

## BEYOND RULES: A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC LIBERTY WITH REFERENCE TO VIRTUAL SPACE OF COMMUNICATION

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### *Abstract*

*With the advent of internet following onset of virtual platforms of communication technically named as social networking sites, the use of language has undergone a tremendous change across the globe. The whole dynamics of language governed by its lexical, syntactical and other grammatical rules has been reconsidered and reintroduced subsequently with changes effected at both linguistic and non-linguistic level forming the basis and medium of communication. The linguistic- non-linguistic integration results into bypassing the age-old defined rules of language giving way to a kind of “meta-language” as a medium of communication independent of any specific language with its set principles to be observed. This trend has received its own share of negative and positive comments from “communication corruptor” to “language liberator”. Irrespective of the comments, though, what is clearly understandable in this context is the fact that the new style of communication taking on creative lateral changes with respect to language and beyond is largely informal for the reason that such communications are quite unintelligible and ambiguous at times. The paper under discussion titled “Beyond Rules: A Study of Linguistic Liberty with Reference to Virtual Space of Communication” aims to study and examine the extent of linguistic liberties taken by the users while communicating on virtual space. ‘Virtual Space’, as used in the title, would include only three platforms, namely, Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter from amongst many others like Hike, Snapchat, Linkedin, Instagram etc. ‘Beyond the Rules’, as used in the title, signifies both the structural shifts from principles of a language and the establishment of newer communicative patterns that extend beyond a particular language and the rules thereof. Newer communicative patterns engage themselves with linguistic and non-linguistic elements that change and altogether redefine the whole idea of communication performed earlier through a pure linguistic medium.*

**Key Words:** Language, Social Media, Communication, Structure, Rules, Liberty, Virtual Space

### **Introduction**

The title consists majorly of the key terms that build up the whole discourse of the paper. The terms, ‘Beyond Rules’, ‘Linguistic Liberty’, ‘Virtual Space’ and ‘Communication’ in the title are self-definitive to a great extent. The paper, thus, aims and attempts to study and examine the extent of linguistic liberty at different levels taken by the users while communicating on the virtual space. The paper also endeavours to look into the rationale of rampant linguistic liberty taken at such platforms of communication. As such, it becomes imperative now to bring out the issues associated with each individual term separately so that language and communication as taking place today vis-à-vis virtual space of communication could be better understood. The key terms of the title as mentioned above unfold themselves in the following manner:

#### **A. Virtual Space of Communication:**

Virtual space or platforms of communication is technically named as “social networking sites”. The paper includes the study of communication on only three such platforms, namely Whatsapp, Facebook and Twitter. Other such sites include Hike, Snapchat, Linkedin, Instagram etc. Communication on these social networking sites, especially by Gen Y<sup>1</sup> users of such platforms assumes an altogether different colour and

flavor in terms of the use of language cast in and with other signs that supplement or override language at times.

## B. Linguistic Liberty:

Linguistic liberty is the liberty taken in the use of a language for the purpose of communication. Linguistic liberty is seen taking place at multiple levels such as:

### i) Lexis:

Lexis refers to words. The use of word has undergone a tremendous change with the advent of social networking sites. Lexical changes are perceptible with reference to:

- a) New words/Neologisms (Metrosexual, Crowdsourcing, Chilax, Brangelina, 404, Tweetcred, app, etc.)
- b) Old words with new meaning(Cloud, tablet, viral etc.)
- c) Ambiguity due to shortening of words(UGC,BTW,RIP, JK,OH,AFAIR,ESP etc.)
- d) Deliberate choice of new meaning for an old word (guy/gal, actor/actress, etc.)
- e) Mix of letter and digits to form/create a word(Gr8, B4, ,G2G etc.)
- f) Wrong spelling of words(Ryt, ya, Lyk, vry etc.)

### ii) Syntax:

Syntax is the structure of sentence in a language used for communication. Syntactical structures followed by the users on the social networking sites also do not conform to the need of the language in the formal sense of the term. Syntax management in communication takes place at the following levels:

- a) Omission of auxiliary verbs. ( U right, U dere, U nt replying, All wel etc.)
- b) Omission of Punctuation (U right, U there, Wat u doing etc.)
- c) Code-switching(I am fine. *Aapkaisehain?* etc.)
- d) Code-mixing(Let's do some *masti-wasti*,Today'sgereneration be like Relatives *jiyo or jinee doetc.*)
- e) Use of non-linguistic signs/characters in the syntax(\*, #, & etc.)<sup>2</sup>

### iii) Other Linguistic/Grammatical Liberties:

Apart from the liberties taken in context of lexis and syntax, communication on virtual planes involves violation in other areas of grammar as well. Other major linguistic liberties exercised by the users while communicating on such space includes:

- a) Skipping the use of article (*Udontkno name of president of india?, he is best candidate* etc.)
- b) Violation of the structure of S+V+O(*Yeah busy I m, For movie Y U not intrstdetc.*)
- c) Precarious acronyms (**KISS,LOL,ORLY** etc.)

