

Exploring Language Dynamics on Social Media: A Corpus Analysis of English Usage on Facebook by the Sri Lankan Undergraduates

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සන්නිවේදන කාර්යයේ දී බහුලව භාවිතා වන මාධ්‍යයක් බවට අන්තර්ජාලය පත්ව ඇත. මෙහිදී පෞද්ගලික මෙන්ම සමාජමය තොරතුරු සන්නිවේදනයේ දී මුහුණුපොත් භාවිතය සුවිශේෂී වේ. නිදහස් සන්නිවේදන මාධ්‍යයක් වන මුහුණු පොත භාෂාවේ ඇති නිර්මාණශීලීත්වය ප්‍රකට කරන ක්‍රමවේදයක් ලෙස ද හැඳින් වේ. කාලය හා අවකාශය සීමා කිරීමේ අරමුණ මත භාවිතා වන මුහුණු පොතේ භාෂාව සරල වන අතර ඉතා කෙටි යෙදුම් තුළින් සන්නිවේදනය වඩා පහසු කරයි. මෙම භාෂා විශේෂය වඩාත් ප්‍රචලිතව ඇත්තේ තරුණ පරපුර අතරය. ඒ ඔවුන් නිර්මාණශීලීත්වය හා නවෝත්පාදනයට වැඩි රුචිකත්වයක් දක්වන බැවිනි. ඒ අනුව මෙම පර්යේෂණයේ අරමුණ වූයේ සිංහල ඉංග්‍රීසි ද්විභාෂික උපාධි අපේක්ෂකයන් විසින් මුහුණු පොතේ භාවිතා කරන ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවේ පදිම හා වාක්‍ය රටා අධ්‍යයනය කිරීමයි. රාජ්‍ය විශ්ව විද්‍යාලයක විද්‍යාවේදී උපාධිය හදාරණ සිසුන් තිස් දෙනෙකු මේ සඳහා සහභාගී කරවා ගන්නා ලදී. එම නියමය ප්‍රශ්නාවලියක් හරහා තෝරා ගැනීම සිදු කෙරුණු අතර ඔවුන්ගේ අවසරය මත මුහුණු පොතේ ඔවුන් විසින් ප්‍රකාශයට පත් කර තිබූ ඡායාරූපවලට අදාළ ශීර්ෂ පාඨ (Picture caption) හතලිහක් පර්යේෂණය සඳහා යොදා ගන්නා ලදී. එමගින් මුහුණු පොතේ සන්නිවේදනයේ දී භාවිතා වන පදිම හා වාක්‍ය ගොඩ නැගීමේ ක්‍රම ඒදිනෙදා සන්නිවේදනය හා සැසඳීම මෙම පර්යේෂණයේ දී සිදු කරන ලදී. ඒ අනුව කෙටි යෙදුම් (Abbreviations), නව්‍ය පදිම (Neologisms), කේත මිශ්‍රනය (Code mixing), වාක්‍යයක එකම අක්ෂර හා වචන ද්විත්වකරණය (Redduplication), අවභාෂණය (Slang) හා කැපිටල් අක්ෂර (Capital letters) සහ විරාම ලක්ෂණවලට අදාළ ව්‍යාකරණ නීති නිසි ලෙස භාවිතා නොකිරීම යන විශේෂ ලක්ෂණ මෙම පර්යේෂණය තුළින් සොයාගන්නා ලදී. තවදුරටත් සමාජ මාධ්‍යයට පමණක් සීමා වූ විවිධ සංඥා සංකේත භාවිතා වන බව ද, මුහුණු පොතේ භාවිතා වන භාෂාව හා ඒදිනෙදා සන්නිවේදනයේ දී භාවිතා වන කථන හා ලිඛිත භාෂාව අතර සුවිශේෂී වෙනස්කම් පවතින බව ද තහවුරු විය. ඒ අනුව වර්තමාන සිංහල ඉංග්‍රීසි ද්විභාෂික තරුණ සමාජය සමාජ මාධ්‍ය (Social media) තුළ ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාව භාවිතා කර සන්නිවේදනය කිරීමේ දී කථන භාෂාව පදනම් වූ නව්‍ය භාෂා ප්‍රභේදයක් භාවිතා කරන බව මෙම අධ්‍යයනය තුළින් ප්‍රකට විය.

