

Transformation Of English Grammar: The Digital Communication Among The University Students

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Article Details	Abstract
Received: 19 Jan 2024 Accepted: 26 March 2024 Published: 30 June 2024 ¹Dr. Subhan Raj ²Saja Tariq Copyright @Author Corresponding Author: *Dr. Subhan Raj	Smartphones, social networking and IM have changed the way university students write texts, and the way some teachers think about English grammar. The linguistic and educational literature for digital communication is summarized in this paper and the question of the impact of the Internet on the grammar of university students' writing is explored. It argues for the evidence showing that there is no decline and that adaptation is required. Students use a variety of informal features, such as abbreviations, omission of punctuation, creative capitalization, emoji, and new discourse markers, but typically make these register-specific decisions, not in lieu of traditional grammar. There are, however, certain problems in the literary field: the transfer of informal features into formal compositions, lack of uniformity in students' knowledge of the rules/grammatical structures where they were not well educated in formal grammar, and specific problems with multilingual contexts where English is a second language.

Keywords: The digital communication, English grammar, computer-mediated communication (CMC), university students, texting, register, code switching, academic writing.

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INTRODUCTON:

The mobile and networked technology has made more impact on the daily life of writing than any other. The student at the university these days can compose dozens of messages before the first lecture: an answer to a group message, a caption for a social network, a comment under a video, an e-mail to a professor. Each of these pieces of writing has its own context and differing expectations of a tone, speed and correctness. They have a daily writing habit together that is far greater than that of other generations of students.

The change has been frequently talked about in an alarmist way in the public domain. So there have been newspaper columns and teacher surveys all maintaining that “text speak” is ruining students' development and ability to write properly and that their ability to spell, to use punctuation and grammar is going downhill. Academic writing even has been blamed. These accusations are not unique. Whether it's the printing press, telegraph or telephone, fears have been expressed over every major communication technology. Resisting change is in fact resistance to decay, as has been noted by linguists over the years.

But, all concerns should not be ignored. Academic texts produced by university students are sustained, accurate and organized and teachers notice informal features in students' writing. Not only does it influence the grammar, but how, where and for whom? A structured review of the literature is used as a mechanism to answer that question in this paper.

In Section 2 the conceptual background is described that defines the concepts of grammar, register and computer-mediated communication. Section 3 details some of the important characteristics of digital writing. In section 4, the empirical studies examining the connection between digital communication and literacy are discussed. Section 5 focuses on the specific situation of multilingual university students, while taking into account contextual differences such as English as a second language and as a language of higher education in Pakistan. The implications for teaching discussed in Section 6. Section 7 is a methodology for future research and Section 8 concludes.

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1.1 Research Questions

It is based on 4 questions in the paper:

- 1.What is the grammar and quasi-grammar of students' digital communication in the university?
- 2.Are there indicators that these features contribute to students' lack of mastery of standard English grammar?
- 3.Is there a transfer of informal devices into formal academic writing – when and why?
- 4.What are the implications in multi-lingual context of digital communication for English grammar?

2. Conceptual Background

2.2 The Grammar of English

The term grammar has several meanings and many people are confused about them. Grammar is the term used for the system of rules, that is used by the speakers to make meaningful sentences as they describe them, mostly without being aware of it. All varieties of English, even text language, have a grammar. From the perspective of usage and correct use of the written standard form of English, prescriptive grammar is the rules of usage and correct use, as described in a style guide and taught in school, such as subject-verb agreement, tense agreement, articles, punctuation, etc. This sense is most often important to students' grammar concerns.

This paper employs both senses, but maintains the separation. Does it systematically change the content of students' informal writing - in other words, do the patterns of digital communication differ from students' traditional writing patterns? 2) Digital communication is affecting students' knowledge of the standard?

