by offering an escape from the real world problems or the experience of living life vicariously through viewing someone else's life on TV.

As the whole theory of Mass Communication today, depends upon popular or working class culture, popular culture is something which cannot be ignored. It is ethically communal and regards society as a vehicle for controlled advancement. The fact that popular culture has directly affected changes in the English Language is very much evident in the process of what is called 'dumbing down'.

Wikipedia³ defines 'dumbing down' as is "a deliberate diminishment of the intellectual level of content of schooling and education, literature, TV programmes and cinema, news and culture". The process involves an over-simplification of thought to a degree of "conceptually undermining the intellectual standard of language and learning". The purpose of such revision is to appeal to the illiterate or those who possess barely little education among the masses to meet the political or economic 'needs of the market'. Cultural theorists view commercial television as a pernicious contributor to 'dumbing down' of English Language at the communication level. Refinement in the tracking systems that measure the approval rating and the audience size increased the cultural incentive for the producers of the idiot box sitcoms, to write as simply and simplistically as possible, diminishing the intellectual complexity of arguments in the programmes usually at

the expense of factual accuracy, logic and complexity. The content of most TV channel programmes today can be said to be written by morons for the morons. The mass media produced programmes no longer pretend to be art anymore. In fact Media culture today is like cookie cutter industry “authoritatively subjecting audience as passive viewers / listeners to broadcast programmes which are exactly the same” (Adorno, Horkheimer. 121)⁴. Increased business competition and introduction of econometric methods changed the business practices of the mass communication media. The business monopoly practice of media consolidation has reduced the breadth and depth of journalism practiced by the ever increasing TV and Internet news channels, newspapers and news magazines for the information of the public. The quality of English Language has obviously suffered in the rat race for private monetary gains of the media moguls.

The mass appeal of the popular culture today which finds manifestation in low brow mass media forms, which are forms of reality television, pop music, escapist fiction, kitsch, slapstick, jingoism and pornography etcetera. With the help of mass media, almost the entire world is made to pass through the sieve of this low brow industry which precludes any space for sustained thought or imagination. As a result, the classical high brow English Language that once offered the world a rich legacy of artistic literary genres, has been severely and badly affected. With Literary art value commoditised, the syntactical, rhetorical and prosodic devices are grossly neglected and the language is undergoing a steady decomposition. What is sad is that it admits to this status of being subsumed in a wider usefulness or exchange value defined by market forces: that of “need” rather than being liberated from it which fine literary art once inaugurated.

With the social media, we are also exposed to the dominant model for exchanging views by the popular culture of our time. One of the sub-cultures of popular culture is the ‘punk culture’ which is a predominantly working class youth culture. The intervention of the punk culture in the realm of social media is notable, where it created an alternative critical space by means of punk press and ‘fanzines’ that use profane and grammatically unsound English which is replete with undecipherable corrections. Words like screamo, indie, post rock, ska, reggae emo, are undeniably vulgate at the barricade with modern English.

With Social Networking incursion into the main artery of English language, the exponential rise in the statistical figure on English Language usage is dizzying. Also, the social desirability of English as social media language is bringing about a quick evolution in the language itself.

People are often heard saying that the beauty of social media English language lies in its brevity. Yet one cannot deny that this ‘brevity’ is achieved at the cost of young people’s disregard for spelling and grammar, a habit which today seems to be creeping not only into classrooms, but even formal documents today. Texting was socially viable and justifiable when cost was a consideration and people had to cramp a mobile message in 160 characters which was the limit at that time. Noted linguist David Crystal in his famous publication *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8* (2008) argues well in favour of the joy of texting by making the following points:

- Text messages aren’t full of abbreviations - typically less than ten percent of the words use them.
- These abbreviations aren’t a new language - they’ve been around for decades.
- They aren’t just used by kids - adults of all ages and institutions are the leading texters these days.
- Pupils don’t routinely put them into their school-work or examinations.
- It isn’t a cause of bad spelling: you have to know how to spell before you can text.
- Texting actually improves your literacy, as it gives you more practice in reading and writing. (DC blog)⁵

Yet, Crystal feels that texting “is a risk certainly and we need to be alert [about]” and “if it [is] a regular happening then we might have cause to worry”.

With the arrival of free social networking sites like facebook, twitter (140 character limit) and Whatsapp on the Internet scene; it has been noted that messaging and micro blogging constantly continues to give rise to newer and silliest of abbreviations and grossly truncated spellings in the English Language. The continued usage of alpha numeric codes and ‘expressive smileys’ along with the English Language makes one

wonder whether we are regressing to the stage of Babylonian Sign Age. The rigorous lessons of learning how to spell and those of studying English Grammar that we went through in our childhood seems to be becoming a useless exercise and an anachronism today ; as we gradually keep de-familiarising ourselves; this done, with the advent of new abbreviations and words that the Language seems to be morphing into.

Although one cannot stop being amazed with the level of communication that can take place in 140 characters, it becomes increasingly doubtful that creative ideas would be effectively passed on by a language restricted to such parameters. The classiness of our *lingua franca* stays affected with such a sublime rejection of English Language of elegance, in favour of pop words and abbreviations of messaging acronyms like LOL, btw, or ROFL.

The unprecedented pace at which social media is playing the role of introducing new terms in English language is evident from the rate at which new words are added at CollinsDictionary.com, through what is now called 'crowd- sourcing'. Crowd sourcing initiative was opened by Harper Collins, inviting English language speakers from around the globe to suggest words they believed should be included in the English lexicon. According to Alex Brown⁶, the head of digital Harper Collins, in the process of leveraging the intersection of language and social media, there were received, as many as 2100 new suggestions of new English words within few weeks of opening CollinsDictionary.com; surely an amazing pace at which new terms are seeking to get introduced and reach the critical mass culture.

Historically, it is true that languages evolve steadily with the passage of time. Yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to stay current with the unprecedented pace at which English Language is evolving (with Online Technology becoming a driving force of rapid creation and proliferation of new words and transformation of the language itself). Perhaps it's the grammatical flexibility of English Language to adapt quickly and easily (unlike any other language) that makes English language globally acceptable despite the entire morphing that is taking place. We are increasingly changing nouns and adjectives into verbs (such as using the term 'to Google'). The speed at which such changes in the language are occurring raises some key questions like: how different will English language be in the next 15 years? Or, Is the future of English Language somewhat in line with the Orwellian 'Newspeak' of 1984 : Language created by the Totalitarian State apparatus in the novel, not just by the invention of new words, but chiefly by elimination of undesirable words that were considered heretical by the State, and by stripping such words as remained; devised to meet the ideological needs of 'Ingsoc' or English socialism in Orwell's dystopia?

This reminds us that the term 'culture' has also been given a political valence, viewing it as a part of ideological process of state apparatuses, for which English Language has also been a tool for the discursive practices. Orwell's presentation of a brilliant portrayal of the 'scheme' of how English language can be stripped of all shades of meaning leaving just simple concepts behind in order to reinforce a constant State domination, is scary.

English language, in many senses in the present time, remains grossly reduced to applied, profitable purposes alone.

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