ප්‍රමුඛ පද : සමාජ මාධ්‍ය (social media), මුහුණු පොත (Facebook), කේත මිශ්‍රනය (code mixing), ද්විත්වකරණය (reduplication), නව්‍ය පදිම (Neologisms)

1. Introduction

Since its inception, human language has been subjected to numerous modifications and alterations to facilitate communication among individuals. These changes in language are often induced by geographical, social, cultural and religious circumstances which have compelled the humans to express and understand one another in diverse social contexts. Hence, over the past few decades, every language known to humans across the world have undergone a variety of significant changes with the addition of new components and the extinction of prevailing norms and lexical items.

The English language, which is spoken by approximately 1.5 billion of the global population, has not been spared by the aforementioned changes. While English is the native language of a large number of inhabitants in several countries, it is spoken as a second or third language in most of the countries across the world. Hence, it is inevitable that English is constantly affected and altered by different changes and innovations introduced by its speakers.

Today, where much of human communication is taking place over different virtual platforms, the above discussed language variation has significantly impacted the communication on internet as well. The features of the resulted form of virtual language are often observed in social networking sites which have become increasingly popular specifically among the youth. It is often observed that, English language on social networking sites is non-standard, informal and significantly different from its everyday spoken and written variants. Further, the language is rich in symbols, acronyms, abbreviations, and new lexical items. In many occasions, these newly coined expressions are difficult to be interpreted outside their original context. Thus, language on social media has become an interesting domain of research.

It is noteworthy that the young users of social media are keen to embrace language change, while the interlocutors from the older generation are reluctant to adhere to this novel form of language and its unconventional features. In this light, the present study is an attempt to investigate the morpho-syntactic features of the English language used on Facebook by Sinhala undergraduates.

In the Sri Lankan context, where Sinhala or Tamil is the native language of the majority of the population, English is used as a second language of communication.

However, it is often observed that English is the most frequently utilized language in conversations taking place on social media. Accordingly, it can be seen that code switching and mixing, neologisms, emoticons, deviation of punctuation and grammar, abbreviations and acronyms characterize the discourse of these young interlocutors as they strive to bring innovation and creative use of language into communication. Hence, the key objective of the study is to analyze these features from a linguistic perspective with an emphasis on morphological and syntactic aspects of the English language. A voluntary group of 30 undergraduates who speak Sinhala as their first language was selected for the study. Since language is used for different purposes of communication on social media, the data were collected from picture captions shared by the respective Facebook users.

Although the language of social media is a frequently discussed topic, its linguistic features, specifically in relation to the bilingual users and their age group, have not been adequately investigated in previous studies. Hence, it is expected that, the findings of the present study will contribute to the existing knowledge in the domain of language and social media.

1.1.1 Research Questions

- I. What is the language behavior of undergraduates on Facebook?
- II. What are the novel linguistic features of the English language used on Facebook by the undergraduates?
- III. What are the functions of linguistic innovation on Facebook?

2. Literature Review

According to Ouahmiche and Belahcen (2017), “Language, like all existing things, is subject to change. It is a dynamic phenomenon in the sense that it changes in diverse ways, in different places and at different times” (p.25). Commenting on the relationship between age and language change, the authors have stated, “the old generation tends to maintain the old resort to linguistic conservatism; while on the other hand; the young generation shows their willingness to reject all what is traditional. This is clearly reflected in their use of language. They submit to the pressures of the peer- group. They become influenced so that they are strongly integrated and share common social norms.” (p. 34). Cheshire (2014) has also emphasized, “the relationship between the ageing process and language use has traditionally been analyzed from two points of view: the changing language used during the lifespan of an individual, and the language of different cohorts of individuals living within a speech community. Age-specific use of language refers to the first approach, with generation-specific use of language reserved for the latter.” (p. 1). Stidham (2014) has claimed, “younger generations have witnessed those changes (in language) due to their early adoption of new technology.” (p. 22).

