

# Facebook's Influence on Language and Communication

Jaclyn Valentin

With 62% of users utilizing it at least once a day (Statista 2018), and approximately one billion active users in October of 2012 (Facebook), one could argue that Facebook has transformed oral communication, digital communication, and literacy itself. The network enables individuals to contact anyone, on a global scale, within seconds. Communication interactions have changed drastically since Facebook's humble beginnings in 2004, when it was created by its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg. Initially created for students of Harvard, it has since grown to include the entire world (Facebook, 2001), opening doors for various thoughts to be expressed by posting comments, pictures, gifs, videos, and interactive live stream. This website, alongside its application access and Messenger function, has greatly influenced the world in today's digital age. But how did Facebook change one of the most essential aspects of culture, language?

Facebook was not always a vast aspect of my life. Just as many people, the site was once simply a space for communicating with family members who live far away. However, one day, Facebook became my emergency savior, affecting how I view language and communication. On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. "Loss of communication and electricity, scarcity of water, isolation of some residents, slow coordination of the aid that has been sent, and the magnitude and scope of the necessary repairs all merit a call for help from and the engagement of the global community"(Zorrilla, 1801). Horrifying images and video of my father's mountainous hometown of Utuado, where he was located at the time, surfaced on Facebook. I spent hours on the phone trying to get through to him; however, Puerto Rico lost all access to phones and any source of communication. I could not get information from FEMA, the Utuado Police department or the Utuado National Guard. I even tried emailing pictures to FEMA, hoping they will recognize my dad's house and street. I was not successful. And yet, hurricane survivors were somehow able to posting video and pictures from Puerto Rico to Facebook.

## *Loss of Physical Contact*

The convenience of Facebook has lessened the importance of physical contact as a means of communication. Facebook interaction occurs with internet access on computers, game systems, and smartphones. People converse with other users via comments, messages, pictures, and videos, which can be viewed continuously. Because everything is digitized, users are now cyborgs on a digital screen: as Donna Haraway writes in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction." Being a "cyborg," I used Facebook, utilizing its various

communication innovations, enabling it as my own emergency communication to find my father and relatives. As Carrobbis writes, “Language used through social media has created a heightened awareness of communicating in different registers.”(Sharpe UWIRE Text, 6 Mar. 2014, p. 1). Personal experience with the ease of Facebook’s interface makes interaction a breeze: when one utilizes Facebook, they can leave a comment to be read by a friend at a later time. The conversation does not end until both parties stop replying altogether. Therefore, “Facebook, in particular, enables variations in indirect means of disclosure” (High, Oeldorf-Hirsch, & Bellur, 2014). This is what makes Facebook a successful social networking media.

#### *Facebook Groups*

Facebook has also created groups, a vital communication aspect, which allows for quick digital assemblies to occur. I joined the Facebook group “Huracan Maria” (Hurricane Maria) which has now been changed to Cuarto De Oracion (Prayer Room). To find my family, the group interaction brought together various people of multiple backgrounds from around the globe, all struggling to find their relatives, friends, and colleagues. This Facebook group creates a forum in which “cultures do not talk to each other; individuals do” (p. 138) (Lee and Choi 51). Each connection made became formal as we shared similar circumstances and grieved together. The group grew rapidly. The multiple group members also each brought multiple Spanish dialects. This made finding my family effective.

#### *Translation Tool*

Interestingly enough, I lacked advanced Spanish speaking skills, being only able to understand basic terms. This became a dilemma that many face with language barriers. However, Facebook’s creation of the “see translation” option changed the dynamic of language barriers between users. The group included members who had family missing, as well as others who wanted to help in any way possible. At times, it was difficult to understand the discourse; this is because, according to Professor Michael McCarthy, “we speak both formally and informally” online ”(UWIRE Text, 6 Mar. 2014, p. 1). Some users used Spanish slang when posting missing person descriptions with pictures or videos. Ultimately, while the creation of the translation tool made communication easier, it did not always clearly translate material. In this sense, some information still must be interpreted. As I wrote and read numerous posts, I began to write and read Spanish without needing the translation tool. I found the literacy and orality of my Spanish beginning to improve. I started to find connections between words and their meanings. When the group communicated with live-feed videos, I was able to contribute by engaging in a two-way interaction.

The translation feature helped eliminate the language barrier during a time of crisis. Initially, I was unaware of this tool, which Facebook created in 2008, and which is now available in 65 languages (Stone, 2009). Facebook has also made this tool accessible to other websites (Stone, 2009), which shows the dynamic through which Facebook influences media. Today, 15,000 websites or apps work with Facebook Connect, which has allowed users to access content outside of the social network (DevSource, 2009). This tool was vital in my search for my father, allowing me to comprehend those who had had interactions with him. Eventually, I found

out that my family back home had suffered a landslide, in which my father was able to escape with other relatives just in time.

