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NON-STANDARD ONLINE LANGUAGE STRUCTURE IN FACEBOOK: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF TOPICS AND PURPOSES

BY

NURULJANNAH USOP

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Language Studies

Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the purposes of various topics posted on Facebook and explores whether topics lead to the employment of non-standard language. The use of non-standard language features include morphological, lexical, orthographical, and typographical deviations. This study employed convenience sampling as 60 Malaysian participants from the researcher's Facebook contacts were involved. Herring's (2007) situations classification was utilized to explore the communicative purposes and topics. An adopted and adapted version of Volckaert-Legrier, Bernicot, and Bert-Erboul's (2009) types of deviation taxonomy and Herring's (2010) e-grammar classification were selected to examine the non-standard and deviant linguistic features. The findings reveal that sharing information and self-expression are the main communicative purposes. Nonetheless, a number of status updates has more than one communicative purpose. The results also suggest that topics do, to a certain extent, significantly affect the use of non-standard language. The communicative purposes seem to have a remarkable influence on the participants' language use as well. The findings are in line with Herring's (2007) situational factors in which both topics and communicative purposes shape language use in the online milieu. These findings may broaden one's understanding of how language works in the online discourse.

خلاصة البحث

تبحث هذه الدراسة في أغراض مختلف المواضيع المنشورة في الفيسبوك، وتكشف ما إذا كانت الموضوعات توظف اللغة غير القياسية. واستخدام ميزات اللغة غير القياسية تشمل الانحرافات الشكلية ، والانحرافات المعجمية ، والانحرافات الإملائية و المطبعية. واستخدمت في هذه الدراسة عينة قدرت بـ 60 مشاركًا من ماليزيا عن طريق حساب الباحث في الفيسبوك . استُخدم Herring (2007) في تصنيف الحالات لاستكشاف الأغراض التواصلية و المواضيع المتداولة. وتم اختيار النسخة المعتمدة وتكييفها من Volckaert- Legrier, Bernicot, & Bert-Erboul (2009لتصنيف أنواع الانحراف Herring (2010) تصنيف القواعد الإلكترونية لدراسة الخصائص اللغوية غير القياسية و المنحرفة . كشفت النتائج على أن تبادل المعلومات والتعبير عن الذات هي الأغراض التواصلية الرئيسية. ومع ذلك ، فإن عددا من تحديثات لها أكثر من غرض تواصلي واحد. وأشارت النتائج أيضا إلى أن المواضيع المتداولة، إلى حد ما ، تؤثر تأثيرا كبيرا على استخدام اللغة غير القياسية. يبدو أن الأغراض التواصلية كانت لها تأثيرًا ملحوظًا في استخدام اللغة من طرف المشاركين كذلك. النتائج تتماشى مع Herring (2007) العوامل الظرفية في كلا المتغيرين موضوع التواصل و أغراض استخدام اللغة في الانترنت. هذه النتائج قد توسع فهم المرء لكيفة عمل اللغة في الخطابات على الانترنت.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Language Studies).

……..
Rozina Abdul Ghani
Supervisor

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……..
Subramaniam Govindasamy
Examiner

This dissertation was submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature and is accepted as a fulfilment of requirement for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Language Studies).

……..
Zahariah Pilus
Head, Department of English
Language and Literature

This dissertation was submitted to the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences and is accepted as a fulfilment of requirement for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Language Studies).

…….
Ibrahim Mohamed Zein
Dean, Kuliyyah of Islamic
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CMC	Computer-mediated Communication
D	Debate
DCR	Develop casual relationships
DPR	Develop professional relationships
GI	Get information
H	Humour
I	Insults
IO	Impressing Others
MA	Make announcement
O	Others
SE	Self-Expression
SI	Share information
SNS	Social Networking Site
SNSs	Social Networking Sites

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

People all over the world use computer-mediated communication (CMC) to communicate and disseminate information. As Herring in 1996 aptly put it, CMC is a "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" (Herring, 1996: 1). The online communication can occur both synchronously or asynchronously.

Synchronous communication takes place in real time, where users are present simultaneously to communicate using mediums like instant messaging (IM), chat rooms, video conferencing and others. In contrast, asynchronous communication is when users are not concurrently present and the interaction between users may not be simultaneous such as bulletin boards, electronic mails (emails), and social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and Hi5.