However, the older generation, “who didn’t have access to these types of technologies during their formative years, sometimes find it more difficult to adapt and enmesh themselves into the online world.” (p. 22). In the modern society, where communication is mostly taking place over social media, language variation and creative use of language are frequently observed phenomena, particularly in the discourse of young interlocutors.

Jafarov (2020) has claimed, “A person is more detailed and flexible while communicating on social media than in real life. It also urges him/her to be creative and express himself/herself in a more compact way.” (p. 958). He has further stated, “as the communication tools evolve, the number of new language units emerging in this environment also increases and develops” (p. 958). According to Al-Salman (2017) “with the distinctive features of the social media discourse, (i.e., brevity, economy, and speed), the standard discourse markers of elevated style, vocabulary, grammaticality, well-formedness, coherence, connectives, etc., are hardly attainable in this genre of social media discourse” (p. 173). Based on a study by Heath (2018), “social media users deviate from the norms of English orthography in numerous ways; particularly in the areas of capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and use of emoji” (p. 1). Jafarov (2020) has observed that in social media discourse, “images, symbols, ideographical and pictographic text that express the interlocutor’s mood and messages he/she wants to convey in a very compact and specific way, replace conventional texts” (p. 964). He has further highlighted that fractured words and sentences, incomplete use of the language units, and the misuse of punctuation marks are frequently perceived in the language of social media. According to Nwala and Tamunobelem (2019), non-standard spelling, letter/number homophones, acronyms and abbreviations constitute the unconventional linguistic features of social media communication. Yunis (2019) has also stressed that, “shortenings like abbreviations, acronyms, numeronyms, logograms and emoticons got their superiority over the language used in social media.” (p. 309). Jafarov (2020) has observed, “the wide-spread use of argots and slang words among internet users, revival of the epistolary style in the form of the electronic texting, expression of opinion by means of as simple units as possible are also examples of the innovations that virtual reality has brought to the language environment.” (p. 955).

As highlighted in the above discussed literature, language on social networking applications constitutes a variety of novel linguistic features.

3. Methodology

A qualitative analysis approach was employed in the study. Thirty undergraduates following the BSc degree programme at a national university were involved. The participants were selected through a questionnaire based on the criteria of their first and second languages, preferred language of communication on Facebook and their active use of Facebook prior to the study and their different purposes of using Facebook as a medium of communication. Along with the questionnaire, a consent form was distributed among the students in order to access and extract data from their individual Facebook profiles. The corpus includes picture captions shared by the participants over the period of three months before the research. Forty captions were extracted from the Facebook profiles of the participants, and they were descriptively analyzed with regards to the morpho-syntactic characteristics that differentiate them from the language of everyday communication.

4. Facebook Picture Captions by Sri Lankan Undergraduates

Forty picture captions by the voluntary participants were selected for the study. It was observed that abbreviations and acronyms, capitalization, misuse of punctuation, fractured words and sentences, slang, neologisms and deviation from the conventional rules of spelling and syntax were the most common features of language appearing in captions by the young participants. In addition, code mixing was identified specially in producing utterances which do not have equivalents in the English language. It was understood that these expressions were mostly related to the local culture, life style and religion. Semiotic elements, including emoticons, emojis and hash tags were also considered as part of syntax since they were a common feature appearing in the majority of the picture captions. The aforementioned features and the sample captions are presented and examined throughout this section. For the purpose of analysis, the captions are categorized and discussed under different linguistic features in this section.

4.1 Use of New Abbreviations and Acronyms

In the picture captions selected for the study, abbreviations and acronyms were one of the most prominent morpho-syntactic deviations observed. It was evident that they were used by the young interlocutors as a substitute for both single words and whole sentences. It can be conceded that using abbreviations and acronyms avoids the necessity of typing lengthy sentences and phrases while reducing space. Hence, they can be identified as an essential component of the language used on Facebook, which requires analysis. The following list of picture captions exemplifies the use of abbreviations and acronyms on Facebook.