2.2 Register and Variation

It is a useful concept in sociolinguistics, the 'register': the way language is used within a particular context, for a particular purpose, to a particular audience. Competent speakers are not always speaking in one mode but rather switch from

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one mode to another depending on the audience and purpose. A student does not confuse grammar if they write to a friend "cant make it tmrw, sorry!!" and to a supervisor "I regret that I will be unable to attend tomorrow's session. She's demonstrating the capability of being practical. Much of the following research is based on the degree of register change the students can make.

2.3 Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) or computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is a field of study that concentrates on the language that arises in computer-mediated environments. Herring (2004) suggested a framework to consider for analysing CMC that takes both the technology (synchronous/asynchronous, text-only/multimodal, public/private) and the social environment into account. It's important because Digital communication is not a single genre. There are different norms in each of the following: email, instant messaging, social media posts, discussion forums and submissions to learning-management systems. As a single text mass of "internet writing" it obscures the very differences that underlie the decisions with respect to grammar.

Texting is not a corrupted version of English but rather a new way of communicating that is using the strengths and weaknesses of text, Crystal (2008) suggested. Because of the constraints on character count and cost, abbreviations were adopted, but many features continued after the character and cost constraints were eliminated because of their social relevance. The above-mentioned register argument is valid also for the above-mentioned online writing because the characteristics of speech and writing are present in online writing, and therefore the users adapt their style to the writing.

Grammatical Features of Digital Writing

This section addresses the typical elements cited in student digital communication. It makes a distinction for each with regard to features that are a consequence of the loosening of written conventions and features that are truly new grammatical or discourse resources.

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Identify words that start with the same sound and sound but have different spellings. Find words which begin the same letter and sound the same, but are spelt differently.

Forms like u, 2moro, gr8, idk, lol, are the most obvious aspects of texting. These are usually orthographic (not grammatical) but that has a grammatical implication, for example when they are associated to a underlying loss of syntax, as by the loss of a subject or auxiliary ("going out later?") or "been there before?). This sort of ellipsis is also present in spontaneous discourse and suggests the notion that digital writing is a written form of the speech norms.

3.2 Punctuation and Capitalization

Probably the most common change is the lack of or insufficient punctuation. Students don't complete sentences with a period, but leave it out as an ambiguous or informal punctuation mark. In certain online communities, the end of a brief message with a full stop has even been taken to mean abrupt or cold. Any capital letters can be for emphasis, shouting, and any lower case can be for informality, intimacy. Repeated letters (sooooo) and repeated punctuation (!!!!) indicate intensity and emotion. Such features tend to take the place of intonation and facial expression in speech (Thurlow 2006).

3.3 Emoji, Emoticons and Digital Gestures.

Emoji and emoticons are not grammatically English but they relate to English. Gawne and McCulloch (2019) suggested that emoji are akin to gestures used to augment or clarify verbal speech: not statements as much as modifiers, softeners or emphasis to accompany verbal speech. An emoji after a blunt statement can indicate a playfulness tone and/or soften the impact, thereby rendering a pragmatic function which might otherwise be expressed in a few other words or hedging in its grammar.

New Discourse Markers and Syntactic Patterns (3.4)

The most interesting result in the sociolinguistic literature is that digital communication has engendered new or newly prominent grammatical patterns. McCulloch (2019) explained that the "because + noun" structure ("I can't come,

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because homework") the intensifier literally, the intensifier just as, and the stylistic use of lowercase in the ironic sense, and the reanalysis of lol, 'laughter', into a discourse marker, that softens statements and regulates the flow of a conversation. Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) found in their large collection of IMs exchanged by teenagers that the imprecation 'lol' and the like was not used for 'laughter' but pragmatic; and that the language of IM was conservative and innovative with a high percentage of the traditional structures being used by young people.

The subject will also include 3.5 Contraction, Non-Standard Spelling and Clipped Syntax.

Apostrophes are frequently left out in contractions ("dont", "im") and shortened words are used ("prolly", "gonna", "wanna") and words are used in succession without any conjunction to tie them together ("I am going to school" becomes "im gonna school"). Again, many of these are similar to styles of spontaneous speech. Their distinctiveness lies in their visibility and visibility of writing, and sometimes in their archiving, which makes them more accessible for viewing and more legible to others.