#### *Acronym, Slang and "Teenage Language"*

In addition, Facebook has also affected literal communication. Social media users have developed acronyms and slang, often in texting and instant messaging, for communication. For example, to incorporate humor in a sentence, instead of saying "that was funny," users use "LOL," which stands for "laugh out loud." Users also drop letters when creating a message. For example, the word living might be written as "livin." In shortening the word count, slang gets information across at a faster rate. Language is constantly changing and adapting to situations, creating new social norms in which new words and new constructions become acceptable (Sharpe UWIRE Text, 6 Mar. 2014, p. 1). In an interview entitled "Facebook's Influence on Your Language," 17-year-old Stephanie Diaz, who has grown up with numerous media and new media outlets, expresses how most of her communication relies on smartphone applications. When asked if she uses Facebook often for communication, Diaz states, "Yes. At least once a day." She explains numerous terms in which she communicates, which often incorporate acronyms and slang (also known as short language). This "teen language," as she asserts, is difficult for those who are not in her age group.

Diaz also states that most of the terminology has been passed through Facebook Messenger group chats, or even comments on a user's post. One word, for example, is "stan," which represents an obsessive follower of someone famous, a derivative of Eminem's rap song "Stan." I immediately understood the context, being a fan of the song. The word "stan" illustrates Victoria Fromkin's assertion that word meanings can alter and constantly change over time: the word now represents the idea of obsession. Some words and acronyms also mentioned by Diaz include the acronym "RT" for real talk, the word "clout" for seeking attention, the word "flexing" for bragging, and the word "deceased" for laughing intensely. Diaz mentions that she sometimes finds herself mistakenly using these terminologies during class during a discourse discussion. Kourtney Poland, a senior psychology student, asserts a similar notion: "When I write papers or formal letters, and I have to rethink the way I spell words and make sure I write correctly and not with my texting lingo" (UWIRE Text, 2014). The speed with which these words have circulated throughout Facebook demonstrates the power Facebook can have over language. Diaz's interview has helped me understand conversations between teenagers.

#### *Facebook Messenger*

The promotion of slang words has been widely distributed, as Diaz mentioned, via Facebook Messenger. Facebook's creation of Messenger has allowed users to be connected to other profiles. Messenger is a free but separate application users must download to utilize on smartphone or tablet. On a computer, users can use this feature directly on the Facebook website. With one click, users gain access to voice chat, text messages, group chats, and video chat as one continuous interaction ("Facebook Messenger Takes On Traditional Texting"). This feature is easy to use, similar to Apple's iMessage and traditional SMS messaging, which also require only a limited need for instruction. Additionally, Facebook Messenger allowed me to

interact with numerous family members I had never met before. The exchange of written messages, as well as phone calls, gave vital information for my father's whereabouts during the storm. I also began to pick up on Spanish words on these phone calls, practicing pronunciation. This completely changed the way I looked at Facebook. Before, it was solely an account to post pictures, videos, and stories to stay in touch with family and friends. Instead, Facebook developed into an ultimate form of communication.

#### *Name Promotion*

Overall, Facebook as a technology has also influenced the creation and enhancement of other various communication tools. Facebook has even created a tool in which users can learn how the proper pronunciation of a user's name. This feature contains an audio clip besides an individual's name and will transmit the name with the correct accent (Mondal, 2015). This innovation allows users to efficiently pronounce their friend's name without embarrassment. To use this feature, click 'About' on the profile and select on 'Details About You' section the option called 'Name Pronunciation' with a breakdown of your name and a small play button to playback the pronunciation (Mondal, 2015). When I found new relatives from Florida online also searching for my family in Puerto Rico, this feature made me feel more comfortable when speaking to them on voice messenger, since I can properly pronounce their names.

#### *Video Features*

Furthermore, Facebook videos are also an essential part of the site's success. Many users post videos on Facebook for humorous, instructional, informative, and persuasive content. For the citizens of Puerto Rico, video communication was an essential communication tool. In the group Huracan Maria (Hurricane Maria), a random person was traveling around the island recording videos of people. Essentially, his mission was to record survivors delivering a message that they were okay. Again, Facebook was a better communication tool than phone or email. Multiple people in the group forum were urged to "share" the video until their families commented on the video in relief. The sheer amount of content posted just after the storm made it seem like years had passed, not days. I would often check multiple times a day, with no luck, looking for anyone I knew. Then, a glimmer of light: I finally found a video of my dad and my cousin. The one-way communication of the video posts brought relief to multiple people of the group forum. I was able to understand the Spanish my father spoke, just as easily as his English. This occurred because the constant live video feeds, alongside the translator feature in the comments, had helped improve my Spanish. Facebook features changed the way I understood Spanish, and it is possible others in my position have had similar experiences.

After several days had passed, Facebook Messenger rang. (Messenger has a feature that enables users to call each other, just like a regular phone call.) I began to scream. It was my father.

#### *Conclusion*

Facebook has been around since 2004 and I do not see this social media diminishing anytime soon. The website is a staple for today's communication,

revolutionizing language. With the success of multiple tools and the positive response to these innovations, Facebook will eventually create more ways to make communication even more personal and accessible. During the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, Facebook helped me and put me at ease when searching for my missing father. For the numerous features that Facebook incorporates, I am extremely grateful. I cannot wait to see what the future holds.

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