- i. LOL 😂
- ii. Hope to see you in SL soon. TC ❤️❤️❤️
- iii. OMG. This is shocking!
- iv. HBD to my favorite niece 🎂
- v. New designs are out. DM for more details 😊
- vi. #TBT to the young days
- vii. BFF moments. Miss you guys a lot 😭

The acronym LOL (Laugh Out Loud) in the first example was used to caption a shared picture with which the user had sarcastically identified himself. The second title was used for a picture where a group of people was waiting to board the plane. Evidently, the Facebook user intends to wish them well with the abbreviation TC (Take Care). In the same caption, SL is used as an abbreviated term for Sri Lanka. In the third example, OMG (Oh My God) was used to express bewilderment over a picture depicting a statement made by a politician. HBD (Happy Birthday) in the fourth caption is a frequent social media abbreviation invented by the young users. DM (Direct Message) was used to draw attention to a picture depicting a collection of crafts designed and sold by the user. The viewers are requested to contact her for details. TBT (Throwback Thursday) and BFF (Best Friends Forever) in the last two captions are two of the most commonly used abbreviations on social media. They were used by the participants to introduce an old picture from childhood and a group of friends, respectively. In all the above examples, the use of emojis has intensified the intended meaning, as discussed in the previous section.

In addition to the common social media abbreviations and acronyms, it was observed that shortened or informal words were also used by the participants to replace standard words. In the present study, this phenomenon was observed as follows:

- i. One of my fav songs
- ii. Pic of the day ❤️
- iii. Such a beautiful fam
- iv. Gd times during lunch break
- v. Welcome home lil princess ❤️
- vi. Jst sharing this for fun.
- vii. Happy Birthday mchn 🎂

In the above extracted captions, the words favorite (fav), good (Gd), picture (pic), family (fam), little (lil) and just (jst) have been abbreviated. It is noteworthy that the term “machan”, (an expression in Sinhala to address a close friend) has also been abbreviated in English.

It is evident that, the abbreviation on Facebook does not adhere to standard rules in the language. It can be seen that the users are in need of expressing themselves using as less words/ letters as possible rather than paying attention to the correct use of language. In relation to the findings of the present study, abbreviating seems to be a popular informal function among young Facebook users. It can be conceded that the aforementioned acronyms and abbreviations are a depiction of the creative use of language invented by the younger generation to communicate a message or an idea concisely within a short period of time by consuming as less space as possible.

4.2 Disregarded Capitalization and Punctuation

In examining the Facebook picture captions of the selected participants, it was frequently observed that the standard rules of capitalization and punctuation are often disregarded by the users when communicating their thoughts. This can be observed in the language extracts given in the captions below:

- i. *Another FANTASTIC day with lovely people!!!*
- ii. *THANK U and LOVE U all ❤️*
- iii. *Missing Those Days*
- iv. *i cant believe my eyes!*
- v. *Dnt judge others, we dnt know their story*
- vi. *Live the life youve imagined!*

The use of capitalization in the first and second examples suggests that the respective Facebook users have employed all capitalized terms to emphasize their intended ideas. *Caption i* is from a picture depicting a group of people at a family gathering, while the picture under *caption ii* is from a surprise birthday celebration. It can be assumed that by using capitalized terms, the two individuals are attempting to stress their feelings of excitement and gratitude, respectively. Further, the exaggerated use of exclamation marks in *caption i* is also an indication of the emphasis that the Facebook user wishes to place on his/ her idea. The third example, where capitalization has been employed in a different manner, can also be considered as a situation of emphatic stress.

The writer is trying to create a sense of nostalgia by emphasizing each word with capital letters at the beginning.

However, in the second, third and fourth examples, it can be observed that the users have intentionally disregarded the rules of capitalization and punctuation. While it is an indication that the writer is more concerned towards expressing their thought than adhering to the correct use of language, it can also be an attempt to reduce space and time.

Apart from misusing the punctuation marks, it was observed in the study that punctuation is utilized as a mode of expressing facial features and emotions which are commonly known as emoticons on social media platforms. Below is a list of picture captions, where emoticons were used to communicate the Facebook users' ideas and thoughts.

