

BEFORE. B-e-f-o-r-e. Not b4. We Write English, not Bingo!
Academic English and Pakistani Digital Natives

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***Abstract:** The present study focuses on the effect of Netspeak on academic written discourse of undergraduate students in Pakistan. A 'hybrid' English has emerged among the Pakistani students because of the regular use of SMS text messaging and Internet chat. The features of this 'hybrid' English include frequent code-switching as well as deviation from standard spellings, grammar and punctuation. Triangulation of data was used for this study which includes Pakistani users' chat logs from the Internet chat rooms, SMS text messages and examination scripts. First, distinct examples of hybrid English found in the chat and SMS discourse of Pakistanis were categorized. Then the exam scripts were examined to search for similar features. The results showed that distinct features of Pakistani Netspeak has infiltrated the academic field as well. In the Focus group discussion teachers came up with remedial measures to help students avoid using Netspeak in academic discourse. It is hoped that the present research will help in understanding why the standard of written academic English is falling in Pakistan and how this issue can be addressed.*

Key words: English , Netspeak, Internet , SMS , Academic discourse

1. Introduction

The present research focuses on the effect of Netspeak on academic written discourse of undergraduate students in Pakistan. A 'hybrid' English has emerged among the Pakistani students because of the regular use of SMS¹ and Internet chat. The features of this 'hybrid' English include frequent code-switching as well as deviation from standard spellings, grammar and punctuation. According to Internet Live Stats (2016) by July 1, 2016, the estimated internet users have reached 34.3 million in Pakistan; thanks to broadband, 3G/4G services and mobile phone operators. This makes 17.8% of the total population of the country. Among these 34.3 million internet users, more than 15 million of them avail internet services through mobile phones, thanks to cellular operators' packages and awareness drive. Reportedly, Pakistan ranks² 5th in Asia and 7th in the world in mobile phone users. The number of cellular subscribers in

1 Short Messaging Service

2 <http://dawn.com/2011/07/27/pakistan-ranks-5th-in-asia-in-mobile-phone-users/>

Pakistan surpassed 134 million in September 2016 , according to latest statistics released by Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA, 2016).³

Nowadays, it is hard for us to imagine a life without mobile phones or Internet. Texting and instant messaging have become a part of our daily life, so much so that the teenagers are even able to text blindfolded. Hence, the ‘Generation txt’ as predicted by Thurlow (2003) is born.

The present study aims to find out whether the academic discourse of Pakistani undergraduate students is effected by the Netspeak/Textspeak or not. The research questions for the present study are:

RQ 1: Is the academic discourse of Undergraduate students in Pakistan effected by the Netspeak/Textspeak?

RQ 2: What are the perspectives of the students and teachers regarding the interference of Netspeak in the written academic discourse?

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is Netspeak?

Crystal (2001) used the term Netspeak for the language used on the Internet and for text messages. Further, Crystal (2006: 52) viewed Netspeak as “a novel medium combining spoken, written and electronic properties.” Crystal (2005) further adds to it by stating that Computer-Mediated Communication is not like speech nor is it like writing. Following the lead, Imtiaz (2010) seconds , “e-chat contains a mix of features that are like spoken and written language, and electronic patterns.” Various other studies have also stressed that the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) leads to certain changes in vocabulary, punctuation and grammar rules (Kwak, Morrison, Peters & Zinkhan, 2003; Denis & Tagliamonte, 2008; Stavfeldt , 2011).

2.2. Who are Digital Natives?

‘Netizen’ as defined by Crystal (2006: 4) is a “regular citizen” of the Internet, thus we can very conveniently identify Netspeak as a native language of a Netizen. Similarly, Prensky (2001: 1) claims that students of today can be called Digital Natives, because they were born and raised in the epoch of technology and these students are native speakers of the digital language.

2.3. Netspeak and Academic Discourse:

The effect of the Internet, particularly the Netspeak, on the English language is a burning issue among researchers on language and communication (Denis & Tagliamonte, 2008; Nelson, 2007).