The emergence of CMC and the Internet has led to a new form of language which is widely known as "Netspeak" coined by one of the CMC pioneers, David Crystal (2006). Such online language has been referred to numerous metalinguistic terms such as "electronic language", "digital language", "digitalk", "chatspeak", "textspeak" "textese", "netling", "Internet lingo", "Internet language", "cyber language", and Internet slang" (Crystal, 2006; Turner, 2010; Berger & Coch, 2012; Barton & Lee, 2013; Riley, 2013). It consists of unconventional orthography, shortened words, inexplicable sentences, abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons, symbols and other new linguistics elements (Androutsopolous, 2006; Kinsella, 2010;

Anurit, et al., 2011). These linguistic features do not conform to the standard form of language such as English.

This new language variety is also broadly used in Facebook (McNeill; 2008; Anurit et al., 2011; Tay et al., 2012, Parkins, 2012; Ng, 2012; Siti Hamin Stapa & Azianura Hani Shaari, 2012, 2013; Ong'onda, Oketch, & Ongarora, 2013; Riley, 2013). Facebook is a popular social networking site and it is a microblogging platform. Microblogging refers to a web that is designed to write short messages of self-report to describe one's activity, emotions and thinking (Lee, 2011). Since there is no character limit on Facebook, users can post lengthy sentences in their status updates or comments. Unlike Twitter, the post cannot exceed more than 140 words. Young Facebook users often incorporate "Netspeak" into their Facebook postings as in shortening words, using eccentric spellings, unconventional punctuations, and other language discrepancies and do not adhere to standard form when they interact (McNeill; 2008; Anurit et al., 2011; Tay et al., 2012, Parkins, 2012; Ng, 2012; Siti Hamin Stapa & Azianura Hani Shaari, 2012, 2013; Ong'onda, Oketch, & Ongarora, 2013; Riley, 2013). Herring (2010) describes the features of grammar in electronic communication consist of irregular linguistic forms and the linguistic features are affected by technological and situational contexts.

Previous linguistics studies have described online language forms in social networking sites particularly in Facebook (McNeill; 2008; Anurit et al., 2011; Tay et al., 2012, Parkins, 2012; Ng, 2012; Siti Hamin Stapa & Azianura Hani Shaari, 2012, 2013; Ong'onda, Oketch, & Ongarora, 2013; Riley, 2013). However, they focus on the descriptive accounts of the linguistic features without examining the situational factor like *topics* and their *purposes*. Hence, this study intends to explore the *purposes*

of *topics* and whether *topics* influence users' language use in Facebook and lead to non-standard language features.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many linguists, educators, parents, and media reports express concerns over "digitalk" or "netspeak" and deem such language as the perpetrator for deterioration of adolescents' language as well as the root of language corruption (Thurlow, 2006; Herring, 2008; Vosloo, 2009). These media reports severely disparage the electronic language and claim that using such language reflects one's incompetence and ineptness (Thurlow, 2006). Electronic language includes linguistic deviations which are rampant in social network sites like Facebook. Facebook users often employ deviations such as shortening of random words, deviant spellings, improper noun capitalization, and non-standard forms (McNeill; 2008; Anurit et al., 2011; Pérez-Sabater, 2012, Ng, 2012; Siti Hamin Stapa & Azianura Hani Shaari, 2012, 2013; Ong'onda, Oketch, & Ongarora, 2013; Riley, 2013). In addition, Herring (2007) claims that the mode of communication may affect users' language, but the use of such digital language has ignited public debates about impoverishing the language and engendering negative impacts on the adolescents' language and literacy (Reid, 2011).

Despite all these claims, many studies have also suggested the potential of online social interaction in enhancing human communication (Thurlow, 2006). In fact, Herring (2010: 8) believes that these linguistics deviations which she coined e-grammar as one that "enriches rather than impoverishes language users and language themselves." Thurlow (2011) also argues that this new media language is an indication of creativity and it serves the purpose for communication but such language is often disparaged and deemed contemptible. Barton and Lee (2013: 19) claim that it

is important to understand how digital language functions in order to "challenge moral panic about language". Therefore, factors that shape these linguistic deviations need to be investigated and explicated if we were to shift the common notion from one of language corruption to that of language evolution.