## C. Beyond Rules:

Beyond rules signifies the range of exercises done in addition to or more than or apart from or outside of the rules of grammar of a language usually followed by the people while communicating. The earlier two key terms as specified and illustrated above testify to the

fact that communication on social networking sites is performed in an altogether different style. It's a style or blend of styles that doesn't require obeying the prescribed rules of a language to achieve communication.

So, what emerges from the exploration and analysis thereof is that communication on social networking sites is performed through newer communicative patterns that largely fall into two categories:

- a) Linguistic and
- b) Non-linguistic

As far as linguistic category is concerned, bilingual operation is more perceptible for communication. On all chosen virtual space of communication, namely Whatsapp, Facebook and Twitter, the erratic use of two languages—English and Hindi, for instance, prevails upon the basic principles of a language. The erratic use naturally bypasses the grammar of a language, lending newer communicative styles determined by and disseminated amongst the set user-group<sup>3</sup>.

Non-linguistic communicative patterns include the use of smileys, asterisks, emojis and emoticons<sup>4</sup>, hashtags etc. This kind of interactive style is the exclusive percept of social networking sites where inter-personal communication no longer depends upon a language or languages alone. These signs function in two ways in the process of communication:

- a) They supplement and contribute to the linguistic signs.
- b) They replace the language itself in order to perform communication.

Thus, we see that the linguistic-non-linguistic integration results into violating age-old defined rules of language giving way to a kind of “meta language” or third language as a medium of communication which is independent of any specific language with its set principles to be observed. This integrative style of communication on social networking sites is “united by a generally colloquial tone and a readiness to deviate from Standard English norms” (Crystal, 186).

Users of language on the social networking sites appear as if they were endowed with extraordinary knack of language management. And, they do it even when joining an internationally profound concern/debate on the social media like Twitter, let alone in their informal interpersonal communication. Economy of space granted with restriction of word-limit, however, is a possible reason adopted by the users in general and Y-Gen in particular. But, in the opinion of a noted linguist, David Crystal, the idea of ‘economy of space’ in the use of non-linguistic characters for communication is not justifiable. He places a more justifiable observation on the use of non-linguistic characters which he calls ‘emotes’<sup>5</sup>. According to him, it is the speed of typing a message that determines the choice of linguistic or non-linguistic characters in communication on virtual platforms:

“Economy of typing is not the whole story, as is easily illustrated from the structure of emotes, which often use quite complex expression, and from such examples as onna(‘on a’) and atta(‘at a’), which usually use an extra letter keystroke. On the other hand, anything which does speed up typing is going to be appreciated...”(Crystal, 188).

One of the reasons for the widespread use of emojis, emoticons, smileys etc. is attributable to the inadequacy of textual language of words. These non-linguistic characters ‘diffuse the situation’, to use Crystal’s phrase, and thereby lends clarity to the communication performed. Else,

“written language has always been ambiguous, in its omission of facial expression, and in its ability to express all the intonational and other prosodic features of speech. These features of Netspeak<sup>6</sup> have evolved as a way of avoiding the ambiguities and misperceptions which come when written language is made to carry the burden of speech.”(38-39).

Kate Burridge also reflects on the inadequacy of language in expressing one’s thoughts and feelings. She says:

“I am sure you are painfully aware of the inadequacy of language when it comes to expressing thoughts and feelings. This is one reason why our speech is full of approximating phrases or hedges like ‘kinda’, ‘like’, ‘sorta’, ‘ya know’, ‘I mean’. These expressions aren’t just the stuff of teen-speak!”(Burridge,160).

In order to stress upon the limitations of language, Kate further quotes the linguist, Fred Householder as follows ‘...nothing can be so clearly and carefully expressed that it cannot be utterly misinterpreted’(160).

But, resorting to the innovative linguistic style of communication on the virtual platforms could equally end up in a precarious way at times. However vibrant and interesting chats on the virtual platforms may be, there is always the ‘potential for chaos and offence’ (Dudeney, 130) with the new and newer styles of communication on such platforms. For instance, the use of acronyms as a linguistic smartness is not only unintelligible but also embarrassing and disturbing at times. The following example from a hypothetical whatsapp chat can be illustrated to understand the situation:

A: Thanx 4 urmsgyaar. Feeling relieved now. Gr8 u

B: Hmmm. Actually the prob is his AFAIR.

A: Still yaar.

B: KISS

A: K

B: G2G.PAW. TTYL.

A lot of anomalies can be pointed out in the example cited above. This style of chatting has been seen prevailing upon the students’ habit of using it in the answer sheet of the examination which is a space of formal communication. *B/W*, *ASAP* etc. are seen frequently used for ‘between’ and ‘as soon as possible’ respectively. Similarly, *Acc.to* and *btware* written for ‘According to’ and ‘by the way.’ The examples are in plenty, prevalent even in formal space of communication illustrating the newer style of language deviating from Standard English usage. The appendix section of the paper comprises a sample each of Whatsapp, Facebook and Twitter where communication happens with almost all deviations of language and innovative integration of non-linguistic style being discussed here.