3 <http://tribune.com.pk/story/498715/cellular-subscribers-cross-123-million-mark/>

Asif (2007) laments that Cyber English used by the Pakistani Netizens is one of the least studied areas. Whereas, Imtiaz and Khushi (2010) in a study pointed out that Pakistani Netspeak has emerged as a unique variety which is full of code-switching and word hybridization. Moreover, Asif (2007) looked at the non/acceptability of Netspeak in the formal educational contexts in Pakistan. She investigated the implications of the use of this Pakistani variety of the English language in written exams, academic papers and student assignments.

Tomita (2009) argues,

Students need to be effective communicators not only from a formal standpoint, but also an informal one as well. This includes the ability to compose a term paper or essay for History or English class utilizing formal writing skills, and communicate efficiently using short text messages. Educators need to understand that literacy is not limited to only typographic literacies, but includes digital literacies as well.

Crystal (2008: 165) is of the view that it is up to the teacher to explain to the children the difference between texting and Standard English. He further highlights, “If there are children whose discourse skills are being hampered by texting, then it is up to teachers to show them how to improve.”

Similarly, Stavfeldt (2011: 23) argues that the teachers can act as catalyst to create awareness in the students regarding the difference between the formal and informal writing by teaching form and function. Endorsing the same idea, Murtiana (2012) adds, that teachers must give exposure to their students to different varieties of English so that students get awareness of the usage of these varieties in proper context. Referring to Pakistani Netspeak, Aslam, Ahmed, and Sajid (2011) endorse that a new “lingo” is developing in Pakistan, which is causing the Pakistani students to use non-conventional and irregular spellings for the purpose of communication.

3. Research Design and Data Collection:

The present study falls under the paradigm of qualitative research. Following Maxwell’s (1996) concept of triangulation, data triangulation was done by obtaining data through four sources, i.e.

1. Internet chatlogs
2. SMS messages
3. Exam scripts
4. Focus Group

Thirty minutes’ chat log of Pakistani users’ text chat from Internet chatrooms was saved. 100 Sms/text messages were collected, 300 Examination scripts of Undergraduate (BS Hons) students from two colleges in Rawalpindi were also collected. For the two focus groups; 10 teachers of

English who teach at undergraduate level and 20 Undergraduate students were selected.

4. Data Analysis:

First the chat log and SMS text messages were closely studied to find out the distinct features of Netspeak in the chat and SMS discourses. These features were further categorized in the following 21 categories:

Table 1.1 Showing features of Netspeak and Textspeak taken from Pakistani chatroom discourse and SMS messages

1.	Constant Simplification	12.	Virtual Phonology
2.	Truncated Words	13.	Non-conventional spellings
3.	Punctuation Expressiveness	14	symbols
4.	Graphic display and emoticons	15	Mono-lettered lexemes
5.	Code Switching	16	Letter-number homophones
6.	Numerals	17	'g' clipping
7	Abbreviations/Acronyms	18	Vowel clipping
8.	Half-baked sentences	19	Consonant clipping
9.	Non-capitalization	20	Missing apostrophe (')
10.	Plural 'z'	21	Font-switching
11	Brevity or Apathy?		

4.1. Analysis of data obtained from exam scripts:

As a next step, students' exam scripts were closely studied to find out whether there are any instances of Netspeak in their academic discourse. By applying the above categories (c.f. Table 1.1), the following examples of Pakistani Netspeak were found in Pakistani students' academic writings:

1. Consonant Simplification:

Consonant contraction is a regular feature of chatroom discourse. There could be many reasons for using these contractions, like, saving time, lack of typing speed, or just being innovative. Such contractions, amazingly, have found their way to our student's academic work as well. The ones found were:

Dint (for Did not), Kinda (for Kind of) and Gonna (Going to)

2. Truncated words

Truncated words are those in which some letter is omitted to shorten it, or even the spellings are changed according to the pronunciation of the word. Examples found in the exam scripts were:

Luv (for Love) Hv (for have)
Lil (for little) Ur (for your)

3. Punctuation Expressiveness

Punctuation expressiveness (Crystal, 2001) is a distinct and very popular feature of online discourses. In the student's work I found such examples as:

Are you with me ?...
Dear Sir!
Ameen!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

4. Graphic display and Emoticons

Surprisingly, in one of the papers I found the picture of a heart ♥ drawn for the word 'love', but this is just one example of its kind.

