

Conventions of the English Language in the Twitterverse

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *When given the opportunity to complete a Davis Honors Challenge contract in the class of my choice, I decided to pursue a research project in a class that was fascinating, relevant, and challenging: English Grammar. With the guidance of my professor, I chose to investigate the relationship between grammar and "microblogging"—the field of communication facilitated by Twitter. I have long been intrigued by the effect social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook have on their users' grammatical decisions when posting public comments. Many users neglect proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation of the Standard English language to maintain a casual tone with their friends on these sites. However, Twitter is exceptionally different from MySpace and Facebook; Twitter only allows users to post a comment ("tweet") in 140-characters or less. Thus, it is often unclear if Twitter users are deliberately negligent with spelling, grammar, and punctuation, or if they are simply victims of a character constraint. For my research, I tracked grammatical trends among thirty different Twitter users and catalogued their Tweets according to these users' social affiliations. A large part of my research was a breakdown of numbers: the number of users, the number of errors, and the 140-characters constraint hovering over the Twitterverse. This research is more than just a breakdown of numbers; it is a critical examination and a snapshot of how we currently communicate as a society—and how our communication practices continue to evolve (or arguably, devolve). I would like to thank my mother for her support (especially during late night phone conversations when I rhapsodized over Twitter and grammar). I would also like to thank Dr. Jared Haynes for being patient and encouraging throughout the process—I could not have completed this project without his genius and kindness. Finally, I would like to recognize Jack Dorsey, the founder of Twitter, for convincing 140 million people (and counting) that it is necessary to share their lives with the world in 140-characters or less.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *Julia-Rose was enrolled in my English Grammar class last spring (2012), and she came to me to ask to do a Davis Honors Contract as part of the course. We somehow settled fairly quickly on the*

topic of the grammar conventions in the Twitterverse. We decided that the research would entail not only a look at how Twitter got started and how it is used and critiqued, but also the analysis of a large number of tweets from a variety of sources. Julia-Rose's enthusiasm for the project made it easy for me to guide her, and I was impressed with the number of tweets she examined for their grammatical characteristics. I think Julia-Rose had fun doing this project, and the final product was both entertaining and informative. This is material I can use in future grammar classes.

—Jared Haynes, University Writing Program

A Brief User Manual to Navigating Twitter

In a recent *New York Times* article, American actor John Cusack discussed tweeting from his iPhone and admitted, “I’m pretty new to it, and if there’s a spell check on an iPhone, I can’t find it. So I basically get in the general ballpark and tweet it” (qtd. in Metcalfe). While Cusack’s blasé attitude about “tweeting” with spelling errors may alarm grammarians and scholars alike, his feelings may actually reflect those of the general Twitterverse populace—which as of 2012 contains roughly 140 million active users worldwide (“Twitter Blog”). In fact, Cusack’s approach to tweeting may be exactly what the founders of Twitter intended.

Twitter was developed in 2006 by Jack Dorsey as a social networking website that provides microblogging services to users. These services allow Twitter users to post SMS-based messages that are constrained to 140 characters via a range of technologies (usually a mobile phone or another web-capable device). According to Jack Dorsey, in their quest to name the website, his research team “came across the word ‘twitter,’ and it was just perfect. The definition was ‘a short burst of inconsequential information,’ and ‘chirps from birds.’ And that’s exactly what the product was” (qtd. in Sarno). Consequently, a particular tweet’s meaning relies more on clause content than on actual structure, grammar, and usage of the words and phrases contained in the tweet. Users may tweet a random message, and those users’ “followers” have the option of commenting on the tweet. They need not feel obliged, though, considering that Twitter encourages their users to share “short bursts of inconsequential information” that other users may not even notice (Sarno). However, once one or more users comment

on a certain tweet, a “tweetfeed” is created, and the conversation can last for hours—even days. Twitter currently generates over “340 million tweets daily and handles over 1.6 billion search queries per day” (Sarno).

Who Uses Twitter?

Everyone; Twitter appeals to such a broad demographic of users because it is so convenient and low-hassle, compared to other social networking sites that require users to spend an extensive amount of time creating their profile (e.g. Facebook and MySpace). Twitter also has massive appeal because it allows users to “incorporate links to micromedia, small-scale multimedia, and shortened aliases of longer hyperlinks (Tiny URLs)” into their tweets (Metcalf 790). This feature is useful to all users, as a user can post a link to a photo, a video, or even a website. Users can also use “@” to address another user at the beginning of a tweet or to link a particular user with the content of the tweet. One can imagine the incredible possibilities that such technological capability has for businesses that are trying to promote their products and public figures who wish to provide insight into their own lives for their devoted fans and followers.