- I. *Dreams come true :)*
- II. *This is hilarious:-D*
- III. *Rest in peace legend :-(*
- IV. *First attempt at baking:-P*

In the examples given above, emoticons have been used to express the facial expressions of smiling, laughing, sadness and humour respectively. It can be conceded that they are used as a substitute for emojis on social media. Their frequent usage in virtual discourse signifies the creative use of language, which is becoming increasingly popular among the young social media users.

4.3 Incomplete Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are incomplete units of language, which is a common observation with regard to the language behaviour of young individuals on social media. In relation to the picture captions selected for the study, incomplete language units were utilized to express part of the intended idea, while the rest of the message was expressed in the picture or through the use of hash tags.

- i. *Surprised her finally ❤️*
- ii. *Can still remember how happy we were those days # unilife # nostalgia*
- iii. *Trying snorkeling for the first time #bucketlist #checked #snorkeling*
- iv. *Passed the final year MBBS exam 😊*

- v. *Many Happy Returns of the Day angel. Can't believe you are six already* 🎂📁
- vi. *Thank u everyone for the lovely wishes! ❤️ Means so much.*

The Caption i given above has been taken from a picture where a group of young people have surprised a friend on her birthday, whereas the second caption was used to share an old picture showing the carefree life spent at university. Captions *iii* and *iv* are from pictures depicting snorkeling and posing for a picture at the end of a university exam. In all these situations, the individual Facebook users are attempting to communicate their message more through the actual picture and less through written words. Further, fragmented sentences have captioned the pictures.

But in captions *iii* - *vi*, sentence fragments have been used as part of the captions. It can be observed that in all these sentences, the subject has been omitted, expecting the viewer to understand the message through the picture. Further, hash tags have been included in some captions as an identification of the photograph.

4.4 Use of Internet/ Cyber Slang as Innovative Lexical Elements

Slang in a language refers to the informal lexical items and expressions that are deviant from the conventional norms of grammar in terms of their structure. On social media, slang is a popular phenomenon, specifically among members of the younger generation. It can be seen that innovative and creative lexical units are often generated on social networking sites by the young interlocutors. Interestingly, within a short span of time, such expressions are adopted by the other users and eventually become known as "internet slang". This was a significant observation in the data examined throughout the present study. It was seen that certain informal terms were frequently used in communication between undergraduate Facebook users, and simultaneously, similar word formation strategies were also observed in these new lexical items.

In the picture captions selected for the present study, it was examined that phonetic spellings were frequently used to represent single letters as follows,

- i. *Plz spread the word*
- ii. *Congratz best friend. Love you loadz 😍*
- iii. *Have a safe journey and njoy the vacation guyz 😊*
- iv. *Ya she z da best!*
- v. *U guys are the best 👍 CU*

As can be seen in the first four examples, /z/ is frequently used as a substitute for the actual letters in a word. Further, in the captions *iii*, *iv* and *v*, the words 'enjoy', 'you' and 'yeah' have also been abbreviated by replacing them with the sounds generated by individual letters.

It was further observed in the picture captions that, numerical characters were also used as a replacement to individual letters and prepositions. Given below are examples identified in the study:

- i. *Thank u 4 dropping by guys! #reunion #fun #happytimes*
- ii. *Thank u 4 da gift tz awesome 😍*
- iii. *Had a gr8 time.*

In addition to the internet slang presented above, informal expressions used in spoken language were also noted in the data sample as follows:

- i. *I wanna be here again #vacation diaries #nostalgia #wish I could visit again*
- ii. *We gotta stick together*
- iii. *See ya'll soon.*

It can be conceded that due to their need of sharing a message with a large number of people within a limited time, the users are reluctant to type complete words. As a result, orthographic deviations discussed above are a common phenomenon in the language of social networking sites.

4.5 Neologisms

New lexical items/ neologisms are frequently invented and used on social media which demarcates its discourse to be different from everyday spoken and written communication. In the picture captions observed during the study, it was examined that neologisms have often been generated by changing the existing form/ meaning of words.