Finding an emoticon, especially a smiling one ☺ :-)) at the end of the exam script was quite common.

5. Code Switching:

Although code switching is very frequent in Netspeak but in exam scripts it was found in religious/cultural perspective only. Examples found were:

- *Ameen!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*
- *InshaAllah*

⤴ Numerals

Use of numerals, instead of alphabets, is a distinct feature of Netspeak and Textspeak and it is also found in the formal academic discourse of Pakistani students. The examples found are:

2 (for 'to' or 'too') and 4 (for 'for')

⤴ Acronyms/Abbreviations

Students have trouble seeing the distinction between formal and informal writing, and consequently use informal IM abbreviations and lingo in more formal writing situations (Brown-Owens, Eason, & Lader, 2003). Same was found in the exam scripts, students used the following Netspeak:

Btw (by the way) *b/w (between)*
asap (as soon as possible) *Coz (because)*

✧ **Half-baked sentences**

Half baked, incoherent sentences constitute a major part of Netspeak and Textspeak and were found in the academic work of the students too. Examples are:

- 'All of my servants happy with me.'
 - 'My owner satisfied with me'
 - 'corruption eating roots of Pakistan'

In the above examples it can be seen that the some words are altogether omitted to make the sentence as brief as they can.

✧ **Non-capitalization**

In exam papers, just as in chat rooms there are no capitalization after a full stop. Omitting to capitalize the personal pronoun 'I' is also a usual practice in chatroom and SMS discourses and same was found extensively in exam papers as well. Some examples from the data obtained from exam papers are:

i (*instead of 'I'*)
essay (*as the title, instead of writing it as Essay*)

10. Plural 'z':

Both in chat and sms discourses as well as exam scripts plurals are created by replacing 's' for 'z' . Examples found in academic discourse are:

revolutionz, *carz,* *dayz*

1. **Brevity? Or Apathy?**

Netspeak or sms lingo encourages to be brief, and write the message within the specified character length. This brevity I should say, has fused into the academic work of the students as well. Some examples from the data are:

*A formal letter started as: **Res. Sir,** (instead of 'Respected Sir')*
*And ended as: **Yours S.** (instead of 'Yours sincerely')*

2. **Virtual Phonology:**

The use of phonetic spellings is quite popular among the 'Young Pakistani Netizens' (Asif and Zahra, 2006).

In the data taken from the students exam papers I have found examples like:

Plz (for please), Iz (for is), Ov (for of)

No (for Know), Sugession (for suggestion), Wht (for what)

3. Mono-lettered Lexemes

My students were trying to communicate academic, scholarly thoughts, but some of them didn't seem to know it's 'y-o-u' not 'u' (Friess, 2003) Similarly, while scrutinizing the exam scripts what I found was:

U (for you) N (for and) Y (for why)
R (for are)

These mono-lettered lexemes are used quite frequently by the undergrad students.

4. Letter-Number Homophones:

The combination of letter and number is a very frequent feature of Netspeak. Thurlow (2003) has termed it as "Letter-Number Homophone." Examples found in the exam scripts are:

b4 (for before), 2day (for today)

5. 'g' Clipping:

Final 'g' clipping is another netspeak feature and it is also found in the formal academic discourse of the students. For example in instances like:

Goin (going) Waitin (waiting)

6. Vowel Clipping:

Another feature of netspeak, vowel clipping, was also found in the exam papers, e.g.

Begning (beginning), Trde (Trade), Clamty (calamity), Mnth (month), Bck (back).