Twitter and the English Language

Communication via social media is nothing new to our society. However, Twitter’s 140-characters-per-tweet-limit provides users with the challenging task of being concise, which often means that they must choose to either forgo adhering to English language conventions or be grammatically aware. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as a user can be concise while still following English language conventions. Still, there is a lot of debate over Twitter’s influence on users’ grammatical choices. The most relevant topics of current discussion pertaining to Twitter and its relationship with the English language are the “Twtiquette” culture that seeks to monitor and police Twitter users who commit grammatical offenses, Twitter’s effect on languages around the world, and, finally, the “hashtag” as a means of facilitating discussion among users on a certain topic. In my own study, in which I analyzed 287 tweets posted by various Twitter users, I tracked grammatical trends among users’ tweets and found an interesting theme: a user’s personal education/profession level generally indicates their choice to either tweet grammatically correct content or not.

Literature Review

Twetiquette Culture

Twitter serves as an open forum for public discussion and debate. Although much of the communicative activity in the Twitterverse involves politics, celebrities, and everyday topics, one thread is gaining popularity and prominence: the relationship between grammar and Twitter. In a recent *New York Times* article entitled “The Self Appointed Twitter Scolds,” columnist John Metcalfe examines the emerging vocal subculture on Twitter of “grammar and taste vigilantes” who police the tweets of “celebrities and nobodies alike” (Metcalfe). These grammar and taste vigilantes search for and find tweets with typos or flawed grammar and write a scolding comment to the alleged offenders. The group of grammar and taste vigilantes is quickly implementing and enforcing a new behavior code known as “Twetiquette.”

Twetiquette has inspired two different philosophies of what the relationship between Twitter and grammar should be; one thought is that Twitter is meant solely as an informal forum for communication via 140 typed characters, and therefore, users should have absolute freedom to use their 140 characters without considering proper grammatical structures; the other thought is that Twitter users should responsibly use their 140 characters by adhering to the grammatical rules of the English language (or whatever language they are using). Members of Twetiquette hold the latter philosophy—which doesn’t always make them popular in the Twitterverse. In fact, Nate Fanaro, also known on Twitter as “CapsCop,” notoriously sends scolding messages to users who write Tweets that are grammatically incorrect and/or in all CAPS. While he and other Grammar Cops receive backlash (even death threats) from the offenders, they revel in the response. Xení Jardin, a partner in the blog site Boing Boing, explains, “With Twitter particularly, the feedback is so intense and so immediate, it does something very particular to your ego that even the blogs don’t. That feedback rush is like pouring plant food on weeds” (qtd. in Metcalfe). In comparison, offenders like John Cusack believe that Twetiquette is ridiculous; “The vitriol was so intense that at first I didn’t think they were serious . . . because, like, who would care?” (qtd. in Metcalfe). As a result, Cusack has been trying a new strategy: he misspells things on purpose and then “I blockthem executioer style now with no warning!!” (This is an example of Cusack’s style) (qtd. in Metcalfe). The

number of Twitter accounts dedicated to Twetiquette are increasing, though there are a few that are well established, such as Grammar Fail, Grammar Hero, Your Or Youre, Word Police, and Spelling Police.

Twitter's Effect on Language

The Twitterverse currently consists of more than 500 languages. According to the article “Brevity: Twtr.,” Twitter’s global span has reduced the percentage of global tweets in English to 39% from 66.6% in 2009, but polyglot tweeters still often favor English “because of its ubiquity” (*The Economist*). The two most used European languages after English in the Twitterverse are Spanish and Portuguese. Users in these two groups have created tricks for reducing the character count; “Brazilians use ‘abs’ for abraços (hugs) and ‘bjs’ for beijos (kisses); Spanish speakers never need to use personal pronouns (‘I go’ is denoted by the verb alone: voy)” (*The Economist*). Korean and Arabic are both gaining popularity in the Twitterverse because most native speakers omit syllables in Korean words or omit vowels in Arabic words. Chinese, another language that is growing popularity in the Twitterverse, “is so succinct that most messages never reach [the character] limit” (*The Economist*). Although “ubiquity and flexibility” may give English hegemony in the Twitterverse, “smaller and struggling languages” such as Basque and Gaelic are also gaining recognition and allowing users to connect in ways that were once unimaginable (*The Economist*).

