

Because Twitter: Linguistic Strategies for Brevity in Internet Speak

Twitter is a social networking site with 280 million active users every month. It provides brief and interactive communication and is used for everything from advertising and networking to sharing big news with friends. Twitter, along with other social networking sites (e.g. Tumblr, Facebook, Reddit), is playing a pivotal role in the current evolution of the English language. Its famous 140-character limit for status updates forces users to be brief, precise, and creative in order to convey their message.

The primary research question posed in this paper is: What linguistic strategies do Twitter users employ to clearly convey meaning in such a brief space? The secondary line of inquiry examines the pragmatic inferences these usages carry. This work-in-progress corpus study will examine 3 linguistic strategies that have evolved from this unique linguistic environment.

First, ‘because X.’ This construction conveys (roughly): “I’m so engrossed by this that I can’t be bothered to explain further” or “the reasoning is so obvious it doesn’t need to be elaborated.” As in 1):

- 1) “@OhLookItsNiamh: Can’t study **because sleep** but can’t sleep **because study**”

Second: ‘I can’t even,’ which conveys a sense of “This is so exciting/outrageous/ridiculous (etc.) that I’ve lost the ability to form proper sentences.”

- 2) “@niskakayla: MY MISSION CALL IS HERE!!! **I can’t even**. I’m unable to even. Ahhhh!!”

The third phrase in 2) “I’m unable to even” is also interesting, as it goes against the briefness constraint that normally limits tweets.

Third: abbreviations, such as ‘**imo**’ (in my opinion), ‘**lol**’ (laugh out loud) and ‘**idk**’ (I don’t know), among others. It has been said that common Internet-speak abbreviations have evolved into pragmatic particles. Specifically, that ‘lol’ is now used to convey empathy, rather than its traditional meaning that the speaker finds something funny (McWhorter, 2013). An example of this usage can be seen in 3):

- 3) “@marquiepeyton: if it wasn’t for whit I would run away **lol** bc I hate everyone”
- 4) “@elfifaplayer: Voice > X factor. Much better signers and judges **IMO**”
- 5) “@CapedCrusaider: **idk** who’s Girl Scout cookies those were but I ate some.”

The presentation will examine instances of these three structures found in a corpus of Tweets; when they are used, who is using them, and what they mean in the various contexts in which they appear. Conclusions will be made regarding the intended meaning of these structures and the overall effectiveness of them. Inferences will be drawn regarding the overall effect of Internet speak and online social interactions on language evolution.

References

McWhorter, John. 2013. *Txtng is killing Language. JK!!!* Electronic Document. www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk.html. Accessed December 18, 2013.