- i. *Adorables !!!*
- ii. *My handsomes 😍*
- iii. *Cuties 😍😊 #puppy love*
- iv. *Tripping after lockdown #unawatuna #Sri Lanka*
- v. *Thank you all for your comments and likes ❤️*
- vi. *Happy frendversary to us 🎉🎉 #friendship goals*
- vii. *Stole this pic from my favorite person's wall 😏*
- viii. *Reposting cause this is such a beautiful message*

The first three captions in the above examples were used to share pictures of two babies, three young men in a family and a litter of puppies, respectively. It can be seen that adjectives in the standard language have been converted into plural nouns instead of being typed as adjectives and nouns as separate units. In captions *iv*, the noun “trip” has been converted into a verb (present participle) whereas the verb “like” has been converted into a plural noun in the final caption. The term “frendversary” in caption *vi* is a unique expression originated from Facebook which is used to describe an anniversary for two people who have been friends. The neologisms in the captions *vii* and *viii* are also salient to Facebook. “Wall” in caption *vii* refers to the space of a person's profile where people can type in thoughts or share pictures. Posting as a verb denotes the idea of publishing or sharing and idea/ thought or a photo.

4.6 Sinhala English Code Mixing

Even though code mixing is a common practice in the everyday conversation of bilingual and multilingual societies, it was observed that this practice has been extended to the communication on Facebook as well since the conversations on this platform are less formal and connecting with people is the primary objective of its users.

Since all the voluntary participants involved in the present study were bilingual Sinhala speakers, the use of Sinhala terms and expressions was a common occurrence identified in their Facebook discourse. This phenomenon was mostly examined in situations where there are no English equivalents to the Sinhala lexical items. Accordingly, language elements denoting local culture, food and life style had been typed in Sinhala by the participants.

- i. *Beginning of Sinhala අවුරුදු <aurudu>*
- ii. *Engineering කල්ලිය <kalliya>*
- iii. *♥ their ඉඟුරු <inguru> tea and වඩේ <wade:>*
- iv. *Delicious කැවිලි <kaevili> made by my loving sister 😍*

In the first caption above, අවුරුදු <aurudu> refers to the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, whereas කල්ලිය <kalliya> in the second caption is the Sinhala equivalent of gang. In the third example, ඉඟුරු <inguru> is ginger in English, while වඩේ <wade:> is a popular snack in the country.

This particular caption was used to share a picture of a wayside boutique, and the emoji was used to indicate the Facebook user's love for this specific food sold there. In the last caption, කැවිලි <kaevili> refers to the traditional sweets prepared during the new year. It is evident that, as Facebook enables using multiple languages for communication, bilingual users can conveniently switch between languages during a discourse.

In addition to code mixing, some Sinhala words used in the captions were observed to have been typed in English.

- i. *Ane: how cute she is 😊*
- ii. *Have a safe flight home. Budusaranai*
- iii. *I have always admired your talent. But you could have done better ne:da 🤔*

In caption *i*, “ane:” was used as an expression of happiness upon seeing a baby. Budusaranai in caption *ii* is a form of blessing in the Buddhist culture, whereas in the final caption, which was used to title a photograph of a reality show star that the user admires, “ne:da” is the English equivalent of the expression, “isn't it?”

It can be presumed that using lexical items from the users' first language allows meaningful communication among bilinguals on social media.

Further, expressing and sharing their thoughts in Sinhala could be considered an effective way of developing interaction and reaching a large audience, especially when the English vocabulary is not sufficient for expressing themselves. This can be conducive towards understanding the Sri Lankan users' communication on social media since bilingualism could be a major contributing factor in utilizing utterances from their native language.

4.7 Use of Reduplicated Letters to Express Emotions

It was understood that young interlocutors on Facebook use language in a manner which allows them to express their feelings and emotions in the best possible way. This is exemplified in the morpho-syntactic deviation observed throughout the study. Reduplication of letters was identified as another significant example in this regard.