3.6 Summary

These features combine to provide repertoire of expressive resources rather than rules lost. Some of them are short cuts; some are clipped from speech; others are innovations which have clear communicative functions. The main empirical question is if the use of this repertoire undermines students' knowledge of the standard form.

Gather evidence of digital communication and literacy. Produce empirical evidence on Digital Communication and Literacy.

Early Concerns and Early Findings 4.1

The majority of the initial investigations into texting and literacy were prompted by media reports. Thurlow (2006) studied the nature of the representations of the young people's use of texting in the press and found a pattern that he described as moral panic: general claims about the death of language, and often based on

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little evidence or, to a certain extent, on representing extreme and unrepresentative examples. He didn't mean there weren't changes, but that there was a clear case of negative change in people's public perception, and it wasn't evidenced.

Research simultaneously started to examine the direct relationship between the two. Plester, Wood, and Bell (2008), however, studied school children and concluded that the more verbal reasoning and reading school children used text abbreviations the better they performed on tests. This was seen as a sign that they should be developing and learning abbreviators and decoding them as well as being aware of the relationship between spelling and sound and that this is related to literacy and phonological awareness and sensitivity. This study was conducted with a younger group of subjects than university students, though it can sometimes be referred to as a counter-balance to the accusations of easy-to-harm.

4.2 Research on YA and University Students

University students studies are less clear in terms of the picture. Drouin and Davis (2009) sent out a survey to college students and compared the users of "text speak" with the nonusers. The two groups of students were not significantly different in terms of literacy skills (spelling, reading fluency), and the authors found no evidence that texting was negatively affecting students' literacy. Their findings, however, applied to a particular sample, a particular set of measures and they cautioned against their generality.

Verheijen (2013) investigated the relationship between text and IM use and literacy in a set of students and found some correlations between the use of non-standard forms and spelling or writing problems in some instances. Of particular interest, the study examined the effects of digital and non-digital writing for a variety of message-language types and various users, indicating that the effects of digital writing might be a function of type of message language, as well as the user's prior proficiency.

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Kemp, Wood and Waldron (2014) studied if people who are prevalent in using unconventional grammar in SMS can still tell when it is wrong. On average they were able to recall the difference between conventional and unconventional form, confirming the conventionalist stance, in which informal digital writing is conducted alongside awareness of the conventional form.

4.3 Student Writing Over Time

Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) made a comparison between samples of writing from American college students from different decades, which provides a long-term perspective. They found that there was not a significant increase over time in the number of errors in the papers but rather the type of errors. Spelling errors, which had declined in the past, were still less common, but other errors, like wrong word and punctuation, were more noticeable. This indicates that technological changes do not necessarily lead to an increase in students' errors, but rather change the nature of these errors. This discovery is a counterpoint of the conventional wisdom of erosion and a sign of transformation.

4.4 Interpreting Mixed Evidence.

There are several patterns to the results of this research body.

First, the connection between digital writing and literacy has often been low, inconsistent or qualified based on a specific measure. Research on spelling and research on grammar and accuracy in formal writing are not the same, nor are studies of accuracy and studies of recognition or judgment tasks.

Secondly, it is hard to determine causality. The use of more 'non-standard forms' may be a common experience for students, or less confident in standard forms, or influence may be in either direction.

Third, there is a non-uniform distribution of research bases. It's much of it about English dominant populations, typically adolescents, and a lot of it predates the current image- and short-video platforms ecosystem. Research on university students in multilingual environments is still rather limited.

Fourth, and most important, most research indicates that users are context sensitive. The ability to switch between informal and formal registers appears to

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be widespread and is likely one of the most critical in determining potential problems in digital habits of academic writing.