7. Consonant clipping:

Similar to vowel clipping, consonant clipping in academic discourse was also found, e.g.

Sory (sorry), Writen (written)

8. Non-conventional spelling:

Surprisingly, such non-conventional spellings were found, such as

Gud (good), Sumone (someone), Nite (night), Alrite (alright)

This innovation is another feature of netspeak and quite acceptable in the online arenas.

19. Symbols

Chatters and Texters use symbols and abbreviations. But in the exam papers it was found out that these symbols also exist there whereas academic discourse do not support such symbols. The examples are:

(used for number), & (used for and)

This practice is quite in agreement with the views of Lee (2002) that teachers say that papers are being written with shortened words, improper capitalization and punctuation, and characters like &, \$ and @ .

20. Missing Apostrophes

Just as netizens do not care for punctuation in Netspeak and Textspeak, in Academic discourse too they ignore punctuation, e.g. *dont for don't and your for you're*.

21. Font Switching to Urdu

This feature is quite unique to students' academic work and not found in the Pakistani Netspeak data. A student wrote 'ruff amal' using Urdu font which means Rough Work.

4.2. Students' perspective regarding their use of Netspeak:

A focused group discussion was conducted with 20 undergrad students of BS (Hons).

Following are the major points which came out of the discussion :

- Almost all of the students replied that use of Netspeak in their academic written work happens unconsciously on their part. However two students said that they deliberately write in Netspeak to save time.
- Students unanimously showed deep concern that they lose marks because of using Netspeak in their academic writing. They assured that they wanted to be careful in future.
- Only one of them went so far as to demand that Netspeak/Textspeak should be given acceptance by the teachers and they should not discredit the students who write their assignments or exam papers using Netspeak.

4.3. Teachers' perspective regarding the academic discourse of students

A focused group discussion was conducted with teachers of English.

Following are the major points that came out of discussion:

- Teachers unanimously lamented the fact that the standard of written academic discourse of their students is at decline.
- They all agreed that Netspeak is "ruining" the standard of academic English.
- They were of the opinion that mostly students are not even aware of the fact that they are using chatroom slang or Netspeak.
- They pointed out that following are frequently found in the written work: 'becoz, y, u, n, b/w, 2, i,'

- There was a unanimous concern over the fact that students have become so habitual of using Netspeak in their academic writings that it has become harder for them to conform to the norms of acceptable academic discourse.
- One of the teachers lamented , “ Writing just isn’t the same as it was 8 or 9 years ago.”

5. Suggestions, Discussion and Conclusion:

Teachers were asked for some suggestions to improve the standard of Academic English of their students. They all agreed that these errors should be explicitly pointed out in the class room to make the difference between Netspeak and Academic English clear. And if the mistakes persist, then marks should be deducted. Since it is a serious problem so teachers and parents have to step in to tell their concern to the students about their writing in the academic world. “It’s something that has to be explicitly conveyed to children” (Helderman, 2003). Students on the other hand, should be made to speak in English more often in class so to improve their language and counter the effects of Netspeak usage. It was also suggested that students should spend time in reviewing and revising their educational work before handing it over to the teachers. Students should be encouraged to write proper form of English while texting or chatting. Sms packages should be banned as they are encouraging the youth to text more and more (said on a lighter note).

The above discussion reveals that the standard of academic discourse of Pakistani Undergraduate student is on the decline gradually. Apparently, the students are not aware of the ways to distinguish between the Netspeak and academic English. Only a few years ago Thurlow (2006) stated that despite the lack of empirical evidence, a “moral panic” will rise that IM and texting would damage people’s ability to write sustained, cohesive texts in standard edited English. Today, it appears that teachers as well as students are equally worried about the potential impact of Netspeak on the academic English. Academia, parents, teachers, and students, all will have to make conscious efforts to uplift the standard of academic English once again in Pakistan and this should be the main focus of today’s educators, because this trend of using Netspeak/Textspeak instead of academic discourse in academic written work “shows no sign of ending any time soon” (Snow, 2008).

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