The Invention of the Hashtag

If you are unfamiliar with Twitter, you may be somewhat confused when you read a Tweet like this one from President Barack Obama (taken directly from his Twitter page): “26 months, 4.2 million American jobs added to the private sector. That’s #progress:OFA.BO/cFGo8h.” The pound sign and phrase that follow the first sentence in President Obama’s Tweet is known as a “hashtag,” which is a “typographic convention used to mark the topic of a tweet” (Zappavigna 799). Other users who are following this same topic will be able to see this tweet and any others with the same hashtag, regardless of the users’ identities. A hashtag can also function as a link to a particular website, giving new meaning to the phrase, “Don’t tell me. Show me.” Thus, *searchable talk* “expands linguistic meaning potential by using punctuation to incorporate metadata into language so that online talk can

be found” (Zappavigna 789). Hashtags are yet another example of how the Twitterverse is growing larger while its users become more connected via innovative linguistic techniques and practices.

Research

Methodology

I conducted research by examining approximately 287 Tweets from various Twitter users. My research focused on discovering deviation from Standard English grammar. I categorized these tweets by a particular user’s professional group. These professional groups comprise universities, authors/writers, tech/social networking figures, college-educated celebrities, and uneducated celebrities. I studied five users per group and ten tweets per user. I chose users for this study who have around 1 million Twitter followers (though some have significantly more and some have less). Ultimately, I wanted to track trends among users who are considered influential leaders and figures. Two of the users (Stephanie Meyer and Mark Zuckerberg) had less than 10 tweets visible on their Twitter account. Despite this shortage of tweets, I used Meyer and Zuckerberg in the study because they are currently popular in their respective fields/categories. (I find it especially interesting that Mr. Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, only has 5 tweets on his Twitter profile.) As I was examining the tweets, I was searching specifically for 7 common “offenses”: spelling, punctuation, all CAPS, incorrect letter case, noun count, general typos, and fragmentation (or incomplete sentences). While writing in all CAPS is not technically a grammatical mistake, it’s a mistake in etiquette (“Twtiquette”). Thus, I’m including this violation of etiquette in my data as a grammatical mistake. I recorded each tweet used in the study, and I kept a running tally of errors per user.

Findings

Out of 287 tweets, there were approximately 241 errors (based on my set of determined “offenses”). The category with the least number of errors was “Politics,” with 24 errors (all of which were fragmentation); the category with the greatest number of errors was “Uneducated Celebrities,” with 53 overall errors. The most common errors were fragmentation and incorrect punctuation, and the least common error was the use of incorrect

count nouns. Fragmentation can appear in different forms, but generally, fragments are parts of a sentence that are disconnected from the main clause, due to the improper placing of punctuation (or a lack thereof). Here is an example of a Tweet containing fragmentation (courtesy of Charlie Sheen's Twitter profile): "RESPECT! and welcome home! Martin Hazard says 'First weekend home after a 6 month tour in Afghan' #ShowIt2Sheen <http://say.ly/jcH3m7G>." Obviously, there is a plethora of errors in Sheen's tweet (fragmentation, punctuation, spelling, and all CAPS). It would take too long to consider the countless alternative options that would correct this tweet. Still, it remains evident that Sheen's not the only offender of Twetiquette. The least common error, the use of incorrect count nouns, is best represented by the following example (courtesy of Bill Gates's Twitter profile): "Read several great book on our last vacation. Need suggestions? <http://b-gat.es/JVTaV0>." Interestingly, Gates was the only subject in my study who used an incorrect count noun in a tweet. In Gates's tweet, the singular word "book" doesn't complement the plural adjective, "several." Instead, he should have written "books." These tweets contain just a few examples of grammatical errors, out of 241 total errors in my study.

The breakdown of the number of errors provides insight into Twitter's influence. Interestingly, celebrity Twitter users account for the greatest number of errors, as users in the "Uneducated Celebrities" category had a total of 53 errors, and "College-Educated Celebrities" had a total of 51 errors. Users in the "Authors/Writers" category accounted for 27 errors. Users in the "Tech/Social Networking" categories had 42 errors. Finally, users in the "Universities" category accounted for 44 errors. Users in the "University" group produced the third-most errors in the study, which conflicts with the notion that the more educated a user is, the more likely he or she is to have fewer grammatical errors. However, in the "Universities" group, it is not always clear who is speaking (or tweeting) on behalf of the particular university (though it is unlikely that professors or highly educated administrators are tweeting on behalf of the university). Thus, monitoring trends is more difficult when ambiguous users are involved, as opposed to Twitter users who are tweeting on their own behalf on their own Twitter profile. It is important to note that such a small study that analyzes only ten tweets or less per user requires generalizations to track general trends. The research is not necessarily representative of all users who may identify with a certain group. Still, this research shows that there is generally a correlation between Twetiquette and education/profession level.

