The Language of social media: A Structuralist Inquiry

Revathy S.

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Abstract — Kevin Kelly, a futurist, puts forth the idea of a seventh kingdom to add to the six-kingdom classification. He labels this kingdom as the "technium." It refers to all things invented by humans and includes, but is certainly not limited to, such phenomena as the Internet (Lobo, 2017). The language that has developed as a result of the emergence of some phenomena of the technium (for instance, social media) is now integrating into, and sending shockwaves through human languages, especially English. The latter of the two languages is one with a long history of change and unfailing adaptation. As such, the steady burgeoning of this unhackneyed technological vocabulary may not hold serious consequences for the English language which, as it has done numerous times before, will reorient itself around the insurgence of new words and abbreviations. However, for the first time in centuries (taking into consideration the cave paintings of old), there is an alarming increase in the substitution of words and phrases by visual equivalents, all of which seek to literalize the adage that a picture can speak a thousand words. This hybrid language however is still just that — a language, a system of signs as Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure put it. This paper seeks to conduct an analysis of this fairly new language using the methodology of structuralism, employing various theories put forth by critics associated with this umbrella term. Such an analysis would be directed towards facilitating an understanding of this new technological language in its various manifestations.

Keywords— Language, structuralism, technology, social media

I. INTRODUCTION

Any innovation that is introduced into the world must and should be subjected to an analysis in order to have an estimate of how it might possibly affect existing structures. The language of social media has proven that it is capable of altering the status quo and it has done so in unprecedented ways. Given the speed with which this fledgling language has taken over our lives, there have been many studies conducted on it. The present paper hopes to add a new dimension of analysis in the form of structuralism. Accordingly, this language has been subjected to an analysis using, primarily, the theories offered by the prominent proponent of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure, and also by other known structuralists like Claude Levi-Strauss, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes.

II. EMPLOYMENT OF STRUCTURALISM IN SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

Ferdinand de Saussure saw a sign as being composed of a signifier (which is a sound image) and a signified (which is the corresponding concept). According to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is always arbitrary in the sense that there is no inherent relationship between the two. That is, the same signified can be conveyed using different signifiers, and the same signifier can represent different signifieds. The visual icon of the emoji evinces this aspect of the sign. The emotion of happiness can be conveyed using different emojis — the grinning face emoji, the grinning squinting face emoji, the rolling on the floor laughing emoji and the slightly smiling face emoji, to name just a few. At the same time, a single emoji may convey different emotions to different people. For example, the folded hands emoji is often confused as conveying the meaning of being engaged in prayer. It can

also be used as an expression of gratitude, as a greeting, or, even as a high five.

The interesting thing to note here is the similarities that this language seems to share with other languages where a single idea or concept will often be represented by different words in different countries. According to the change in geographical boundaries, a tree may be called by different names. For example, in Dutch it is called "boom", in German it is called "baum" in Hindi as "ped" and in Malayalam as "vriksham." Similarly, emojis also exhibit this variation according to cultural usage. To study this, we can consider two emojis: the waving hand emoji and the thumbs up emoji.

In most countries the waving hand emoji can signify either hello or goodbye. However, this is not so in the case of countries like China, South Korea or Pakistan. In China, using this emoji can lead to the end of friendships or relationships, while in Pakistan and South Korea it is considered as extremely rude, and akin to cursing or demeaning someone. The OK hand emoji has also come to acquire far more problematic connotations; in the US, it has been linked to racism and in Turkey to sexism (Kalaba, 2022).

At the same time, according to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is also fixed in that the members of society have come to a common agreement to assign a particular meaning to a particular word. The quality of arbitrariness does not hold true for all visual representations seen in social media. Some of them do have fixed meanings. For example, gifs often have the message which they intend to convey written on the top or bottom half of the picture. There is very little, if no chance, of there being confusion about the intended meaning of a gif. Moreover, despite geographical and cultural variations, the language of social media very often also eliminates differences among people worldwide, bringing in the aspect of commonality. For example, while age might be a factor affecting the vocabulary of a common language user (which has been termed as age-graded variation), this might not be the case for a user of social media language. For instance, abbreviations introduced by social media such as 'smh' (shaking my head), 'lol' (laugh out loud), 'brb' (be right back), 'ttyl' (talk to you later) and such are often used indiscriminately by people of all age groups.

In the case of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes there is a slight yet noticeable difference of this language as against, for instance, the English language. The syntagmatic axis reveals the relationship among the constituents of a sentence construction. The paradigmatic axis shows the relationship between words that can acts as substitutes for one another. Whereas both these axes are possible for other languages, we cannot see a clear