5. Digital Communication and English Among Multilingual University Students

5.2 Physical Education and Health

English is used by university students together with one or more other language(s) in a large number of countries. English is commonly used in higher education, official government administration, and for professional development, while languages such as Urdu, Pashto, Punjabi or Sindhi are used in the family, community life in South Asia. The interweaving of language, class and power in Pakistan, where prestige and access resides in the English language, has been described by Rahman (2002). Communication is more complex in these situations.

5.2 Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

Code-switching, in which the two or more languages that are used in a conversation switch from one to the other, even within a single sentence, and romanisation, the use of Roman script for a language like Urdu and Pashto, are two features of multilingual digital communication to which the description has been linked. Androutsopoulos (2006) emphasized the role of CMC as a context for multilingualism and the users' creative use of the linguistic resources to convey identity, solidarity and humour. Students who write in Roman Urdu or a mix of Roman Urdu and Urdu, will find it hard to discern the difference between grammar of English, Roman Urdu and Urdu-English mix when using it on Chat. The sentence can be in Urdu order using English vocabulary or in English order using Urdu vocabulary.

In terms of description this is a rule-governed and social mixing. Prescription: Is there a reduction in opportunity to engage in the use of standard English when there is more exposure to mixed varieties? This is an area where more context specific research is needed as there is no clarity on the answer provided in the literature.

5.3 (POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR LEARNERS)

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Multilingual students can also be helped with digital communication. There is potential for informal interaction with real audiences, which can boost confidence and exposure to English, through low pressure opportunities online. English students are taught a variety of inputs in both native and non-native speakers, through videos, forums and games. This exposure may be beneficial for students who have little or no exposure to English language. But the benefit must be achieved by the inputted quality and variety of what is inputted, and informal exposure does not guarantee the transmission of formal conventions such as the use of articles, prepositions or the use of complex sequences of tenses, which are common mistakes made by learners who have a different structure in their L1.

5.4 Potential risks for learners

The risk involved is that students who do not have formal instruction or have less opportunity to read English or receive feedback to learn formal English may use informal digital English most of the time, and may lack models of the academic prose. If this is the case, the only norm which seems to be available is informal one. Educational inequality is also pertinent: if the school is well-equipped in English language, the students have a better chance of making a clear distinction between registers, others may not have a clear understanding of the grammatical rules that allow for such distinctions. But, it is not communication that is the problem, it is the absence of a supporting teaching.

6. Discussion and Implications

6.2 Stunted Growth

The evidence reviewed conveys a more complex understanding of change than either of the popular extremes. The research results indicate that there is no clear evidence which shows the impact of digital communication to the students' grammatical competences. There is not a consistent finding of a negative correlation, and positive correlations are found with some literacy skills. But the evidence also does indicate that the conventions of digital communication have introduced new conventions into the field, that there have been changes to the profile of common errors, and that the forms of informal communication have

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increased in acceptable range. These are real changes and they need to be considered by teachers.

Thus it is appropriate that the word is "transformation. The communicative context of university students' life is influencing the use of English, which is mostly expressed as an extended repertoire. More choices for students to select. The problem with education here is that they must also not forget and be able to use the form, the academic form, that is still necessary in the world of work and education.

Students will have to apply the skills they have learned in 6.1 in Academic Writing. If there are problems, they are typically register slippage, which is defined as using a capital letter when it is not required, using an informal contraction instead of a formal one, confusing an abbreviation with an informal form of a word, using casual language in an email to an instructor. They are not necessarily grammatical errors, but typically pragmatic, and will be corrected when the student knows what is expected. The conditions that promote more informal features transfer are: writing is quick, voice of the text is not clear, the teacher's expectations are not clearly stated. This indicates that a lot of the problem can be solved through explicit teaching of register and audience.

6.3 Pedagogical Recommendations

Reviewing the literature, the following recommendations are made.

Explicitly teach register awareness. Rather than correcting informal texts per se, teachers can have students check two versions of the same text for different audiences. TTE and ETE activities encourage metalinguistic awareness and apply digital skills to students.