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Category/Members	Error Average*	Types of Errors (If applicable)
6 Categories, 30 Members	*Based on average	S=Spelling
Total=278 Tweets*	of 10 Tweets	P=Punctuation
	per user	C=ALL CAPS
		I=Incorrect Letter Case
		NC=Noun Count
		T=Typo
		F=Fragment
Politics		
President Barack Obama	9	F
Sen. Barbara Boxer	3	F
Gov. Jerry Brown	0	
The Democrats	6	F
Republican Party	6	F
	Total= 24	
Universities		
Stanford University	12	S, I, F
UC Berkeley	10	I, F
Fresno State	10	S, P, F
UC Davis Admissions	7	S, P, F
UC Davis Law School	5	S, P, C, F
	Total= 44	
Authors/Writers		
Nicholas Sparks	8	S, P, I, F
Stephanie Meyer** (2)	1	I
Neil Gaiman	10	P, C, I, F
J. K. Rowling	2	T, I
Margaret E. Atwood	6	I, F
	Total= 27	
Tech/Social Networking		
Jack Dorsey	5	S, P, F
Mark Zuckerberg** (5)	8	I, P, F
Bill Gates	8	S, P, NC, F
Larry Page	10	S, C, I, F
Steve Wozniak	11	T, F
	Total= 42	
College-Educated Celebrities		
James Franco	3	F
Oprah Winfrey	9	C, I, F
Aishwarya Rai	13	I, F
Deepak Chopra	11	T, F
Tom Hanks	15	P, C, I
	Total= 51	
Uneducated Celebrities		
Charlie Sheen	23	P, C, I, F
Kim Kardashian	10	S, P, I, F
Barbra Streisand	4	P, F
Betty White	4	P, F
Lady Gaga	12	S, P, C, I, F
	Total= 53	
	Total Errors= 241	

Discussion

For grammarians, these numbers are somewhat disturbing; they show that some of the most influential groups, such as celebrities and universities, are setting bad examples for their millions of followers. Granted, no one person/user is perfect, and sometimes you just can't fit everything into a tweet (hence the use of abbreviations and omission of periods). Still, Twetiquette—and basically, good old-fashioned English grammar—are becoming somewhat of endangered species in the social media/social networking world. Even Jack Dorsey, the founder of Twitter, exemplifies a lack of regard for Twetiquette.

This research was somewhat straightforward, but it required flexibility in understanding the constraints of the 140-character limit. One of the major challenges with this research was deciphering tweets that contained unsupported dependent clauses and run-on sentences, as punctuation was generally absent at the end of the tweet. I labeled these tweets as “fragments.” Fragmentation was the most common error found in the study, with 144 cases. Although many grammarians consider fragmentation a major issue, most Twitter users can't find a way around it because of the character limit. Even some of President Obama's tweets omitted a period at the end of the tweet, for the sake of adding a hashtag. Another issue that I encountered was the constant barrage of abbreviations, which again, reflects the issue of the 140-character-limit. Abbreviations aren't technically grammatically incorrect—they just tend to confuse readers who are unaware of their meanings. Ultimately, it seems that users will always find a way to communicate effectively—grammatically correct or not.

Conclusion

Twitter is making the world a smaller, more connected place by changing how we communicate online. Twitter is a great equalizer in our society, as it is a free service that allows everyday people to communicate with politicians, celebrities, and high-profile Twitter users around the world while also viewing Tweets between other users. The microblogging site also acts as a grammatical equalizer among the masses, whereby every user must share his or her thoughts with others in no more than 140-characters. However, as this paper has examined, Twitter's character limit poses several challenges for users. Based on my research findings, the greatest challenge for users is Tweeting complete, coherent sentences that contain appropriate punctuation. Failure to meet this challenge results in fragmentation. The

other challenge that Twitter users face is negligence regarding Twetiquette. Some grammarians may consider the character limit an unreasonable excuse for neglecting Twetiquette. As my findings suggest, however, there are many Twitter users who would argue that the character limit is a sufficient reason for fragmentation and omission of punctuation, among other grammatical offenses. Although there are people who spend extensive amounts of time policing users on Twitter, the choice to write grammatically correct is a personal one; some users can be bullied into adhering to Twetiquette and other users choose to rebel. Ultimately, while users have the freedom to choose to Tweet messages that are either grammatically correct or incorrect, users must realize that this freedom has societal implications; every time a prominent figure like President Obama or Twitter founder Jack Dorsey omits a comma or posts a Tweet containing a typo, their “followers” become more comfortable with viewing and emulating these trends. Such occurrences may spark the argument, “if the President of the United States doesn’t end his Tweet with a period, why should I?” Thus, the 140-million users in the Twitterverse are interconnected. While one Tweet alone may seem inconsequential, perhaps users are setting precedents every day all around the world, one tweet at a time.

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