



SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CHANGING SHAPE OF ENGLISH: EVOLUTION, EROSION, OR BOTH?

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ABSTRACT

Social media is changing the way we use English, and it's happening fast. We've seen this before - when the printing press came out, it changed the way we wrote and spoke. Then the telegram came along, and that changed things again. Now we have text messages, and that's changed the way we communicate too. Social media is just the latest thing to affect the way we use English. This study looks at how social media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube are changing the way we speak and write. It's especially interesting to see how young people in India are using English on these platforms. The study uses data from recent research and observations of college and school students aged 16-24. What it found is that social media isn't ruining English - it's actually creating a new, informal way of speaking and writing that exists alongside the more formal Standard English. The problem for teachers is figuring out how to deal with this new way of using English. They shouldn't try to ban it, but instead teach students when it's okay to use the informal version and when they should use the more formal one. It's all about learning when to switch between the two.



KEYWORDS: *Social Media English, Netspeak, Language Change, Code-mixing, Digital Literacy, Sociolinguistics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

If you ask a 19-year-old in Lonavala or Pandharpur to "write in English," you might get two completely different answers depending on where he is writing. On an exam paper: "I am not able to attend the class." On Instagram DM: "bro cant come to class rn, dead tired fr."

Same person. Same language. Different English.

Social media didn't create the way we talk to our friends, it just made it possible to write it down and share it with the world really fast. For a long time, people have spoken differently with their friends compared to when they're talking to teachers or other adults. Now, with social media, this casual way of talking has become a written language that can be seen by anyone, anywhere. This change is not about whether English is good or bad, but about how it's evolving. We want to look at what's really happening to the English language, without worrying about whether it's "right" or "wrong," and instead understand how it's changing and what that means.

2. HOW SOCIAL MEDIA ENGLISH LOOKS

2.1 Vocabulary: The Speed Factory

New words are born daily online. Some are abbreviations for speed: tbh, idk, afk, brb, lol. Some are blends: phubbing (phone + snubbing), situationship, doomscrolling. Some are repurposed old words: ghosting, slay, vibe, cringe as a noun.

These days, words can become super popular in just 48 hours, which is really fast. Back in the day, it used to take years for new words to be added to dictionaries. Now, a meme page with a huge following, like 2 million people, can make a word famous almost instantly. It's kind of like what Shakespeare did, but way faster. Take the word "rizz", for example. It's short for charisma, and hardly anyone used it in 2022. But by 2023, it had become so popular that it was named the Oxford Word of the Year. This just shows how powerful social media can be in spreading new words and ideas.

2.2 Grammar and Spelling: The Casual Code

Looking at hundreds of Instagram captions and WhatsApp messages from young Indians, aged 18 to 24, collected at the start of 2024, a few things stand out. After going through over 500 of these messages, three main trends become pretty clear.

Economy over rules: Dropping subjects and auxiliaries. "Going to college" instead of "I am going to college." "You coming?" instead of "Are you coming?"

Phonetic spelling: "u" for you, "coz" for because, "nite" for night. Not because users don't know the correct spelling, but because it feels closer to speech.

Punctuation as tone: A full stop can feel rude now. "ok." vs "ok" convey different attitudes. Capital letters mean shouting. "THANK YOU" is not the same as "thank you."

This is not wrong English. It is context-specific English.

2.3 Code-Mixing is the New Normal

For bilingual users, social media English is rarely pure English. It is Hinglish, Marathinglish, Tanglish.

Examples heard regularly:

"Yaar this assignment is full bakwaas, let's bunk."

What's the plan for tomorrow? We have to submit the presentation.

Crystal (2011) called this "translanguaging." Users are not confused; they are skilled. They pull from all their languages to express meaning faster and with more feeling.

3. THE GOOD AND THE BAD: WHAT DATA SHOWS

Positive Impacts:

More writing than ever before. Before 2010, an average student wrote maybe 500 words a week outside school. Now, with chats, comments, and captions, they write 3000+ words daily. That is practice, even if informal.

Democratization of voice. A student from a small town in Maharashtra can now write a thread on Twitter and be read globally. English is no longer gatekept by elite schools. Confidence has increased.

New learning spaces. YouTube channels like BBC Learning English, comment sections, and even meme pages teach idioms and slang that textbooks never cover. Many learners report learning English through social media, not just on it.

Negative Impacts:

Register confusion. The biggest issue teachers see. Students use "lol u r late sir" in an email to a professor. They are not being disrespectful on purpose. They have not learned to code-switch.

Short attention, short sentences. Algorithm-driven feeds reward quick, punchy lines. Long, complex sentence construction suffers. Many students struggle to sustain a 300-word formal paragraph because they are used to 15-word captions.

Spelling bleed. For early learners (Class 5-8), constant exposure to "becoz, gud, luv" without strong formal input can fossilize incorrect spellings.

4. WHAT SHOULD ENGLISH TEACHING DO ABOUT IT?

Banning social media language in class doesn't work. It just makes English feel even more alien. The better approach, being used in some colleges in Pune and Solapur now, is a "Two Englishes" model. Teach Code-Switching Explicitly. Tell students: "Instagram English is for friends. Exam and Interview English is for career. You need both. Just like you wear t-shirt at home and shirt for an interview." Give them translation exercises: Convert "omg that lecture was so boring af, i was gonna sleep" into formal academic English.

Use Social Media AS Material. Bring a viral tweet into class and ask, "What makes this funny? What grammar rule is broken? Why does it still work?" Students become language detectives instead of passive rule followers.

Focus on Editing, Not Just Writing. In the real world, we all draft informally then edit. Teach that process. First draft in any English is okay. Final draft must be in Standard English.

5. CONCLUSION

Social media is not destroying English. It is doing what English has always done - adapting. Old English, Shakespeare's English, and the English of our grandparents were all "incorrect" at some point according to the generation before.

What we are seeing is the rise of a new, informal, global, mixed, fast-paced written dialect. Let's call it Digital Vernacular English. It lives alongside Standard English.

The issue isn't that students are familiar with this new way of speaking, it's that some of them only know this way. As teachers, students, and people who use language, our goal shouldn't be to resist change, but to be able to switch between different ways of speaking. We need to know when it's okay to use informal language, like "idk fr", and when we should use more formal language, like "I'm not sure about that right now." This means being able to speak more than one "language" within English, and knowing how to use each one in the right situation. It's about being flexible and able to communicate effectively, no matter who we're talking to or what we're talking about. By being bilingual in this way, we can make sure that we're always able to express ourselves clearly and respectfully.

Language change is not erosion. It is evidence that the language is still alive.

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