- i. We are sooo proud of U 🥰
- ii. Thank uuu everyone for the lovely gifts ❤️
- iii. Need a longggggg vacation now
- iv. No wayyyy 🤯
- v. It's Sundaaaay 🥳
- vi. Ohhhhh you look gorgeous ❤️

The caption *i* above was used to share the graduation picture of a sibling, whereas caption *ii* expresses a Facebook user's gratitude upon receiving gifts on a special occasion. Caption *iii* was used to title the picture of an exhausted person, while caption *iv* is from a picture containing a shocking news headline. In the fifth caption, reduplicated letters indicate happiness and excitement of the Facebook user as a picture depicting a beach was shared. In the final caption also, the reduplicated term signifies the user's strong emotions as it was used to share a picture of her friend as a bride. It can be conceded that Facebook users intend to highlight their strong emotions through the use of duplicated letters.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The different language features identified and discussed above have resulted in generating a unique linguistic variant where communication and the use of language are distinctly in contrast with the everyday spoken and written discourse. It can be conceded that, while the younger generation has invented the creative use of language on social media, the novel linguistic features identified in the study facilitate better communication among individuals in virtual platforms.

This has been highlighted by Jafarov (2020) as well, who has claimed that a person tends to be “detailed and flexible when expressing their ideas on social media in contrast to real life.” (p.958). He has further exemplified that as technology became advanced and new tools of communication are discovered, there is a chance for new language units to generate. Through the innovative use of language, social media users have the ability to communicate their thoughts effectively, consuming limited duration, space and effort whilst paying less attention to the standard norms of language.

While English is observed as the dominant language of communication, the findings reveal that bilingual undergraduates constantly switch between English and their mother tongue during their virtual interactions. Hammad (2017), Das and Gambäck (2013) and Kurniawan (2016) have also observed this phenomenon in relation to the language behaviour of different bilinguals on social media. It is assumed that incorporating lexical items from their first language promotes better communication while allowing individuals to express and understand each another in a better manner. In relation to the present study, it can be observed that these linguistic deviations, along with the language innovations salient to the Sinhala bilinguals, have resulted in the development of a native variety of language on Facebook.

As per the findings of the present study, majority of the young interlocutors regards social media as platforms for creative expression of language. Further, communication over these sites is mostly informal, allowing the individuals to use language as per their preference. Hence, adhering to standard grammatical rules is not observed on social media. This is an observation made by Jafarov (2020) as well, who has mentioned, that expressing oneself using simpler units is an indication of the language change brought forth by the internet and virtual communication. Several innovative linguistic elements were identified in the present study with regard to the picture captions shared by the undergraduates.

New abbreviations and acronyms were a frequent observation in the corpus selected for the study. According to Khalifa (2015), it is necessary to be aware of the acronyms used in the virtual environment as they save space, energy and time.

As evidenced in this statement, creative shortening of lexical items is used by interlocutors as a means of expressing their thoughts efficiently and effectively.

Non-standard capitalization and punctuation were the second unconventional linguistic feature observed in the selected picture captions. Based on a study by Heath (2018), deviation of capitalization rules is a result of the social media users' need of enhancing the potential of communication through a text. He has further claimed, "in an attempt to make writing more speech-like, writers maybe drawing on readers' prosodic competence by writing in a visually stylistic way." (p.11).

Further, he has stressed that different patterns of capitalization signify heightened emotions, linguistic focus and emphasis on what an individual wants to communicate. Hence, it can be assumed that non-standard capitalization and punctuation are a means of expressing the Facebook users' feelings and emphasized ideas in a platform where face-to-face interaction is completely absent.

Further to the linguistic elements discussed above, incomplete sentences/sentence fragments were accompanied by the picture captions investigated in the study. It was understood that as the interlocutors expected the viewers to understand their message largely through the picture shared and less through the use of words, they had not paid attention to the standard sentence formation.