Many studies on online linguistic features in Facebook discuss general descriptive accounts of linguistic aspects, such as patterns of language, orthography, lexical variation, writing convention, and prosodic cues in the online discourse (McNeill; 2008; Anurit et al., 2011; Pérez-Sabater, 2012, Tay et al., 2012, Parkins, 2012; Ng, 2012; Siti Hamin Stapa & Azianura Hani Shaari, 2012, 2013; Ong'onda, Oketch, & Ongarora, 2013). These studies, however, neither explore nor focus on factors that may shape language use in social networking sites. Hence, it is important to study these factors that shape online discourse as it can provide insights why people utilize particular linguistic features in different contexts (Barton & Lee, 2013). Moreover, such comprehension of online language can broaden one's understanding of the new media language.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study aims at expanding the literature and knowledge on the study of language in computer-mediated communication (CMC). The literature regarding language aspects on Facebook is growing exponentially, but a large number of studies (McNeill; 2008; Anurit et al., 2011; Tay et al., 2012, Parkins, 2012; Ng, 2012; Siti Hamin Stapa & Azianura Hani Shaari, 2012, 2013; Ong'onda, Oketch, & Ongarora, 2013; Riley, 2013) done on language aspects merely focus on the descriptive accounts of linguistic features. Since no studies have investigated the influence of *topics* that lead to deviant

language structure in social networking sites, the findings will shed some light on the matter.

The findings of this study are also anticipated to contribute to the CMC language framework as this study may add new information regarding linguistic aspects on Facebook. These results may also add more data regarding *topics* in Herring's (2007) situation factors classification.

Furthermore, this study will contribute to the pedagogical sphere. Educators will have a better understanding of the Internet language, especially when they intend to conduct online learning via social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or other asynchronous or synchronous modes of communication. Such mastery of non-standard online language is essential and can be considered as a skill and being an adept user demands for such linguistic knowledge (Turner, 2012; Riley, 2013). Most youngsters in the 21st century have the flair for reading digital or internet language and grasp the message effortlessly compared to many adults (Turner, 2012). Thus, these findings will expose educators and teachers to digital language and give more insights on how the participants manipulate language by deviating from the standard form to attain a particular purpose (Riley, 2013). This will broaden the understanding of how language works in online discourse and may dispel moral panic about digital language. Besides that, online language is constantly evolving and "unpredictable" (Siti Hamin Stapa & Azianura Hani Shaari, 2012: 818) and therefore, these findings may aid educators in keeping up with students' current pattern of online communicative language in order to prevent a barrier or breakdown in communication.

1.3 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This scope of study is on *topic* and *purpose* which are among the eight situational factors proposed by Herring (2007). This study emphasizes the linguistic features of 60 participants in the researcher's Facebook contacts within a three-month-interaction time period. The assumption is made solely based on the meaning in the participants' status updates, previous researchers' results and researcher's postulation.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the *purposes* of the various *topics* posted on Facebook.
2. To investigate whether *topics* affect language use in Facebook.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer the following research questions

1. What are the *purposes* of the various *topics* posted on Facebook?
2. Do *topics* influence the use of nonstandard language in Facebook?

1.6 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following terms are utilized in this study.

Non-Standard Online Language

It has been referred to numerous metalinguistic terms such as "electronic language", "digital language", "Netspeak", "digitalk", "chatspeak", "textspeak" "textese", "netling", "Internet lingo", "Internet language", "cyber language", and Internet slang" (Crystal, 2006; Berger & Coch, 2012; Turner, 2010; Barton & Lee, 2013; Riley,

2013). Non-standard online language refers to colloquial or informal language that is used in Internet discourse.

Digital/Electronic Language/Internet Language

Digital language is the language used via digital technologies (Riley, 2013). It does not specifically refer to computer-mediated communication (CMC) but also other medium as well such as text-messaging. Digital/electronic/Internet language is an online language that consists of unconventional orthography, inexplicable sentences, unconventional punctuations, shortening words, abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons, symbols and other non-standard linguistics features. In this study, the researcher used "digital language", "electronic language", and "Internet language" interchangeably.