The use of newer communicative patterns on the virtual platforms, however, has received mixed reactions. Internet is largely held responsible for the sea change in the ways language is used today. The question whether internet is ‘Communication Corruptor or Language Liberator’ (Straw, 2005) has eventually brought up debate leaving dual understanding of the issue. The advocates of the language consider it a purely detrimental exercise as it badly acts upon the proficiency of English especially for the non-native learners of the language. For them, it is a ‘communication corruptor’ practice. But there are those who critique the practice in a positive spirit. They opine that communication on the virtual planes through a style independent of any linguistic constraint and confinement is wondrous and appreciate the practice as the ‘language liberator’. David Crystal

stands by the latter advocates. Also, according to Angus Stevenson, the editor of Oxford English Dictionary, “Social networking sites have created a real language of the net.”(‘Retweet’ and ‘woot’, 2011)). Interestingly, people observing or expecting others to observe standard linguistic use while communicating on virtual platforms are taken in a kind of negative or derogatory impression. Those using chaste English as a language of communication refraining from internet slangs and non-linguistic characters as mentioned above are called ‘eggheads’<sup>7</sup>.

### Limitations:

The present paper has its own limitations in so far as it includes only selective aspects of communication on the virtual platforms. It is also limited in so far as it studies only the select virtual platforms of communication from amongst many as stated earlier. Also, the issue of linguistic liberty is confined to the communication that take place mostly between youth and X and Y Generation users. The other users keeping the linguistic formalities intact are not included in the study. The debate of larger negative and positive impacts of linguistic liberty has been excluded from the study. The [paper only focuses on the ways users manage language and incorporate non-linguistic characters innovatively while communicating on the virtual platforms.

Thus, to conclude, the virtual space of communication capitalizes on the linguistic liberty juxtaposed against the new style of communication that takes on creative lateral changes with respect to language and beyond. Newer communicative patterns engage themselves with both linguistic and non-linguistic elements that change and altogether redefine the whole idea of communication performed earlier through a purely linguistic medium. Lexical innovations, structural shifts from the principles of a language and the integration and incorporation of non-linguistic characters on the virtual platforms stand both interesting and challenging. The transition in linguistic application since the advent of internet has re-established the style of interpersonal communication across the globe.

### Endnotes:

1. Generations of people are broadly divided into four categories as follows:
  - \* Veterans or seniors – born before 1945
  - \* Baby Boomers – born 1946 – 1964
  - \* Gen X – born 1965-1979
  - \* Gen Y – born after 1980(<http://interactivecommunicationcompany.blogspot.in/>)
 Gen Z is a latest group considered tentatively for those born 2000 onwards.
2. The use of characters is required to create password for the internet banking services and other online usages. Banks and other such organizations necessitate this procedure in order to ensure safety and privacy so that no one else can ever figure out the codes access the information for any fraudulent use. Interestingly and ironically, we incorporate such usage in language these days to express or ourselves or to communicate while the fact is that these codes are meant for confining the communication to oneself or begetting confusion and ambiguity thereby.
3. Individual determination of linguistic choice is substantiated by the understanding that since language is a means of communication and if communication is achieved through whatsoever ways of the use of language, mono/single or bilingual, with or without following the grammatical rules of a language in particular, the debate for a stereotypical set formula of a

language ceases to exist. This, however, is not sanctioned for formal correspondence whatsoever.

4. An emoticon is a typographic display of a facial representation, used to convey emotion in a text only medium. Like so: ;-). Unlike emoticons, emoji are actual pictures, of everything from a set of painted nails (👁) to a slightly whimsical ghost (👻).  
(<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/06/difference-between-emoji-and-emoticons-explained>)
5. “(Emotes)...are combinations of keyboard characters designed to show an emotional facial expression...”(Crystal, 36).
6. “Netspeak is a brand new electronic medium of communication, global and interactive in character evidently related to English as a global language, with its own distinctive features in all of its varieties. Netspeak is considered to a relatively largely unexplored area, the brand new medium of communication which is closely related to the Internet, and dominant effect in everyday lives, and Netspeak is fast growing. David Crystal argues that Netspeak is a radically new linguistic medium... According to David Crystal, the term Netspeak serves as an alternative to terms such as Netlish, Weblish, Internet language, cyberspeak... Netspeak is a third medium of both speech and writing, combine with the properties electronic texts display. (<https://chihiro89.wordpress.com/2010/03/01/79/>)
7. “Egghead is used as a noun and it is a semantic extension. Egghead is used for the one who is conservative even in the use of social networking, uses set graphics rather than a personal picture, writes correct English rather than using slangs and short forms. E.g. My lecturer is an egghead even on the internet([www.livinginternet.com](http://www.livinginternet.com)).”  
([http://www.academia.edu/19045036/social\\_media\\_neologisms\\_in\\_English\\_languages\\_lexical\\_system](http://www.academia.edu/19045036/social_media_neologisms_in_English_languages_lexical_system))

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