However, many authors have presented different explanations to the aforementioned syntactic deviation in social media communication. According to Jafarov (2020), fractured sentences or phrases are an indication of limited time, anger and aggressive thoughts or the user's lack of enthusiasm in the conversation. Incomplete sentences are a phenomenon observed by Olojede et al. (2018) as well. In their study regarding the language use on social media, these authors have stated that, writing clauses and phrases as single words can result in the violation of standard syntactic rules.

Internet/ cyber slang is one of the most common features observed in all forms of virtual communication. This was identified in the present study with regard to the selected corpus. According to Abdullah et al. (2018), slang "can reflect a person's age as it signals membership of a particular group." (p.775). They have further identified that, people belonging to the same age group often speak in a similar manner.

This statement can be applied in understanding the use of slang by the undergraduates as well, since they represent a particular social group; the younger generation. In analyzing the linguistic formation of social media slang, Zaka (2015) has stated that, slang words are formed by adding sound, returning sound and repeating letters. According to Olojede et al. (2018), using slang is a means of simulating pronunciation and accent to aid communication. It can be conceded that slang aids the interaction process on social media platforms, enabling different social and age groups to develop their own repertoire of communication.

Neologisms/ new lexical items are another prominent linguistic feature identified in the study. It is observed that neologisms are a key contributing factor in the evolution of language on social media. As new words are constantly introduced and become part of virtual conversation, the older terms become less common. Commenting on the use of neologisms, Shahlee and Ahmad (2020) have claimed that, language evolution created by social media has impacted how we communicate as new words and phrases have become part of our vocabulary. As suggested by these authors, neologisms have made a significant impact on social interaction on virtual platforms.

The final linguistic element observed in the corpus was reduplication or the repetition of letters within a single word. It is assumed that this phenomenon is a result of the individuals' need to express strong emotions or to draw the attention of viewers towards the content they have shared. This is a phenomenon observed by Nguyen et al. (2013) as well, who have termed this occurrence 'alphabetical lengthening' where letters in a word are repeated for emphasis and attention. Das and Gambäck (2013) have identified this creative feature as 'word play' and remarked that such characteristics make the study of social media language both interesting and challenging.

In addition to the linguistic innovations discussed above, it was seen that all the picture captions investigated in the study were accompanied by emoticons and hash tags; features that are extremely popular among social media users. According to Stapa and Shaari (2012), "emoticons carry some very prominent functions that convey certain messages and hidden meaning in online conversations." (p.826). They have further stated that emoticons can complement a message and facilitate communication by expressing feelings which cannot be shared as written messages. Commenting on the use of hash tags, Daer et al. (2014) have stated that, hash tags are a means of helping people locate the specific term.

A post has less chance to be read by individuals outside the user's followers if a hash tag is not used. Therefore, the authors have defined hash tag as a symbol signifying the actions of sorting, finding, labeling, and clicking.

It can be understood that both these popular features facilitate communication on social media in different ways.

As language on social networking sites is ever evolving and age plays a key role in linguistic innovation in these platforms, the findings of the present study would be beneficial in developing further research on social media, language and age. Further, the study explores the communication of Sinhala bilingual undergraduates on social networking platforms; a novel area of research which demonstrates a strong impact of bilingualism on the language behavior of Facebook users. In exploring previous literature, it was understood that the innovative language expressions discussed above are often being transferred across multiple social networking sites. Thus, the findings of the present study can be applied in understanding the communication taking place in majority of the social media platforms. Further, the impact of these innovations on conventional norms of language is indisputable which highlights the need of analyzing social media discourse as a distinct form of communication.

5. Conclusion

Language was invented by humans as an important means of communication. Since its inception, human language has been subjected to evolution in order to facilitate different communicative purposes and social situations. Today, with the rapid development of technology and hectic lifestyles, people have become heavily dependent on novel forms of communication for social interaction. This is especially seen among the younger generation, who prefers social media as a substitute for face-to-face communication. They are constantly in need of communicating their thoughts and ideas in the most efficient way, consuming as less time as possible. As a result, they pay minimum attention to the proper use of language, which has resulted in a new variety of languages invented by these young interlocutors. This is a global phenomenon today and a fine example for "Language is Creative, Language can change" based on human needs and as a non-instinctive method of communication.

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