How influential is technology on the language we use in today's society?

Language has evolved enormously and in today's society it is often technology that governs the way we communicate with more submissions into the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) being influenced by technological advancements. Recent additions to the Oxford Dictionaries Online (2013-2014) illustrate this with words like selfie, tweetable, social sharing and touchless.

Kaufman (2013) a journalist from The Guardian is very aware of the need to invent new words in today's society, "do not be afraid to make up your own words…but you must be careful. Every new word must be crafted. It has to have a purpose, a need." He provides examples like 'digippear' meaning to use computer technology as a technique to avoid feared issues and conversations, and 'overchill' meaning to use air-conditioning systems to excess.

I encountered an attempt by comedian Alex Horne (2010) who set himself four years getting a new word into the dictionary. He discusses this in an article for the Independent (2010) and describes the achievement as, "…the most worthy of all claims to fame." Horne (2010) refers to his project as 'Verbal Gardening' and as someone already expert in the English language has the advantage of good connections for "words to flourish" he is able to spread his words on television, in shows and "brandished them on banners at major sporting events, branded them onto mugs, T-shirts and umbrellas."

I contacted Alex Horne who told me how his approach eventually resulted in failure. Where could it have gone wrong for someone with such influence and connections? There was no evidence in his write up or in our email exchange of any of his words featuring on the web. Presence on the web in principle could have provided a stronger backing for spreading words into society.

I needed some understanding of the English language to really give them the chance of success. My research led me to study linguistics and I began to look for people to contact in this area, with a focus around the OED who "…lead the field in recording the entry of today's new words into the language." They directed me to a source with the requirements for word submissions to consider along the way.

My first successful collaboration came from Professor John Coleman, director at Oxford University Phonetics Laboratory who highlighted the origin of the word 'Quiz'. He highlighted that his priorities lay with the university, however he continued to say, "…keep me posted on your work and if there are questions I can help with, just ask" (2013).

'Quiz' was traced back to a late 18th century theatre performance. However it was discovered that the word had previously existed meaning "…an odd or eccentric person." Creswell, J. (2009). Yet the recording was vague and therefore it's later meaning in the 1860s, 'for a test of knowledge' Creswell, J. (2009), came about. This research led to the idea of taking a pre-existing word and re-introducing it with a new meaning.

I also used LinkedIn hoping to connect with linguists. I received a response from Viktor Pekar, who has been an Independent Consultant and Language Data Engineer for the Oxford University Press. "I am happy to provide consultations on linguistics in general, and the influence and change of language on social media" (2013) and so the collaboration began.

Sociolinguistics

I emailed Viktor details my findings and how I planned to structure this project. He recommended that I focus on a branch of linguistics called Sociolinguistics. This looks into how society and language is communicated, their relationship to each other, how it changes across environments and how we interact with each other. It also investigates the use of slang and how language differs with age and gender. It discusses how close communities have a reluctance to use new language yet if those communities cross over to others they may adopt new styles of

language. As discussed by Androutsopoulos (2006) one area of sociolinguistics being investigated is Internet language with online communities looking at the use of emoticons, unconventional spellings, regional dialects and offensive vocabulary.

Collaboratively Pekar (2013) and I discussed "…a particular problem in Sociolinguistics, called language change", which focuses on how language differs throughout time, location and dialect. Society is adapting, new inventions bring new words and descriptions. An area I want to investigate is Lexical Change, the change in meaning or use of a word or phrase over another as discussed with the origin of the word 'Quiz'. A good example of this is 'wireless'. If an elderly person referred to the word 'wireless' one may assume they were talking about a radio. However for the younger generation this word would most likely refer to the Internet. This illustrates how a word's meaning can change within a generational shift.

Pekar (2013) mentions Social Network Analysis (SNA) and Influencer Analysis, which look into behaviours within social networking sites and the influencer within such scenarios. SNA is the understanding of people and their connections, giving better insight into how we interact when sharing information. This is relevant in my study to understand who is involved in the process of sharing and distributing this 'new' information giving the words maximum opportunity.

Network mapping as displayed by the diagram below (Figure 1.1) shows how the social network is formed.