syntagmatic or paradigmatic representation of the language of social media. For instance, a sentence in English such as "The boy ate the apple" could be syntagmatically analyzed. The sentence has an article ("the"), nouns ("boy" and "apple"), and a verb ("ate"). It can also be paradigmatically analyzed. For example, the word "apple" in the sentence can be replaced by words like "orange," "grapes," "carrots," or any other noun. However, while communicating to someone using online media, an entire sentence can be possibly constructed with the help of images alone. In this case, there is the clear breakdown of grammar and hence a syntagmatic analysis of such a construction would be rendered impossible. Even a paradigmatic analysis would be difficult as some emojis are clearly designed to convey one specific emotion. For instance, if one wants to convey the emotion of drowsiness or sleepiness there is only one possible emoji which can be employed (the sleepy face emoji). There are no possible replacements in which case there could be no scope for the construction of a vertical or paradigmatic axis. Moreover, even in an online correspondence comprised entirely of words, users do sometimes omit words for the sake of ease or convenience. In this case too even though the sentence may be sufficient to convey the meaning the user intended, the words that are omitted would again lead to a breakdown in syntax; hence a syntagmatic analysis would be difficult. However, in the case of such sentences, the important thing to note is that the construction of a paradigmatic axis would indeed be possible. For example, in such a simple sentence as "Going to work" there is the essential conveyance of meaning — in this case a missive from a person informing the receiver of his/her intention to go to his/her place of work. However, such a sentence construction also ostensibly lacks the personal pronoun "I" and the simple present form of "to be," that is, "am." Here, a syntagmatic analysis would prove challenging. On the other hand, along the paradigmatic axis, the word "going" can have substitutes such as "driving," "walking," "travelling," "commuting" and so forth. Similarly, the noun "work" may have such substitutes as "bakery," "restaurant," "cinema," "park," and so on.

If one were to go still deeper into the syntactic component of social media language, it would become clear that this language could be examined for the possible possession of a langue (the abstract system of rules of a language) and also how it gives plenty of examples of parole (individual utterances). Now, the language of social media seems to have no defined langue as there seems to be no particular convention amongst its users of any strict, unbreakable rules. For example, the philosoraptor (which has a picture of a velociraptor contemplating philosophical questions) has been used in different contexts ranging from questions about the universe and illegal immigration to

Pinocchio. Similarly, as discussed earlier, most emojis though intended for a specific purpose, are often interpreted loosely by the majority of users and are adopted for conveying meanings which differ from the original. Thus, the parole component of this language is far stronger than its langue. In fact, one could argue that this language completely lacks the concept of langue.

Bricolage is another structuralist concept that can be applied here. Bricolage, a concept introduced by Claude Levi Strauss, is "the skill of using whatever is at hand and recombining them to create something new" (Mambrol, 2016). For instance, the smiley face initially had a very different purpose than merely conveying an emotion. It was first drawn by an American graphic artist Harvey Ross Ball in order to serve as a morale booster to some insurance company employees (Stamp, 2013). Social media culture adopted this face and molded and developed it in different ways to convey a variety of emotions. Movie scenes and excerpts from popular videos have likewise been extracted from their context and have been manipulated to convey certain humorous messages in the form of memes, gifs and trolls. Thus, any social media user who creates such trolls or gifs essentially becomes a bricoleur, that is, a person who employs the method of bricolage.

The concept of polyphony introduced by Mikhael Bakhtin can also be applied to social media language. An online communication, of course, necessitates the presence of multiple voices. There will inevitably be a sender and a receiver, the latter of which will transmit a message back as a reply, thus opening a communication channel. Social media also often provide platforms for conference calls and group chatting. Platforms such as Skype, WhatsApp, and the chat rooms offered by Facebook, facilitate and ensure the presence and participation of multiple voices simultaneously.

Bakhtin's theory of the readerly and writerly texts can also be introduced here. Readerly texts often have fixed meanings and the reader has very little role in the interpretation and construction of meaning of the work. In the case of a writerly text, on the other hand, the reader now "in a position of control, takes an active role in the construction of meaning" (*Readerly & Writerly Texts*, n.d.). Websites like Wattpad provide an easily-accessible space for stories to be published. Such sites also offer a comments section on the stories, thus ensuring an open-ended discussion between the authors and readers — an option that is not nearly as easily available in the case of printed books published using traditional modes of publishing. Apart from print media, multimedia such as videos published on YouTube can also be considered as writerly texts in a way, as these have an invested and participatory audience, the vast majority of which leave comments on the videos. Many

YouTubers take the opportunities provided by the comments section to create a healthy rapport with their subscribers by replying to their queries and suggestions or responding to them in other sociable ways. In response to suggestions from their subscribers, YouTubers have even been known to alter their videos or content. According to Bakhtin, the ideal text is the writerly text as it blurs the lines between the writer and the reader. In keeping with this, the new forums provided by social media, especially those that entail a comment section, can be seen as platforms which contribute to the achievement of Bakhtin's ideal text. Sites like Pinterest also open up communication between different people. For example, a drawing or painting posted by a user can be recreated and "pinned" by another user, often at the request of the original creator of the picture. Thus, there is an active perpetuation of materials posted on the site. This is in keeping with Bakhtin's proposal that a writerly text is ideal because it prevents the commercialization and commodification of literature. The problem with such commercialization is that it would entail a lack of freshness or novelty, thus making such art ephemeral. Websites like Pinterest and YouTube would also contribute to making videos, paintings, photographs, literary quotations, short poems and other works of art more permanent and ensure that they have a steady flow of viewership. As such sites encourage creativity among its users, novelty and originality are always ensured. Moreover, such sites also make sure that the art work reaches a large number of people without any consideration of the economic components of buying, selling and profit-making.

III.   CONCLUSION

Thus, as shown above, there are a number of ways in which the language of social media lends itself to an analysis by structuralism, a theory that peaked in the 1950s and early 60s and was introduced for the express purpose of analyzing a language that was as yet to be touched by the effects of technology. In doing so, this paper has proven that this relatively-new language could possibly be on the way to becoming a fully-recognized language in its own right, just like any other language in the world. Moreover, as this is a constantly-evolving language, the scope for conducting further study on it — not just from a structuralist viewpoint — is immense.

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