Netspeak

It is one of the metalinguistic terms that is used to refer to the electronic language in CMC (Crystal, 2006; Riley 2013). It is to describe the informal language employed in the Internet setting (Siti Hamin Stapa & Anianuraa Hani Shaari, 2013). In this study, such term is used interchangeably with digital and electronic language to describe the Internet language.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-mediated communication is interacting and making contact with other Internet users through the computing technology whether synchronously or asynchronously. CMC platforms encompass IRC (Internet Relay Chat), Instant Messaging (IM) discussion forums, electronic mail (e-mail), blogs (e.g. Blogspot, WordPress, Tumblr), videoconferencing (e.g. Skype, Chatroulette), video sharing

(YouTube, Dailymotion, Flickr), virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), social networking websites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) and online games (e.g. Counter-Strike, World of Warcraft) (Guarda, 2012).

Synchronous Communication

The communication takes place in real time where users are present simultaneously to communicate. Instant messaging (IM), chat rooms and video conferencing are the examples of synchronous communication.

Asynchronous Communication

The communication that takes place at a later time in which users are not concurrently present like bulletin boards, electronic mails (emails), and social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNSs) are social software systems and web-based services that allow individuals to form a social network online, publicly or privately within a restricted system to share (Boyd & Ellision, 2007; Ginger, 2008). In other words, it allows users to participate in the Internet community. Such interaction is realised through sharing one's views, interests and activities (Barton & Lee, 2013).

Microblogging

A web that is designed for self-report where one writes short messages to report or describe one's activity, emotions and thinking (Lee, 2013) like Facebook and Twitter.

Status update is the example of microblogging where Facebook users can utilize it for various reasons like sharing information, expressing sentiments, etc.

Facebook

It is a social networking site which was created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 to provide services like wall posting, events invitation, videos, photos, notes and link sharing, private messaging and a Facebook chat service that is limited to Facebook users' approved acquaintances (Jucker & Durscheid, 2012).

Situational Factors

Situational factors are social contexts or social factors that may significantly affect users' language in their interaction like demographic background, their purpose for interaction and others (Herring, 2007). Herring categorizes eight factors that affect *interaction discourse: participant structure, participant characteristics, purpose, topic or theme, tone, activity, norms* and *code.*

Topic

It is a subject that is being conversed about or discussed in interaction like politics, entertainment, personal matters and other subjects that the participants are conversing with others in the interactions (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Purpose

It is the participants' desired goals of interaction that they attempt to achieve, such as obtaining and sharing information, developing social relationships, impressing, and entertaining others (Herring, 2007). For example, using repetitive exclamation marks

to express strong feelings or emoticons to depict their emotions to compensate for facial expressions, kinesics and proxemics, intonations, and rhythms that CMC lacks (Ong'onda, Oketch, & Ongarora, 2013).

1.7 ORGANISATION OF THESIS

This research consists of five chapters. Chapter One includes the introduction encompassing the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the significance of the study, the objectives of the study, the research questions, and also conceptual definition of terms. Chapter Two reviews the literature and the related studies in the field. The methodology includes the research design, sample, data collection methods, instruments and data analysis are presented in Chapter Three. Moreover, Chapter Four discusses the findings and elaborates on the results of the study. Lastly, Chapter Five summarizes the findings, draws conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the literature review related to computer-mediated communication (CMC), social networking sites, and characteristics of non-standard linguistic structure in CMC. It also discusses the theoretical framework employed in this study.

2.1 COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC)

The advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has brought about a new language trend that fits virtual communication. Such a trend promotes innovative linguistic features and this has sparked various reactions from teachers, parents and mass media. One such reaction is the extent to which online communication deviates from the standard form of language. Such use of non-standard form or commonly known as "Netspeak" is widely utilized in computer-mediated communication discourse.

Herring (1996: 1) defines computer-mediated communication (CMC) as "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers". According to Herring, most CMC systems are text-based, in which a user communicates with other users by typing words using a computing device and they are encoded in text format.

CMC initially encompassed asynchronous communication like email, forums and synchronous communication such as chat room, Internet Relayed Chat (IRC), and Instant Messaging (Guarda, 2012). The current CMC has expanded to Web. 2.01, a