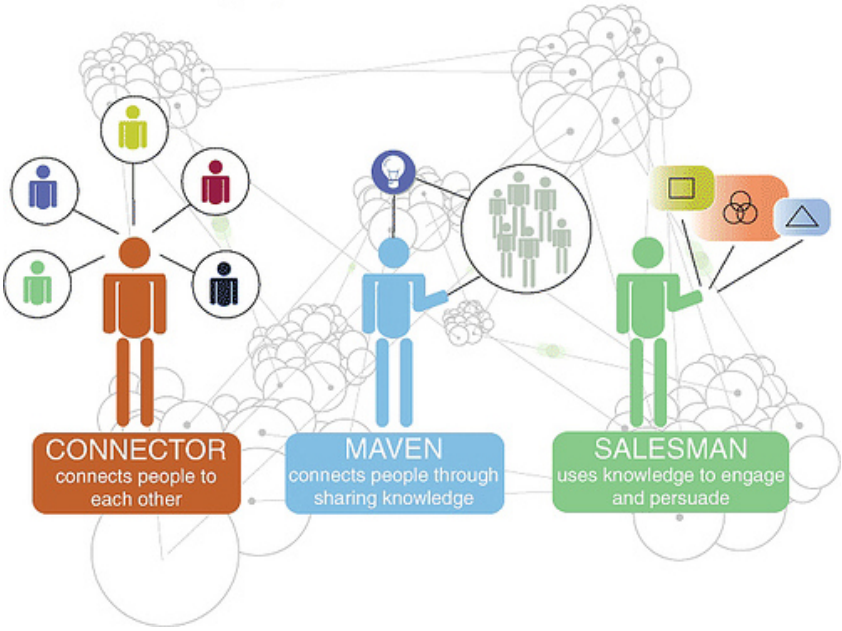


Figure1.1. The Social Media Network

The Connector is a key influential member of a social networking site with a large following. Their followers would notice content when posted and share it with members of their circle. These people can also be considered the Mavens. In their social networks they would have people of similar interests and it is with their specialisms I would require them to distribute and encourage others to use the words. As the creator I would be the Salesman, using my knowledge to persuade others to adopt them into their everyday life and social networks.

Statement of Intent

This research and collaboration has enabled me to categorise the words into sections. I shall create two words around Lexical Change by changing the meaning of unfamiliar pre-existing words. I shall also create new words using the process called 'blending' or 'Portmanteau', combining parts of two words to create a new word. I shall also include an abbreviation.

As stated by Kaufman (2013) "every new word must be crafted. It has to have a purpose, a need." I wanted some of them to be Internet centric so they can be seen growing, evolving and, as discussed earlier, influenced by technology. The words consist of blending: 'loiternet' meaning to loiter on the Internet with no true purpose, 'litternet' - rubbish on the Internet, 'immersinet' - carried away or immersed on the Internet and 'rem-ing'; an abbreviation to reminisce. Inspired by the history of the words 'quiz' and 'wireless' I chose to take two words based upon Lexical Change, therefore creating new meanings for 'groak', currently meaning to stare at someone willing to be invited over, to join in, changing this to mean a miserable person. I also chose 'nary' meaning an informal or dialect form of not and changed this to a moody or grumpy person.

Creating their presence on the web

It is important to create the word's existence on the web so when I start their distribution, they will be presented with some context. I hoped to collaborate with Wikipedia, which would optimise exposure of these new words. Much to my disappointment they were declined, "Wikipedia is an encyclopedia and not a dictionary..." (2014)

Next was Urban Dictionary, an unofficial yet very recognised source for information particularly for more unusual words! The words 'loiternet', 'litternet' and 'immersinet' all were accepted. However 'groak' and 'nary' were not, as these words already exist under alternative meanings, which may make creating their existence on the Internet more difficult. In addition 'rem-ing' as an abbreviation was not accepted.

I created a website called 'Spread the Words', I wanted each word and definition of a similar style to be found in dictionaries and to provide examples of their use and synonyms. I ensured the metadata was included to make it search engine optimised.