Bring digital language as an area of study. A couple of classroom activities based on the collection of examples of online language and a discussion of patterns can help students see that online writing also has its own logic and can help explain why it is different from other kinds of texts. Students will not be isolated from being stigmatized for this type of behavior.

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Targeted grammar teaching as necessary. Likewise, in a multilingual classroom, informal exposure to the language should not replace sustained, intensive efforts to master ongoing problems, like articles, prepositions, tense, and sentence boundaries. Initial course testing will help identify students who need additional support.

Set guidelines for institutional interaction. A common occurrence of informal transfer is in students' email messages and posts. There are a few guidelines to follow to avoid miscommunication when communicating with faculty: tone, greetings, and structure.

Promotes extensive reading and editing. The best way of developing standard grammar remains to be good editing of prose. Students' editing of their own written work for accuracy and audience allows them to practice the skill of changing their register on purpose.

Use technology constructively. Spell-checkers and grammar editors can assist, but can also mask strengths or weaknesses, or make errors as Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) pointed out in the evolving nature of errors. Pupils should be taught to use these not as a substitute for judgement.

The existing literature indicates a number of limitations. Some limitations were identified in the literature reviewed.

Some limitations are imposed on the conclusions that can be made. Various studies have been carried out on self-reported messaging behaviours, but these studies may not be valid. Samples tend to be small, institutional-based and are geographically focused in the West. Technological changes that occur more rapidly than the rate of research can keep up may result in findings arising from SMS research being of little direct use for today's platforms. However, the type of outcome assessment is important – spelling tests and grammaticality judgement tests can measure different skills than extended writing.

Lastly, suggestions for future research.

This paper is a review, no new data is being reported. If the researcher is interested in studying the issue in a particular institutional setting (one university

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in the northern part of Pakistan), he/she may adopt the following mixed methods design.

Participants. A stratified sample of undergraduate students across all disciplines and year levels, data collected on schooling background, home language(s) spoken, and the self-reported level of English ability.

Instruments. The study would include a questionnaire, which would inquire about students' digital communication habits (what platforms they use, what digital language they use, how often they do so, etc.), a corpus of anonymized, consented digital samples of students' digital messages, a grammaticality judgment task, and a task to correct grammatical errors in standard English, as well as samples of formal academic writing (e.g. an assignment, a timed essay, etc.).

Analysis. In quantitative analysis, association between the use of digital devices and the performance of the formal tasks would be explored, taking into account the control of the schooling background and the proficiency. Repeated grammatical and discourse elements would be found by the qualitative analysis of the message corpus. Students would be interviewed short-ish to discuss their awareness of register and the rationale for their selection of choices.

Ethical considerations. Participants would give informed consent, private messages would be anonymized and data would be stored following the guidelines of the institution to secure data storage in an ethical approach.

This would fill in some of the above gaps as it would bring together both behavioural and performance data, and would explicitly focus on multilingual practice.

8. Conclusion

Digital communication has grown into a part of students' linguistic world within the university and clearly affected the way English is written. Students use new discourse markers that were not available (or not as easy to use) a generation ago, emoji, and flexible punctuation and abbreviate and use creative capitalization. A number of these are genuine innovations, in terms of English tone and interaction.

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The evidence in this paper, however, doesn't reflect the proposition that digital communication is killing English grammar. Most of the studies indicate that students still know the standard forms, that there is only a weak correlation between informal and formal literacy, and that the ability to switch between different registers is the most important one. If they arise, they are more likely to happen in the students who are not very well equipped for formal education and in contexts where the demands for formal writing are not clearly defined. These are access problems, language prestige and creative language mixing in multilingual environments.

The lesson is for teachers not to trivialise concerns and not to be alarmist. The constructive approach to digital language is to recognize digital language as a legitimate variety, to explicitly teach register awareness, to offer additional grammar instruction if necessary, and setting expectations for formal writing. This picture needs to be dialed up for additional research on areas that are under researched and newer platforms. Language itself is continually in flux as a tool for learning: the role of the university is to help students use all of the tools of language in masterful fashion.

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