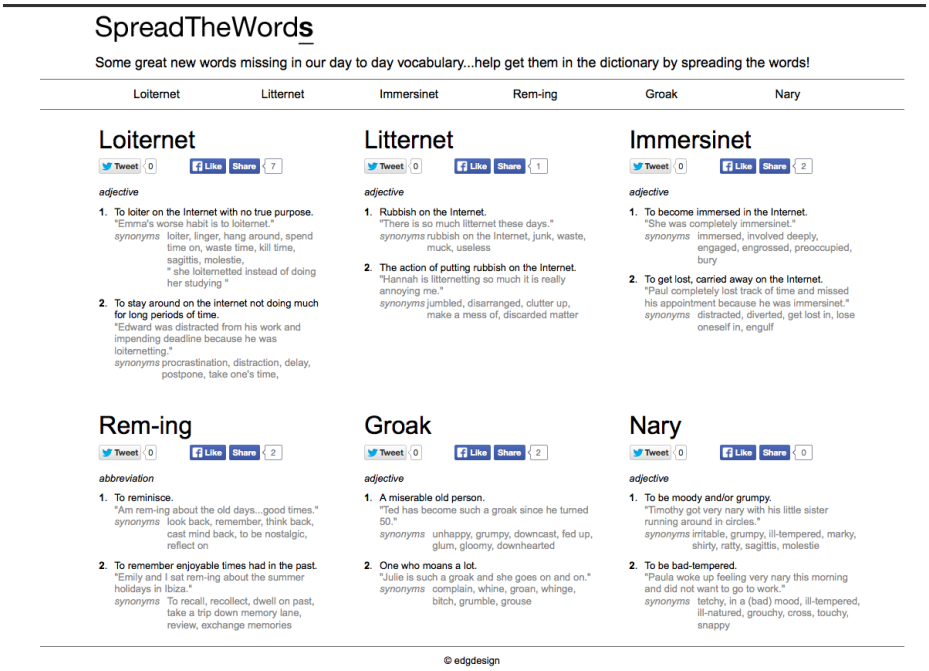


Figure1.2. www.spreadthewords.co.uk

New words can spread rapidly especially with social media playing such an important part in day-to-day lives. As advised by Pekar (2014) "try to tweet that new word, using it as a hashtag. If people like it, it will be re-tweeted, and you can get a measure of how many people used the word in their tweets, re-tweeted it, or just saw it (determining it from the number of followers of those who tweeted the word)" I set out creating the words first tweets on Twitter with a hashtag and included the URL. I also created a Facebook page for people to share.

I wanted to collaborate with reporters and editors, as influential Mavens, from national and local newspapers, asking for tweets or articles to be written using these words. Unfortunately this was unsuccessful and it appeared that the use of a non-existent word could be seen to be unprofessional in their field. "I couldn't use a new unrecognised word in the paper or on the Web I'm afraid…" explained Claire Carter, a former reporter from The Telegraph (2014). My contact with The Guardian editor, Charles Arthur, was short-lived as he stated, "…Nope. I don't use words without knowing their meaning unless they're words I've made up myself to be honest…" (2014).

It was suggested that a copywriter/proofreader maybe able to assist, she "…posts on her business social media pages amusing pictures of language mistakes. She cross-posted one on her Facebook & Twitter pages…it went viral in 24hours, got 500 re-tweets…and increased her followers from a couple hundred to over 2,500!" (2014). But she too was unable to assist "…propagating new words which aren't yet established or have new meanings created for them, wouldn't fit in…" (2014). However a week later I was delighted to see she had tweeted 'loiternetting' as her 'Word of the day' resulting in five re-tweets, one favourite and a response, "I'm loitertwittering :-D." (2014).



Figure1.3. Tweet

Alex Horne with over fifteen thousand followers re-tweeted my tweet, "we're all guilty of it…#loiternetting". Disappointingly this only drove one other re-tweet. A friend of mine in the PR sector with over six hundred followers also re-tweeted my words but sadly had no reactions. Targeting comedian Ricky Gervais also proved fruitless.

I needed more exposure of my words so I approached a contact who, was due to be on BBC Radio Merseyside to act as a Connector or a Maven as discussed in the SNA model. I asked them to use my words in the radio session, which resulted in a conversation on my words, their opinions and other new words entering the English Language.

In another attempt to spread the words in society I wanted to create an artefact that allowed myself and others to spread them around, "I am going to scatter a handful of verbal seeds into the language" as described by Horne (2010). I decided to create the words as personalised confetti (Figure 1.4), with a hashtag to encourage tweeting and keep track of them. I asked friends around the country to scatter them everywhere they went taking photographic evidence, I did the same.



Figure1.4. Personalised Confetti

They have currently been left in Tesco, on public toilet walls, around university buildings, in London and even up the Shard.

Conclusion

Connecting with my main collaborator Viktor Pekar provided me with his insight on how language is formed, his thoughts and suggestions. In addition each person I collaborated with to share the words did so in their own social circles showing the many dimensions to the Internet.

Within social media I found people were much more at ease with tweeting the words as opposed to using them on Facebook. Facebook had a different response with friends using words in status updates such as "enough of this lunchtime loiternetting" (2014) but with little uptake. Facebook is mainly used for social activities however Twitter is open with trends being set and hashtags formed allowing attention to be drawn to specific areas.

Despite an initial concern of the lack of connections, I was able to tap into several links to collaborate with sharing the words in a variety of settings including the radio, which resulted in great conversation around the subject. However it showed that it was actually those Mavens and Connectors from social media who had the greatest impact, which leads me to conclude that although Alex Horne utilized his connections he did not maximize the opportunity online, which could have resulted in the failing of his words.

On reflection I needed to avoid professions focusing on the English language as sharing new, non-existing words could be detrimental to their credibility. However if they felt there was a significant word they could use, it would then be a powerful influence within their like-minded social circle.

This investigation has shown that over time we all have the power to dictate how we communicate with others. It would be unfair to conclude on my project within such small timescales. This therefore opens up the idea of inventing a word and to "…water and watch to see if they can flower and thrive."

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